SELFISHNESS

A study from the series
*What Keeps Me from Growing.*

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Everybody is bound to be selfish at one time or another. It’s just typical of human nature. From the time we were able to want something, our selfish nature has been hurting other people, sometimes with little gain or satisfaction to us. A selfish person ends up losing friends or loved ones because no matter how intelligent or charming or talented a selfish person may be, selfish people are hard to maintain a personal relationship with.

And the amazing thing, truly selfish people don’t even know they are being selfish. They would never consider the possibility that they are selfish. Some people think selfishness is a good thing and that if you follow the example of Christ and put the needs of others above your own, you’re a sucker and a fool. But all who would live a godly life, one in which we are becoming more each day like our unselfish Savior, need to view selfishness as something to deal with seriously.

As always, let’s start with a definition.

**Definition:** Webster’s Dictionary defines a selfish person as one “concerned excessively or exclusively with oneself.” A secondary definition is: “seeking or concentrating on one’s own advantage, pleasure, or well-being without regard for others.”

The apostle Paul describes people in the end times as “lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy” (*2 Timothy 3:2*). If that doesn’t describe the world today, I don’t know what does.

The word Paul uses is *philautos* (*fil'-ow-tos*). It’s made up of two smaller words: *philos* (*fee'-los*) meaning “to be friendly with” and *autos* (*ow-tos’*) meaning himself or herself. Together the word implies being friendly with oneself.

**Caution:**

We have to distinguish between self love and selfishness. If I counseled you to “love yourself” would you have a negative reaction to that? Of course you would. Maybe the word “egotistical” came to mind. But I’m not asking you to be self-centered or selfish. I’m asking you to respect yourself, protect yourself, take care of yourself. And that’s a biblical thing to do.

Here’s what the bible says.

*Leviticus 19:18* “Never seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone, but love your neighbor as yourself.” Now, you can’t love your neighbor as yourself unless you love yourself too.
Matthew 19:19 “Honor your father and mother. Love your neighbor as yourself.”
Mark 12:31 “The second is equally important: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ No other commandment is greater than these.”
Luke 10:27 “The man answered, “‘You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your strength, and all your mind.’ And, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”
Romans 13:9 “For the commandments against adultery and murder and stealing and coveting—and any other commandment—are all summed up in this one commandment: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”
Galatians 5:14 “For the whole law can be summed up in this one command: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”
James 2:8 “Yes indeed, it is good when you truly obey our Lord’s royal command found in the Scriptures: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”

Well, you get the picture. It’s not that we are not to love ourselves; we are to love ourselves by taking care of our body and mind, making sure our heart is right with God, feeding and exercising both body and mind. “For no man ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and carefully protects and cherishes it” (Ephesians 5:29). We are just not to love ourselves to the exclusion of others or show love to our wants and our desires to the detriment of the wants and desires of others. We are to put their needs above our own needs.

Isn’t that exactly what Paul said Jesus did in Philippians 2?

“So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Philippians 2:1-8).

That, my friend, is the most self-less act in the history of the world. It is the quintessential example of putting the needs and desires of others ahead of our own needs and desires.

But I know what you’re saying: “I’m not God; I have difficulty doing that.” Well, you’re right. We all do.

**Developing Selflessness**

So what are some things we all can do that help curb that natural tendency toward selfishness and develop the character of selflessness just like Jesus? From what I glean from the Bible, let me suggest a few very practical things.

1. **Check your own heart.** If you detect more than a little selfishness there, confess it to God for what it is—sin. “If we confess our sins He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).

2. **Look for ways to help other people.** Anticipate their needs and feelings so you can meet them at the point they have them. You can always tell helpful people because
you don’t have to tell helpful people you need help. Look around you. At the needs of your family. Do you have parents who need to feel loved and appreciated in their aging years. Call them. Tell them you love them. Anticipate their feelings and don’t be selfish. Bring them some joy.

3. **Listen to people when they talk.** It sounds so simple, but we are so bad at just lending a sympathetic ear or paying attention when people talk to us. We are selfish that way. If you consciously listen to what people have to say, you might both learn something and put yourself in a position to be used by the Lord to help them.

4. **Don’t interrupt people when they talk.** Let them finish their sentence. Don’t trump their story by interjecting your story. After all, their story may actually be more interesting to everyone than yours. You don’t always need to be talking. Did you know that you never learn anything while talking, except perhaps the accurate perception that no one is listening. Don’t interrupt. That’s selfish.

5. **Compliment people.** Do you know how thirsty some people are for the tiniest compliment? Perhaps it’s been weeks or months since they’ve had one. Be sincere, but show the love of Christ in the way you notice things about other people and compliment them.

6. **Show kindness to all people.** Even the least of these, Jesus says. Being kind doesn’t cost you anything. It doesn’t diminish you in any way. It doesn’t take cash to be kind, but it takes a lot of character. Paul said to the Romans, “Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor” (Romans 12:10). To the Ephesians he said, “Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you” (Ephesians 4:30-32).

7. **Be on time.** One of the most frequent acts of selfishness is being late. It presumes on the time of others and shows a lack of discipline on your part. It frustrates your friends, it disrupts the church service, and at work this act of selfishness could get you fired. It’s just as easy to be on time consistently as it is to be 10 minutes late consistently.

**Some Biblical Conclusions about Selfishness**

*First*, the antidote to selfishness is love. Genuine Christ-like love breaks the cycle of selfishness. Paul says, “Love seeks not her own” (1 Corinthians 13:5). Selfishness can only be broken when we stop loving ourselves more than our neighbor. We are to love our neighbors as ourselves and put their needs ahead of ours.

*Second*, selfishness dies the moment we willfully choose to obey God and not our own desires. Isaiah bears God’s warning about selfishness in the first chapter of his prophecy, verses 19 and 20. “If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land; but if you refuse and rebel, you shall be eaten by the sword; for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”

*Third*, the self-interest that we all have that’s a good thing (caring for our body and mind), becomes selfishness only when we refuse to conform to what we know God’s Word says about selfishness. Once we discover we are being selfish, we are obligated to change our habits or the sin of selfishness is compounded by the sin of disobedience. “So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin” (James 4:17).

*Finally*, forsaking selfishness and replacing that attitude with holiness and godly living is too big a job for all of us. We need superior help. Fortunately we have superior help
in God. **Psalm 56:11** says, “In God I have put my trust” and **1 John 4:4** reminds us, “he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.”

Selfishness is a widespread problem, but it doesn’t have to be your problem. The minute you detect a selfish attitude or action, do the right thing. **Confess** it to God as sin. **Repent** from the harm your selfishness may have done to others. **Ask God to forgive you. Go to those you have hurt** with your selfishness and apologize seeking their forgiveness too. **Ask the Holy Spirit to help** take selfishness away from you.

You can win this battle. Just be sensitive to how you are treating others or ask you friends to clobber you on the head when you are being selfish so you don’t have to be guessing. Let the blood of Jesus wash the stain of selfishness from your life.

Do you know these sayings?

- If a child grows up in an environment of criticism, the child will learn to criticize.
- If a child grows up in an environment of hate, the child will learn to fight.
- If a child grows up in an environment of shame, the child will learn to feel guilty

If you are critical, if you’re ready to fight, if you always feel guilty … then those sayings can give you an insight into what your home life might have been like.

But it’s not all lost. There is still time to grow and heal … these sayings might give you an insight into how to go forward in your life:

- If a child grows up in a **praising** environment, the child will learn to **appreciate**.
- If a child grows up in an **encouraging** environment, the child will learn to be **confident**.
- If a child grows up in an environment of **understanding**, the child will learn to be **patient**.
- If a child grows up in a **just** environment, the child will learn to be **fair**.
- If a child grows up in a **secure** environment, the child will learn to **trust**.
- If a child grows up in an environment of **acceptance and friendship**, the child will learn to **find love in people**.
A Baker’s Dozen of Verses About Selfishness

James 3:14-17 “But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.”

2 Timothy 3:1-5 “But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power. Avoid such people.”

2 Corinthians 9:7 “Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.”

Philippians 2:3-4 “Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.”

Ephesians 4:32 “Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.”

John 15:13 “Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.”

Matthew 20:28 “Even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

1 Corinthians 13:5 “[Love is not] rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful.”

John 3:30 “He must increase, but I must decrease.”

Psalm 119:36 “Incline my heart to your testimonies, and not to selfish gain!”

2 Timothy 3:2 “For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy.”

Romans 15:1-2 “We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up.”

Proverbs 18:1 “Whoever isolates himself seeks his own desire; he breaks out against all sound judgment.”