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OF MY OWN SELF I CAN DO NOTHING

On one Sabbath Day Jesus Christ healed a man who had been lame for 38 years (John 5:5). In the situation that followed Jesus Christ then said that God was His Father (verse 18). For that statement the Jewish leaders then wanted to kill Him. The healing that had occurred represented a powerful miracle. And in that context Jesus Christ then said the following:

Then answered Jesus and said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, **The Son can do nothing of Himself**, but what He sees the Father do: for what things soever He (God the Father) does, these also does the Son likewise. (John 5:19)

This point Jesus Christ repeated a few verses later.

I can of My own self do nothing: as I hear, I judge: and My judgment is just; because I seek not My own will, but the will of the Father who has sent Me. (John 5:30)

What did Jesus Christ mean? Did He really mean "nothing" in an absolute sense? And what about you and me ... is it also true that we of our own selves can do absolutely nothing?

Yes, it is most certainly true that we absolutely cannot do anything of ourselves, starting with **the next breath of air** which we take into our lungs, and the next constructive thought we might think. Our lives are truly in God's hands, and we live by the grace of God. And "our souls" can be "required of us" at any moment of God's choosing (see Luke 12:20).

So yes, it is true in the absolute sense that we can do nothing of our own selves, including the most mundane things in our lives.

But Jesus Christ was not speaking about mundane things!

Jesus Christ's statements in verses 19 and 30 have a much more specific focus. Let's consider the Greek text for the first part of verse 30.

THE GREEK WORD TRANSLATED "DO"

In John 5:30 the Greek word "poiein" is translated as "do". This Greek verb "poieo" certainly does mean "do". But in many instances it has the stronger focus of **"to cause something, to accomplish, to produce"**. In other words, frequently the verb "poieo" isn't just referring to the mundane things of life, like digging a hole or walking or shopping. Rather, frequently this verb is focused on productive and meaningful actions that are achieved by significant or intentional effort, or it refers to actions that have very serious consequences.

Here are a few Scriptures where this Greek verb "poieo" is translated as **"to cause something"**:

Matthew 5:32 = "But I say unto you, that whosoever shall put away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, causes her to commit adultery ..."

Acts 15:3 = "... and they caused great joy unto all the brethren."

Romans 16:17 = "Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences ..."

John 11:37 = "And some of them said, Could not this man, which opened the eyes of the blind, have caused that even this man should not have died?"

These references should suffice to illustrate this particular meaning of the Greek verb "poieo". So now let's briefly examine the first ten Greek words in this verse. Here they are in the order in which they appear in the text.

ou = the absolute negative, ie. "absolutely not";

dunamai = to have power (think of "dynamic");

ego = I

poiein = to cause, to accomplish, to produce;

ap = by;

emautou = myself;

ouden = nothing, anything;

kathos = as, according to;

akouo = I hear;

krino = I judge.

Notice the word "dunamai" in this context. It is translated into English as the auxiliary verb "I can". But this Greek word typically refers to "having power". So putting the above words together, here is what our English translation for the first part of verse 30 looks like:

"I absolutely don't have **the power to accomplish** anything by Myself; as I hear, I judge ..." (John 5:30)

So while the statement "of myself I can do nothing" is certainly true for all of us down to the lowest possible level of activity, the focus of Jesus Christ's statement is really on **the lack of ability to produce, achieve and accomplish by ourselves things that have value or are meaningful**. It is focused on the inability to achieve significant accomplishments, and not merely on being unable to do even something insignificant.

When Jesus Christ made these statements, He was referring specifically to the healing He had performed just before then, an obviously very significant event.

So why did Jesus Christ say this?

Jesus Christ wanted to make clear that **He was not claiming the credit** for what He had done. The credit for the healing He had performed belongs to God the Father. The credit for everything Jesus Christ did belongs to God the Father. And Jesus Christ took the opportunity which that particular healing

presented to spell out that He was always in total submission to the will of God the Father.

So as far as you and I are concerned, for us the intended application of the statement "of my own self I can do nothing" is: by our own power we absolutely don't have the ability to produce anything of value, or anything that is meaningful.

That seems easy enough to understand. But here is the problem: **in our personal lives we so often don't actually believe this factual statement. Or we just seem oblivious to it?**

Look, if this statement applied to Jesus Christ during His ministry, and according to Jesus Christ Himself it did, then it surely applies to you and me a thousand times more so, that you and I really cannot achieve anything significant without God's involvement.

But that doesn't stop us from making plans to make more money, to get bigger houses and bigger cars, to get higher status or higher positions in the business world, etc., and all too often we believe that, if we just put out more effort, **then we can do it** ... and then we can have whatever it is that we desire to have.

There is a complicating factor that enters the mix at this point, and that factor is this:

Almighty God in heaven has **different expectations** for people who have become converted members of God's Church, when compared to God's expectations for the unconverted people of this world. God expects converted members of His Church to have different goals and different purposes, from the goals of people who are not in His Church.

And so **people in the world** can set themselves the goals to become rich or famous, and **in most cases God doesn't get involved** one way or the other. Those people would also be a part of the group whom Jesus Christ "never knew", meaning that Christ wasn't involved in their lives one way or the other, though likely without the condemnation of "depart from Me you that work iniquity" (see Matthew 7:23), since they are not the ones who falsely claim to have done the work of God. Such people are just a part of the world that is cut off from God. Such people can set themselves goals of fame & fortune, and they may get what they strive for without God's involvement?

But that's not how it works for God's people!

Once we have repented and become a part of God's true Church, then God becomes actively involved in our lives. And for us in that situation it will be impossible to achieve any selfish goals or selfish ambitions by our own efforts. And obviously, if our goals and ambitions have any selfish motivations, then God in heaven is not going to approve of those selfish motivations. So all selfish goals and ambitions on the part of members of God's Church will in due time fail.

The explanation here is very simple: if we have any selfish goals and ambitions, then we are not really "seeking the Kingdom of God first" (see Matthew 6:33). And if any member of God's Church doesn't seek God's Kingdom first, then all selfish goals and ambitions are guaranteed to fail, if not sooner, then later.

Jesus Christ's statement in Matthew 10:37 certainly also applies to selfish goals we may set for ourselves.

He that loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me: and he that loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me.

Now the Apostle James wrote to God's people, and what applied to church members almost 2000 years

ago, applies to us today in exactly the same way.

THE APOSTLE JAMES EXPLAINS

James specifically addressed those church members who set themselves the goal of quickly becoming rich. James wrote:

Go to now, **you that say**, To day or to morrow we will go into such a city, and continue there a year, and buy and sell, and get gain. (James 4:13)

James was writing about **church members who were planning to make a fortune**. They had a get-rich-in-one-year scheme. They had totally selfish motivations. They wanted to make a lot of money. And God was assuredly not going to support their selfish intentions.

So James assessed their situation as follows:

Whereas **you know not what [shall be] on the morrow**. For what [is] your life? It is even a vapor, that appears for a little time, and then vanishes away. (James 4:14)

James' point is that **we have no control at all over the future**. James is speaking in the context of members of God's Church setting very selfish goals. And with selfish goals God isn't really in the picture. And that is when presumptuousness on our part so easily enters the picture.

To identify for the moment with the members James was addressing in James 4:13, without saying so in so many words, we are pretty confident that we have a straightforward path to making a lot of money. We have a scheme or an investment that is a sure-fire winner. Or we are confident that we have a clear path to a promotion that we eagerly desire to receive.

And then we rely on our own actions to achieve that promotion. Or we rely on the plan we have hatched to make a lot of money. But God isn't in the picture. And very commonly, when people in God's Church strive for such personal goals, they also stop praying regularly. The pursuit of their personal goals takes up all their energies, and they don't have time for God.

It also becomes somewhat uncomfortable for them to kneel down before God in total privacy, and to approach God in prayer, when deep-down they know that God doesn't really approve of their selfish goals. After all, when **they know that God knows** that, for example, they have set themselves the goal to be raised to Evangelist Rank "within x years", or that they aim to achieve their first million dollars income "within x years", or that they plan to have a different husband or a different wife "within x years", etc. (to consider a few examples of the numerous different selfish goals I have seen some people strive after in the course of the past almost 50 years), then it is really difficult for them to kneel down in sincerity before God and to open up their hearts.

And so people who set themselves selfish goals usually stop praying on a regular basis, i.e. if they were praying on a regular basis to start with.

And it doesn't even remotely occur to them that, as far as their selfish plans are concerned, **"of their own selves they can do nothing"**! No, if they just do things right according to their plan, then they will surely get what they desire, is what they believe. They forget that, as James points out, they have no control over tomorrow.

James then continued to point out the correct approach we ought to have regarding every single plan we make:

For that you [ought] to say, **If the Lord will**, we shall live, and do this, or that. (James 4:15)

It is not really a matter of "**saying**" the expression "if the Lord will". It is really a case of unconditionally **believing** the expression "if the Lord will". Now here is where many people stop. They say: here is what I would like to do or have, and I want to know God's will in this matter. So how will God show me His will?

So they may go to their minister and say: I want to know if it is God's will for me to ... (whatever plans they may have in mind); so can you tell me what God would want me to do?

But that's not how it is supposed to work. We are supposed to figure out for ourselves whether whatever plans we have will have God's approval or not. We are supposed to use our own minds. As Paul explained:

And be not conformed to this world: but be you transformed by the renewing of your mind, **that you may prove what [is] that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.** (Romans 12:2)

Anyone and everyone who has received God's spirit is supposed to figure out for himself/herself what is God's will for every area of our lives. Now in the beginning we may need some help in this process from our local minister. But once someone has had the holy spirit for five or more years (i.e. been a member of God's Church for at least five years), they should be able on their own to figure out God's will on almost all issues that affect their personal lives. And then only the difficult cases need to be taken to their pastor for advice.

But here is the point: When we think up selfish plans and ambitions and goals, then **in most cases we ourselves know that what we want is selfish.** In some cases we may not be willing to face this obvious fact. And then we may present our intentions (or whatever we are already doing) to a minister in such a way, that he may quite possibly say: yeah, that sounds fine to me, so go ahead with your plans. And we have the approval we wanted to hear all along.

As James put it:

But now **you rejoice in your boasting**: all such rejoicing is evil. (James 4:16)

These people were bragging about how much money they had made. They really thought highly of themselves and of their ability to make a fortune. Whenever we boast, God is obviously not in the picture. And their thinking back in James 4 was totally selfish. James called their attitude evil or wicked.

In the context of condemning their self-reliance in this situation as "evil", James then stated a principle:

Therefore to him that knows to do good, and does [it] not, **to him it is sin.** (James 4:17)

James was applying this principle to the subject he had discussed in the previous four verses. That's why this statement starts with "therefore". What did James mean?

People in the world can set themselves selfish goals, and then focus all their energies on achieving those goals, confidently relying on their own abilities and powers to achieve whatever they want to achieve ... and they don't know that of themselves they cannot really achieve anything! They can only achieve things because God gives them the abilities and the opportunities to achieve those things. But they don't know that. And so they proudly claim the

credit for whatever they may achieve.

But when we, the members of God's Church, set ourselves the same selfish goals, **we actually know** that we should seek first the Kingdom of God (i.e. we know we should "do good"). And **God expects us to know** that of ourselves we cannot achieve anything of value. We are supposed to know that all our abilities come from God, and that it is "the blessing of the Eternal that makes people rich" (see Proverbs 10:22), rather than our own efforts at producing wealth.

And that knowledge on our part makes all selfish goals "sin", while at the same time those things are not necessarily sin for people in the world. In other words, we'll be "missing the mark", but the people in the world don't even know that there is a mark to aim for. Greater knowledge on our part brings with it greater responsibility, and also greater accountability.

Originally there were no chapter breaks in the Epistle of James. And so in the next few verses James continues to address those same church members, calling them "rich men". And then James predicts that they will lose their wealth because of their totally selfish attitude (that's James 5:1-6). Losing everything they had acquired with their selfish conduct and motivations is a major proof that of their own selves they couldn't really achieve anything that would endure. They didn't have an "if the Eternal will" frame of mind.

SELFISH GOALS

Over the past almost 50 years I have seen many examples amongst people in the Church of God striving after selfish goals, goals that clearly became very important to those people.

In some cases they almost got what they were striving for ... and then quite suddenly lost it all. In other cases they did actually get what they desired ... and then they lost it. In still other cases they also got what they had set their hearts on ... and then adversity struck them. In other cases they really wanted a different husband or a different wife ... only to have things turn out far differently than what they had planned. And some men who planned to get ahead in the ministry, and perhaps even into the upper echelons of the ministry actually did get there ... before leaving God's Church altogether. In fact, leaving God's Church has been a very common result in all of these cases of people striving after selfish goals.

It never occurs to them that of their own power they can't achieve anything. Somehow **they believe that they can work things out** to get what they really want to get, and somehow to still be a committed Christian in whose life God always comes first.

Yes, God can certainly bless us and give us wealth or promotions or happy relationships or good health. As the Apostle John wrote: "beloved, I wish above all things **that you may prosper and be in health**, even as your soul prospers" (3 John 1:2). And when our priorities are right, and when we clearly see our own inability to achieve anything of value on our own power, then God will bless us in various ways.

And when that is the case, i.e. when we are being blessed by God, then the results will show that it is indeed a blessing from God. Proverbs 10:22 reveals the key in this situation.

The blessing of the LORD, it makes rich, and **He adds no sorrow with it.** (Proverbs 10:22)

I referred earlier to people in the world setting themselves the goal to become rich or famous, and sometimes achieving their goal, even though God is not involved. But in almost all their cases there is a heavy price they have to pay. The price, as mentioned in the proverb, is that **they have also "reaped**

sorrow" in the process of striving after their selfish goals.

That may be in the form of poor health, or broken and unhappy relationships, or major problems for their children, or serious accidents, or becoming victims of serious crimes, or developing absurd phobias and other mental problems, etc. And very many famous people have died before even reaching age 50 or 60 years. The achievement of excessively selfish goals always exacts a heavy price from the people involved.

On the other hand, when something is truly a blessing from God, then there is **"no sorrow" attached** to that blessing. The blessing will not tear up their families or destroy their health, etc. A blessing from God has no bad side-effects, unless our own subsequent conduct brings bad side-effects upon us.

Think of the example of King Solomon.

As a teenager Solomon was very humble, and God then gave Solomon great wealth, as well as "a wise and an understanding heart" (see 1 Kings 3:12). There was no sorrow attached to those blessings from God. But it was Solomon himself who, as a result of these blessings, became vain and very selfish. And that's when "sorrow" also entered Solomon's life, to the point where Solomon by the time he was in his early 50's "hated life" (see Ecclesiastes 2:17). But that is not how it started out for Solomon.

Think also of the example of King Nebuchadnezzar.

God gave Nebuchadnezzar "a kingdom, power and strength and glory" (see Daniel 2:37). That's pretty clear: the powerful kingdom you rule over was given to you, Nebuchadnezzar. And at that time Nebuchadnezzar seemed to get this. But then many years later, a year after getting a serious warning because of his pride and arrogance, Nebuchadnezzar looked at the splendor of his capital city, and he said to himself:

The king spoke, and said, Is not this great Babylon, **that I have built** for the house of the kingdom **by the might of my power**, and for the honor of **my majesty**? (Daniel 4:30)

For that pride and vanity **God took the spirit in man away from Nebuchadnezzar** for seven years. And for those seven years Nebuchadnezzar was basically an animal with a human-looking body. In biblical language that is stated as follows: **"let a beast's heart be given unto him"** (see Daniel 4:16). (This last Scripture is thoroughly explained in my 2017 50-page article "The Spirit In Man".)

This is probably **the ultimate penalty**, short of death, for thinking that we ourselves have the power to produce great things and wealth and great accomplishments. When God takes the spirit in man (which spirit belongs to God) away from any living human being, then that individual ceases to be a human being, and then that individual becomes totally incapable of any conduct or behavior on the human level.

That is a pretty powerful way to teach someone (once God gives the spirit in man back to that person) that "of his own self he can do absolutely nothing". And obviously, if hypothetically God were to never give the spirit in man back to that person, then that individual would also be incapable of ever again learning anything. We need to have the spirit in man to even be able to function on the human level.

And when God after seven years gave the spirit in man back to Nebuchadnezzar, he had really learned this particular lesson very well. As Nebuchadnezzar then wrote in a letter to all the people throughout his whole empire:

I thought it good to show the signs and wonders that the high God has wrought toward me. (Daniel 4:2)

Now I Nebuchadnezzar praise and extol and honor the King of heaven, all whose works [are] truth, and his ways judgment: and **those that walk in pride he is able to abase**. (Daniel 4:37)

Yup, Nebuchadnezzar had learned his lesson. So he can have a positive start when the second resurrection takes place.

And what about us?

Do we really understand how totally and completely helpless we are without God giving us the power and the means to achieve and to accomplish anything of value? The world is not expected to understand this. But you and I, who are members of God's Church, ought to realize with every fiber of our being that "of ourselves we really cannot do anything of value". We always should make every single plan we make on the premise of "**if the Eternal will**, we will do this or that".

We always need to be on guard against any selfish desires taking us out of a direct relationship with God the Father.

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