

Defeating Selfishness: God as Our Greatest Good

Philosophically and practically speaking selfishness is a fundamental human problem because selfishness begets selfishness. As R. C. H. Lenski said (MacArthur, 1984): "Cure selfishness, and you have just replanted the Garden of Eden."

No matter the external regulations or incentives, social harmony will not occur without men and women having a love, a caring, for each other. Justice alone is not enough. It is a good start. It may be the best we can do naturally, but it will disintegrate if it is treated only as a principle with no core motivation to care about the other person.

God has always wanted His people to live by the type of faith that results in love toward Him and each other. Both the Old and New Testaments command us to "love the Lord our God with all our hearts, and our neighbor as ourselves" (Joshua 22:5; Leviticus 19:18; Mark 12:29-31). Jesus in Mark 12:29-31: "The most important commandment is this: 'Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is the one and only Lord. And you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength.' The second is equally important: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' No other commandment is greater than these."

But look around! Selfishness seems to too often rule the day. And the behaviors that manifest themselves out of selfishness create dysfunctional relationships. In order to get them out of your life you have to not want to indulge them. You have to be committed to doing the will of God. I do not necessarily mean His specific will for a situation, although you should seek His guidance in it, but I am talking about the will He has already revealed, His general will that should govern our thinking and attitudes. Read verses like Philippians 4:8 and 1 Thessalonians 5:12-22. These verses indicate God's general will for all. When we commit ourselves to living according to His general will we will find that our relationships improve and many of the problems that plague our lives will not exist. No! bad situations that already exist because of our own bad actions will not necessarily disappear, but if we approach them with the attitude and heart that Philippians 4:8 and 2 Thessalonians 5:12-22 indicate even these old problems will become less stressful. But also realize that new problems will not be created.

So much of what ails us is self-inflicted, self-created but our own bad actions. We create many of the problems that plague our lives because of who we hang around with and the sinful things we do. Yes, I realize that things do happen to us that we do not deserve because that is the kind of world we live in—the sin of others often affects us unfairly. We live in a cause-and-effect world. And some of those ‘causes’ are the bad and irresponsible actions of others. But if we commit ourselves to a Philippians 4:8 and 2 Thessalonians 5:12-22 attitude, those ‘unfairnesses’ will not grow bad attitudes in us. It is not a virtue to "when in Rome do as the Romans do" if what they do is wrong! It is no excuse before God to say, "This is a dog-eat-dog world where a survival-of-the-fittest mentality rules, especially in business and politics, therefore I need to behave that way to survive and prosper." James says it well. "What is causing the quarrels and fights among you? Isn't it the whole army of evil desires at war within you? You want what you don't have, so you scheme and kill to get it. You are jealous for what others have, and you can't possess it, so you fight and quarrel to take it away from them. And yet the reason you don't have what is that you don't ask God for it. And even when you do ask, you don't get it because your whole motive is wrong—you want only what will give you pleasure! You adulterers! Don't you realize that friendship with this world (and its way of doing things) makes you an enemy of God? I say it again, that if your aim is to enjoy this world, you can't be a friend of God. What do you think the Scriptures mean when they say that the Holy Spirit, whom God has placed within us, jealously longs for us to be faithful? He gives us more and more strength to stand against such evil desires. As the Scriptures say, 'God sets himself against the proud but he shows favor to the humble.'"

Hitler, those involved in pornography, exploiters of child labor, those involved in the human slave trade, and others have used "the survival of the fittest" mentality to justify bad actions. It is an end justifies the means philosophy. It is interesting to note that that philosophy is used to justify predatory behaviors. And yes! those who are aggressively committed to power and status will often overrun those who are peaceful. Look at the Vikings, Mongols, Nazis, and Greeks. These peoples were driven to war and conquering by leaders who wanted to increase what they already had. These leaders sought glory, power, and material wealth. They went out of their way to overrun peoples who were dwelling in relative peace. But interestingly, they were less capable of managing the peace and building a well functioning society free from brutality to keep the subjects in line. Often, those who were living in relative harmony, and who were actually more ‘fit’ in promoting a healthy social system, were overrun by aggressively murderous thieves or ideological zealots. This world is one long history of violent and predatory dysfunction!

The work of God is not promoted by ‘medieval crusades’ or ‘conversions by sword point’. I do not just mean this literally as the reference indicates. But the same principle speaks against a Christian indulging in immoral business practices in order to "grow the business" or "further the cause." As James tells us, we are not to be a friend of this world. And how do we become "friends" with this world? We are friends of this world when we do things the way it does them. Christians are not to operate this way! In order to do this we must first reject selfishness as our operating principle!

But what is the answer for rejecting selfishness as our operating principle of life? Are we to hate ourselves? Or pretend we do not exist? The Bible tells us to “love others the same as we love ourselves.” This verse (Mark 12:33) tells us that loving ourselves is not a bad thing. It would make no sense to tell us to love others the same as we love ourselves if loving ourselves is a bad thing. Then what is the difference between legitimate “loving of self” and selfishness, that garden from which every evil known to man finds its beginning? The “loving of self”, or legitimate self-love, God calls us to is different.

Self-love is the wishing of good to one's self. All persons have self-love. Self-love is natural. It seeks the good. By God’s design, since we are not self-sufficient, the goods are those that will perfect us as humans. By God’s design, at the time of birth, natural self-love is the very first movement of the will and appetites (Reardon, 1943, p. 26). It was designed to guide us to our highest ends-to perfect us.

Self-love is founded on fundamental aspects of being (Reardon, p. 44):

1. Self-love seeks the good.
2. Self-love seeks the personal good, i. e., man as a person seeks the good.
3. Self-love seeks the personal good in society.

The nature of this impulse requires human interaction with its surroundings. Humans are not self-sufficient beings. God did not make us to be self-sufficient. It is important to realize that for the most part we were made to look outside of ourselves for true happiness. God and His creation, all things in time and eternity, are to be objects of our attention, each in its proper order and importance. That is the way we were designed from the beginning.

The characteristics of true self-love are the same as those which Aristotle gave for friendship (Nicomachean Ethics, p. 293ff):

1. Everyone wishes his friend to exist and to live.
2. Everyone desires good things for the friend.
3. Everyone does good things for the friend,
4. Everyone takes pleasure in the friend's company.
5. Everyone is at peace and one mind with the friend sharing joys and sorrows.

Virtuous people, as originally created by God in his image, therefore, have true self-love. It is not a bad thing. It is designed to motivate us to seek the best for ourselves. It is the basis and the norm by which we are to love our neighbor (Mark 12:33 and Romans 13:9-10). True self-love encourages us to care about others, to regard others as important and act for their benefit, to be others-regarding (Bond, 1996).

This love of self is the basis for all our desires and passions. When we obtain the good we feel delight, happy. Even the opposite passions are closely connected with love. All our hatreds and repulsions, all our sorrows, hopes, despairs, all our enterprises, fears and angers, ultimately point to the place where our treasures of love lie. Love is the principle of our actions since it is the principle of our passions. Human acquisition of goods is connected with their psychological happiness. Loss and deprivation of goods are connected with sadness and hurt.

Thomas Traherne a 17th century pastor and philosopher put it like this: "As love is the root of endeavor, so is it the spring of all the passions: They all depend upon love alone. We are angry at that which stands in our way, between our love and its object: We desire an absent good, because we love it: We hope for it, when we conceive its attainment feasible: We rejoice in it, when we have it: We fear to lose it: We grieve when it is gone: We despair, if we cannot get or recover it: We hate all that is opposite to it" (Traherne, 1968, p. 45-46). All of what Traherne said is true, only if we care enough about ourselves to hold and attain what we love. It is not a virtue to care about nothing; it is a psychological malady! The fact that we care about things that please us is normal and expected. **The issue of self-love is not that we care about things that are important to us, for that is a given, it is what and who we care about.**

Every vice is a defect in love. As legitimate self-love is included in every virtue, illegitimate self-love is the basis for every vice. This type of self-love is called inordinate self-love (Reardon, p. 48-49). Inordinate love means "out of proper order". It lacks an appreciation for the authority of natural law (in agreement with ordinary human reason) and justice. From a psychological point of view it makes the self the center of the universe-good is what is good only for the self, without others considered, bad is what is unpleasant to self, without others considered.

Inordinate self-love seeks a particular thing out of its proper place. Although it is seen as "good" it is actually noxious (Adler, 1991) and detrimental to the health and development of the total person. This person is not doing what is best for self but only that which he or she thinks the self to be. A false image is constructed and fed. The individual clings to the glorified self-portrait because it relieves anxiety, satisfies perceived needs, and represents the negative qualities of the real self as glorious ideals instead. For example, the compliance and submission of a "moving toward" personality (dependent personality traits) come to be viewed as goodness, love, saintliness, and service. The assertiveness, aggression, and power strivings of the "moving against" personality (aggressive personality traits) come to be viewed as strength, heroism, and leadership. And the aloofness of a "moving away" personality (independent personality traits) is interpreted to be self-control and wisdom (Kirwan, 1984, p. 179). Inordinate self-love is selfishness.

The extreme egoism of selfishness makes the individual the center of reality and causes him or her to credit self with undue importance. Right reason (ordinary human reason) and common sense should show the individual that his or her place is not such in the order of reality. But it does not. Inordinate self-love must abandon reason for the irrational. Rather than letting reason be the ruler over the passions (desires), it becomes their servant. The irrational is grasped to sustain selfishness.

Humans seem to have an innate ability to distort reality for their own personal gain. The inner push to satisfy our basic impulses causes us to have a tendency to impose ourselves on our environment regardless whether what we want is good for the situation or not. There are four ways we deal with reality that lead to problems:

1. Hiding reality - i.e., hiding evidence
2. Ignoring reality - i.e., ignoring evidence.
3. Manipulating reality - i.e., manipulating evidence.
4. Manufacturing reality - i.e., manufacturing evidence (Dolhenty, 1999).

Reality becomes distorted because our desires push us to hide, ignore, manipulate, or manufacture what really is the truth of the situation. Inordinate self-love always requires such reality distortions to survive the penetrating gaze of simple human reason! This violation of simple human reason is what Paul describes in Romans chapter one. When we, as a race and individually, put God aside we descend into irrationality to support our selfish and self-centered lifestyles. We do this to ourselves. As a race, we did this to ourselves.

Humans label and seek out objects that they see as good. Whether they ultimately are good is not the point for the inordinate self-lover. Whether others get hurt in the process is also beside the point. What matters to them is that the objects are wanted. Possession of them feels good. It makes them feel strong and in control.

E. E. Jennings conducted a study on 162 American business executives and then offered this statement to describe their overall attitude toward success in business:

"Ambitious business executives do not regard as success-contributing those practices ordinarily regarded as good human relations. They believed that self-interest was the basis of all human nature, that it is safer to be suspicious of men and assume their nature was more bad than good" (Mead, 1965, p.196).

In sum, they believed that in order to compete they needed to be selfish, because their competitors were also basically selfish. Philosophically and practically speaking selfishness is a fundamental human problem because selfishness begets selfishness.

In my opinion, no matter the external regulations or incentives, social harmony will not occur without men and women having a love, a caring, for each other. Justice alone is not enough. It is a good start. It may be the best we can do naturally, but it will disintegrate if it is treated only as a principle with no core motivation to care about the other person.

The remedy for selfishness is not asceticism but a proper appreciation and ordering of all the real goods in the world. Thomas Traherne states it well:

"They tell us it [real happiness] doth not consists in riches, it doth not consist in honors, it doth not consist in pleasures. Wherein then, saith a miserable man, doth it consist? Why in contentment, in self-sufficiency, in virtues, in the right government of our passions &c. Were it not better to show the amiableness of virtues, and the benefit of the right government of our passions, the objects of contentment, and the grounds of self-

sufficiency, by the truest means? Which these never do. Ought they not to distinguish between true and false riches as our Saviour doth; between real and feigned honors, between clear and pure pleasures and those which are muddy and unwholesome? The honor that cometh from above, the true treasures, those rivers of pleasure that flow at his right hand for evermore, are by all to be sought and by all to be desired. For it is the affront of nature, a making vain the powers, and a baffling the expectations of the soul, to deny it all objects, and a confining it to the grave, and a condemning of it to death, to tie it to the inward unnatural mistaken self-sufficiency and contentment they talk of. By the true government of our passions, we disentangle them from impediments, and fit and guide them to their proper objects. The amiableness of virtue consisteth in this, that by it all happiness is either attained or enjoyed. Contentment and rest ariseth from a full perception of infinite treasures. So that whosoever will profit in the mystery of Felicity, must see the objects of his happiness, and the manner how they are to be enjoyed, and discern also the powers of his soul by which he is to enjoy them, and perhaps, the rules that shall guide him in the way of enjoyment. All which you have here, God, the world, yourself, all things in time and eternity being the objects of your Felicity, God the Giver, and you the receiver" (Traherne, 1960, p.105-106).

The opposite of selfishness and greed is not a rejection of all objects and a rush to inner nothingness as Buddhism teaches, but possession (in thought) and appreciation of all objects according to their proper order and importance. The key attitudes are gratitude and thankfulness as God's grace and goodness is seen at the center of all things. Individuals who possess everything they ever wanted and still end up unhappy possess things in themselves, apart from God. Without a vision of God's generosity and provision at the center of all things, they are ultimately empty and impotent in their ability to give the human heart a real and lasting satisfaction and happiness.

God has always wanted His people to live by the type of faith that results in love toward Him and each other. Both the Old and New Testaments command us to "love the Lord our God with all our hearts, and our neighbor as ourselves" (Joshua 22:5; Leviticus 19:18; Mark 12:29-31). Jesus in Mark 12:29-31: "The most important commandment is this: 'Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is the one and only Lord. And you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength.' The second is equally important: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' No other commandment is greater than these."

The Bible records many names for God. Many of them reveal some truth about God or some role God fulfills. For example: El-Elyon-God Most High; El-Shaddai-

Almighty God; Jehovah-Jireh-the Lord will provide; Jehovah-Rapha-the Lord who heals; Jehovah-Nissi-the Lord our banner; Jehovah-Shalom-the Lord our peace; Jehovah-Raah-the Lord our shepherd; Jehovah-Tsidkenu-the Lord our righteousness; Jehovah-Shammah-the Lord is present; Adonai-Lord (Thiessen, 1986, p. 24). There are more. But John captures the essence of God when he said in 1 John 4:7-8: "Dear friends, let us continue to love one another, for love comes from God. Anyone who loves is born of God and knows God. But anyone who does not love does not know God-for God is love."

God in His essence is love. Jesus in His essence is love. "God showed how much he loved us by sending his only Son into the world so that we might have eternal life through Him. This is real love. It is not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins." And as other Scriptures record, the Son showed His love by yielding Himself to be that sacrifice. "For even I, the Son of Man, came here not to be served but to serve others, and to give my life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45).

If Jesus Christ is our ultimate example of behavior and attitude (Philippians 2:5-8), then we should follow His lead when we are trying to discern the differences between true self-love and false humility and asceticism, or self-indulgence. Hebrews 12:1-4 is very instructive:

"Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a huge crowd of witnesses to the life of faith, let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily hinders our progress. And let us run with endurance the race that God has set before us. We do this by keeping our eyes on Jesus, on whom our faith depends from start to finish. He was willing to die a shameful death on the cross because of the joy he knew would be his afterward. Now he is seated in the place of highest honor beside God's throne in heaven."

Notice that denying Himself is not interpreted as altruism-- giving no consideration to personal interest but only the interest of others. Jesus Christ is God's ultimate expression of love in action. And terminal to the loving action on the cross was "the joy that was set before Him." He valued the best over all other things. And He pursued it with passion, even though it meant temporary pain and deprivations.

With Jesus as our example, we learn that self-love is good. It led Him to the right hand of God the Father. It will lead us to fellowship with our Creator and Redeemer if we allow Him to stir and guide it according to His Word. Inordinate self-love, or selfishness,

will lead us in the opposite direction, away from God into eternal darkness and damnation.

God is the ultimate good. With our eyes on him, faith, righteousness will reign in our hearts and minds. That is how it was designed to work from the beginning. Our, in Adam, relationship with God was to be the central focus of who we were to be and how we were to behave. Righteousness, quite simply, was walking hand-in-hand with God. And that is what it is now. When we walk with God and follow His lead, we are behaving righteously because we have no other agenda we are trying to fulfill. When Abraham believed God and followed His lead, he was declared righteous. Repentance toward God is a recognition and lament of our rebellion that refused to honor and follow His lead in our lives. Repentance toward God is the spiritual preparation of our hearts and minds to accept Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. True self-love, as seen in Jesus, agrees with Paul when he says that all the world is dung (Philippians 3:8) compared to the goodness and majesty of God Himself. True self-love seeks the best of all 'objects', God Himself.

Men and women are designed to function with God and His creation as the objects of their attention and affections. God is valued as the chief good and all others things viewed with gratitude and thankfulness as they are seen in their proper place and order. With Jesus as our example, let us set our minds and hearts on things above where our true treasures lie.

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