

Compassion And Couch Potatoes

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Here is an interesting concept from game theory: Failure to make a decision is a decision. When you say *pass* in a poker game, you have refused the opportunity to make a certain decision of course, but you have still rendered a decision. And most importantly brethren, that decision is not inconsequential. Because, you see, everything matters. You cannot avoid consequences. Your decision to pass does affect the game and in human relationships there is no neutral ground. In a larger game, there is no fence setting. When you do not do something, you have done something.

Let us take that notion a step further. In some card games, a player can be the dummy. According to the rules of the game and its design, the dummy's decisions and strategies have in theory no effect on the game. The dummy cannot harm them, neither can they help them, and by design the dummy's role is neutral. Typically, the dummy is not a spoiler because he has no say in the outcome of the game; he is just there, he is occupying space. You could say, he is the exemplar of non-involvement—or is he?

Indeed brethren, in most games which incorporate dummies, he is not in fact totally neutral, as if he does not exist. Because he does exist and holds cards in his hand and most importantly, or just as importantly, the players around him can only guess what those cards are.

The dummy does, in fact, affect the game and by extension we understand that life does not follow the rules of Bridge or Rummy or any other such games. Life is not a game of chance—or is it? And life is not for dummies.

We all hold a number of different cards in our hand and those are the complex of talents that God has given each of us. We ought to understand that God expects us to play the different cards He has given to people wisely and at the right time. Incidentally, we should not play the cards that God has *not* dealt to us. Just ask Miss Kitty (from the TV show “Gunsmoke”). You play cards you have not been dealt and you could get shot!

Indeed, God does want us to play the cards right and not habitually say, “I pass!” If we do that, we will affect the lives of others and we will affect our own lives. We all know brethren, of some people who have made the decision to play dummy. When it comes to life, day after day after day, they routinely and conscientiously say *pass*, thus adopting this sitting-this-one-out lifestyle. Sitting life out is what they are really doing. The reasonably healthy retiree who falls into the lifestyle of a couch potato is a species of this phenomenon, and the young person who opts out of school ditching the development of his talents and his skills. That is just another manifestation of the same mindset.

Young and old, and those in between can play dummy—advantaged and disadvantaged, noble and ignoble, franchised and disenfranchised, empowered and unempowered, educated and uneducated. In point of fact anybody can play dummy. And, yes, everyone at one time or another, in one way or another, to some degree or another, to some extent or another, has played dummy taking solace in the thought, nothing ventured, nothing gained.

These are floaters of various varieties surrounding us, they are individuals miserably entrapped in the zeitgeist of 'ennui,' which loosely translated means the spirit of *the couch potato*.

That attitude has engulfed American society since about the 1960s. These people exist in a cocoon of their own fashioning. At the end of the day, "Solitaire" is their game. Ultimately it is not what these people do not do, and it is not what they will not do, but it is what they *cannot* do. They finally become catatonic; they become paralyzed and refuse to connect with other people because they believe that connection imperils or endangers their 'selves' or the self.

That is what autism is really all about. For dummies, living becomes a grotesque state of rigor mortis in which nothing matters except the protection of the self. They come to cherish a camaraderie of one. But make no mistake about it brethren, their indifference and inaction affects their lives and the lives of others.

Right now, you may be casting about in your mind, asking yourself and considering dummies that you have known, and undoubtedly some of those could be people in the church or even people you see in this room! And no, I am not going to ask for a show of hands of dummies in this room. I might be dumb but I am not stupid!

To be clear, I am talking here about the phenomenon of psychological and sociological disengagement. The situation of individuals taking steps to isolate themselves, to insulate themselves from others, disassociating themselves from them even when they recognize that there is need out there, and that they have the ability to meet those needs or at least to partially meet those needs.

This attitude does not reside just in those out in the world. It also exists with those among God's people. This unplugging, this decoupling of oneself from others affects God's own people as well.

That is bad enough in its own case and in its own situation. But brethren this is really acute in the scattering that God's people are experiencing right now. And by scattering, I mean actually two things: the geographical separation but also the corporate fragmentation that we all have with our little tubes of groups of people that exist all over the place.

A member may live a mile from another child of God, but maybe that person is in another congregation. Well he might as well live under a different sun if that were possible! That is how much detachment and estrangement can and does exist with some people in God's church. Not everybody and I want to be clear about that, not everybody! We all know people who live tens of miles from the nearest venue of Sabbath assembly but who unfalteringly attend.

They resolutely take steps to overcome separation. Some drive themselves to alleviate, to mitigate, and to assuage as much as possible the isolation of today by actively engaging people; God's people of various congregations. They do that every day through prayer. They do it through the Internet. They do it through the telephone and as it is feasible and practicable, they do it by visiting those people or traveling to them. These people are serving; they are caring and that is great.

But it is not just the corporate problem brethren; it is not the corporate fragmentation per se, and when it comes right down to it, the problem is not the geographic separation but how we respond. How God's people generally respond to that fragmentation and how they respond to that separation.

And, sadly, too many exhibit a spirit of unconcern for God's people or a spirit of nonchalance in the face of their need. To some, togetherness with God's people is more than a liability, it is actually a pariah. There are people like that in God's church. These people watch but they watch from a distance without much interest. They see, they often do not respond, or they responded inadequately or belatedly. They fail to seize the opportunity to help others in practical ways. And they are uninvolved and such people in God's church are playing the dummy.

Brethren, we all exist to circumstances ordained by God in some degree of geographic separation and corporate isolation. We all know that it is more dangerous, more obvious in some areas and in some circumstances than others, but we all suffer from that. It affects every one of us.

Right now fragmentation is a given; it is the way it is. But how we respond to that isolation is not a given but it is a choice and it is *our* choice. We ask ourselves: What does God think of those who exacerbate this isolation? Those who aggravate and make it worse by making their choice, and I repeat again, by making their choice to play dummy?

Let me be clear. I mean the *considered* choice to disengage from God's people. My comments today which I have entitled, *Compassion and Couch Potatoes*, is a response to that question. Life does not accommodate the role of dummy. God has ordained that people count; that their actions and inactions count. There are meaningful. They are consequential.

Everything does matter, as Austin Del Castillo rightly pointed out in his excellent sermonette of July 8, 2017: He said that *no man is an island*; and brethren, by God's decree and by God's design, no man can become an island; in the area of human intercourse, ships simply do not pass in the night without leaving any wake.

That does not happen. It cannot happen and it will not happen. Paul puts it this way in Romans 14:

Romans 14:7 (ESV) For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself.

In Matthew 12, Christ Himself touches upon the fact that insularity is impossible:

Matthew 12:30 (ESV) "Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters."

If a person, any person in God's church, sets out on a cross of indifference to his social context, whatever it might be, determining to do nothing no matter what, he emphatically and inexorably remains a real and genuine force on behalf of evil. He is *not* neutral.

The person who 'passes' is not just a bump on a log, he is not just inconsequential; but in fact affects the game and does so negatively. The Christian who sits this one out is through the lack of connection with God's people laboring at cross purposes with God and His work. Christ likens that person's actions to scattering, and that scattering is the opposite of Christ's own work and Christ's work is gathering. Please turn to Luke chapter ten.

Here is a classic example of what could have been a lethal, lackadaisical, do-nothing attitude—one with a very highly negative consequence. We are going to pick up the story of the Parable of the Good Samaritan. The following scene here is taking place on a road that connected Jericho to Jerusalem:

Luke 10:31-34 (NKJV) “Now by chance a certain priest came down that road. And when he saw him [That is the victim of the robbers], he passed [Here is that word pass.] by on the other side. Likewise a Levite, when he arrived at the place, came and looked, and passed by on the other side. But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was. And when he saw him, he had compassion. So he went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine.”

Brethren, the only action taken by the Levite and the priest was to give the victim ‘wide berth,’ as they would say in England, just hightailing out of there post-haste. And in doing so, they sidestepped their responsibilities to another human being, to another person, not wanting to become involved, they callously refused to take any remedial action at all.

And do not forget that as a result of their inaction, the victim could have perished. He had been attacked and wounded. He could have perished.

These people who became part of the problem did not become part of the solution. To some extent they were complicit in the crime. Some people would argue that there is a legal argument but to some extent because they did nothing, I personally feel that God considers them complicit in the actual crime.

Conversely, the Samaritan sacrificed time and sacrificed money. He sacrificed his own energy on behalf of the victim. And this sacrifice is the essence of love and the opposite of the apathetic approach taken by the Levite and by the priest.

Of course, we all understand that those two were not the perpetrators of the crime, but neither were they helpers. They scattered rather than gathered. And our inaction very definitely can affect others negatively and as this particular story indicates, even fatally had not the Samaritan come along.

Please turn to I John 3. This is a key scripture that connects what some would consider opposites. It connects active hatred on one side, and passive indifference that many people would consider as opposites. Quasi indifference however, and outright hatefulness bear the same fruit. They are not really opposites. In point of fact, God sees indifference as a particularly sinister species of hatred; pernicious by virtue of the fact that indifference generally operates under the surface. You do not see indifference but it is still there. So it is not as overt as something like hatefulness. But the difference is still there.

I John 3:14-18 (ESV) We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death. Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him. By this we know love, that He laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. But if anyone has this world’s goods and sees his brother in need, and yet closes his heart against him, how does God’s love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.

In verses sixteen and seventeen, the apostle moves from discussing active malice, which is exemplified there by his reference to murder, to talking about passive indifference—just doing nothing or the failure to help others in need. What John is doing is expanding the scriptural definition of hate. And in that definition, quite pointedly, indifference is a type of hatred.

John points out that both the act of hatred and its passive counterfeit apathy have the same effect on people: death. From God's perspective, hate and indifference are linked by the fact that they belie or deny inherent relationships both ultimately leading to death.

Let us return briefly to the Samaritan and mention him one more time. The parable implies the existence of a native and inherent relationship between people. For instance, between the victim, between the priest, and between the Levite. And yet those relationships were never fostered and never cultivated at all.

Let us use this concept of a relationship as a springboard to consider another relationship: The relationship between God the Father and Christ and between God's people taken as a whole—God the Father, the Son, and God's people.

The Scriptures commonly refer to this relationship as fellowship, the word that we see the most in the King James Version of the Bible. In John 17 Christ mentions this fellowship. Christ is actually praying here for His disciples and by extension, He is also praying for us.

John 17:21 "That they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me."

In the context of John 14-17, it is clear that the Holy Scripture facilitates and defines the basic characteristic of this fellowship. It is a spiritual matter, but brethren it is a very real matter. In this relationship or fellowship, the Father, the Son, and God's people share the same Spirit. At huge cost, Christ and His Father made that relationship and fellowship a rock-solid reality for us. Not for those outside the church, but for us it is a rock-solid reality. There is nothing more real; and He did so at the time of Christ's sacrifice—the peace offering of the Passover. An indication of the strength, an indication of the integrity or the vitality of that particular relationship appears in the book of Zechariah in chapter 2:

Zechariah 2:8 (Common English Bible) The Lord of heavenly forces proclaims (after his glory sent me) concerning the nations plundering you: Those who strike you strike the pupil of my eye.

In context, the pronoun *you* refers to God's people. Those who attack God's people attack God. This bespeaks a very, an extremely close relationship indeed. If somebody strikes the pupil of your eyes it is pretty close to you is not it?

Do we share God's perspective regarding that relationship or that fellowship? Do we recognize it? Do we vividly recognize it, brethren? Do we profoundly respect it? And more than that, do we actively cherish it to the extent that we consider an attack on one of God's children or any other child of God, through joblessness, sickness, or whatever it might be; do we treat that and deal with it just as if it were an attack on us or an attack on God?

The fact of that unseen, that over the sun relationship and its reality, renders our disengagement from God's people as untenable from God's viewpoint. It is an understatement to assert that apathy is inconsistent with or incongruous with the Christian's lifestyle. It is positively destructive.

Do you understand? Please understand: Disengagement is scattering. Disengagement from God's people is scattering and the reason has to do with entropy. I am going to pass over this comment very

quickly. Entropy, we all know, is the principle that things in the physical creation degenerate. They go downhill unless energy, work, is applied to them. Things left to themselves never get better but degenerate.

Even if you do not take your car on the road over a period of time, the dust on it gets thicker and thicker; and unless you engage that dust with soap and water, unless you go to work with it, you will just begin wading in the dust, will you not?

Likewise, if a brother becomes discouraged, the situation is not going to get any better unless he confronts the situation. He has to engage it, he has to overcome it. And since we, in the church, are very profoundly, innately in fellowship with that person through God's Spirit, God expects us to help as well.

We all understand that we cannot overcome for him; we know that. But we can go to work and we can engage him. We can encourage him and we can help him overcome. And unless he does his part and unless we do ours, the situation is likely only to degenerate. Entropy is why disengagement results in scattering unless someone goes to work to gather. The sheep wander further and further apart and astray. They are scattered and scattering all the more.

Please turn to Matthew 25. I am going to stall for a moment here over the concept of this three-way relationship between the Father, the Son, and God's people. In Matthew 25, Christ provides a New Testament statement of the vitality, strength, and depth, we could say, of this fellowship or this relationship. Remember Zechariah 2:8. I mentioned earlier where God indicates that an attack on His people is an attack on Him.

In Matthew 25, Christ expands this concept from outright belligerence which is an attack to include indifference—just doing nothing!

The way God sees it, just doing nothing is an attack on Him personally, an attack on the very pupil of His eye. In His statement here, Christ points out the high cost of apathy for God's people.

Matthew 25:34-38, 40 (NKJV) “Then the King will say to those on His right hand, ‘Come, you blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from before the foundation of the world: for I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me a drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.’ “Then the righteous will answer Him, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? . . .’ “And the king will answer and say to them, ‘Assuredly, I saw to you, insomuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.’”

Christ begins there with those brethren who refuse to play dummy: They do not play dummy! And then Christ addresses those who do [play dummy.]

Matthew 24:41-45 “Then He will also say to those on the left hand, ‘Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels: for I was hungry and you gave Me no food to; I was thirsty and you gave Me no drink; I was a stranger and you did not take Me in; naked and you did not clothe Me; sick and in prison and you did not visit Me.’ “Then they also will answer Him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison and did not minister

to You?’ Then He will answer them, saying, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it for Me.’ And they will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

Brethren, disengagement from God's people and indifference towards them bears a really, really high cost. Please turn to James 2 and we will see a second witness of this cost of indifference, the cost of refusal to serve. James speaks here of this couch potatoish, self-absorbed, do-nothing kind of approach in his comments concerning faith and works.

James 2:14 What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him?

I want to repeat that question brethren: *Can that faith save him?* We often read over that, do we not?

James 2:15-17 If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, and one of you says to them, “Depart in peace, be warmed and filled,” but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit? Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

What is remarkable about this response “be warmed and filled,” is that behind it, there is no spirit of service; there is no spirit of sacrifice. And hence, this do-nothing response is bereft of agape love. This type of response is not outgoing at all.

James asks an exceedingly important rhetorical question in verse sixteen: *Can that faith save him?* And James is talking there about the passive faith; He is talking about the inert faith; he is talking about the moribund faith that does not motivate to action, and through the use of that question James in averring that such a faith is not one which is capable of leading to salvation.

Please brethren let us be very clear about this. We are talking about a salvational issue!

Engagement with God's people is not just a nice-to-have if you can afford it. Involvement is not just a value-added if it happens to fit your disposition! And *together* is not an option whenever it is convenient for *you*. Rather brethren, God expects and indeed demands an active, ongoing, and practical engagement with His people on our part. On the part of a Christian, the persistent, I mean the persistent, unrepented, *I will sit this one out* approach will produce no good fruit whatsoever.

James actually does answer this question brethren in the next few chapter in James chapter four:

James 4:17 Therefore, to him who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin.

And brethren we all know were sin leads. The committed dummy, who is also a Christian, is in a whole lot of trouble. Please turn to Deuteronomy 15 as I begin to wind down. Moses’ comments here are clearly relevant to the Israel of God as they focus not only on the act of charity, or on the act of service, but on the attitude and the spirit that is behind it.

Deuteronomy 15:7-9 (ESV) “If among you, one of your brothers should become poor, in any of your towns within your land that the Lord your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart or shut your hand against your poor brother, but you shall open your hand to him and lend him sufficient for his need, whatever it may be. Take care lest

there be an unworthy thought in your heart and you say, “the seventh year, the year of release is near,” and your eye look grudgingly on your poor brother, and you give him nothing, and he cry to the LORD against you and you be guilty of sin.”

The Hebrew word there that has translated grudgingly brethren is a Hebrew is *beliya'al*. Grudgingly is probably not really the best way to render a word which means worthless, unprofitable, and wicked. And rightly or wrongly, some commentators actually believe that *beliya'al* is a very old name for Satan. God considers the mindset of disengagement, the mindset of indifference, the mindset of neglect as a sin. It is a sin of omission and it is a satanically inspired attitude.

Deuteronomy 15:10 (ESV) “You shall give to him freely, and your heart shall not be grudging when you give to him, because for this the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake. For there will never cease to be poor in the land. Therefore I command you, ‘You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor in your land.’”

This need is not new, brethren. Rather God has kind of built it into life as an exercise for those of us who have His Spirit. Those of us who have are to aid those who have not and to do so liberally. We use the term tightfisted to refer to a scrooge or a miser. But God reverses here the image of an eye using the concept of an open hand.

Helping those in the church as opportunity arises and I am not talking about giving money away like the federal government does. That does not work. All that does is entitle people and does not really help them in the long run.

Mr. Herbert W. Armstrong used to actually talk about that and how he used to say, “You can’t give what you don’t got.” We ‘don’t got.’ The federal government can tax and get more money but we cannot. We cannot tax people and thus have to use our own resources.

It does mean, however, serving God's people in the context of the gifts that God has given us as opportunity for us. I am going to conclude in Galatians 6. Paul sets the standard here

Galatians 6:1-2 (ESV) Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.

Brethren, please note that in the context of Paul's concluding comments to the Christians in Galatia he mentions a spiritual matter. Paul is not talking here about physical needs; he is talking about sins and about transgressions. Mature Christians should engage other Christians with a spirit of restoration as it is appropriate.

John Ritenbaugh mentioned just a few weeks ago, leaping is absolutely necessary. It is very important to God that we leap in the right direction and the right time and we have to have wisdom to do this but this is a topic for another day.

Galatians 6:9-10 (ESV) And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up. So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.

At this point, the apostle Paul expands his comments to include both spiritual assistance and physical assistance—both of them.

Brethren, in about forty-eight hours from now, we will have scattered home, some facing another year of isolation to various extents, some outright dreary solitude. But rather the fact of that separation provides no reason for solitaire on anyone's part. While upon a year, let us determine to play the cards that God has dealt us engaging God's people wisely, consistently, sincerely as opportunity affords, remembering that our actions and our inactions matter.