

Matthew 10:37-39; 16:24-26 (REB)
Galatians 2:15-21 (Peterson)

SO YOU THINK YOU'RE TOO SELFISH?

All my life I have heard from those outside any faith community that the church is full of hypocrites: people who claim to believe one way but live another way. With outsiders, I don't react very pleasantly to that charge. I have known too many people who have lived amazing, courageous, faithful, prayerful lives. I don't ever mind stacking the people inside the church against the people outside the church – at least not the people of the churches I have known. Maybe if you compare their best to our worst, you can fake a flimsy case. The truth is, statistically speaking, we live better, longer, healthier lives. Our morals are better, our goals are higher, our generosity is greater, we have more love for each other, and we have a greater concern for a wider spectrum of people than those outside a faith community. We are convicted of fewer crimes, love our children more, have a lower divorce rate. I don't feel ashamed or apologetic before the charges of outsiders that we are hypocrites.

But never mind them. Inside the church, with each other, we can talk on a deeper level. And it is true, we are all hypocrites. At least I am. I never make it through a single day living with, staying with, and demonstrating the very truths and attitudes and principles I most believe in. I am still amazed and alarmed to discover that beneath the layer of things I think I believe and try to believe, there is another layer of things I *really* believe. I truly believe that men and women are equal. But I *really* believe that men should protect and defend women – which means a woman is of greater value and, if necessary, the man is expendable. I am not asking you to agree with this. I am not inviting you to try to change my mind either. It is too late for me on this one. I have tried for years to change my mind about this, so I doubt you will have any better success. I merely notice my own hypocrisy. I try to believe one way, but what I *really* believe has a greater impact on my life.

Far from being a rare experience, I know that my life is riddled with inconsistencies between what I *truly* believe and what I *really* believe. While that no longer surprises me as much as it used to, I am always eager to get the *truly* to match the *really*. It's called "integration." Every time a new area inside me gets integrated, it stops another interior war. I feel the increased peace and harmony and joy. I can sense the increased power and focus too. One of the many differences between me and Jesus is that He had this interior life put together. He prayed a lot more than

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I do. He was integrated – reconciled. I suspect that is why His focus and perception and power were so incredible. I still have all this interior confusion going on. But at least it's not as bad as it was twenty years ago. I am so glad I'm not back in my forties. I don't know how people stand it!

Anyway, we are hypocrites on many deep and honest levels. But it is not by intention; it is not some game we play on purpose. For that very reason, it makes me very concerned when the church itself gives mixed messages. It is highly annoying, for instance, to have a lot of modern-day preachers talking about Armageddon, judgment, the rapture, and lakes of fire in a way that tries to reverse everything Jesus revealed to us of the God of love and mercy and grace. That is a mixed message. In the Book of Revelation, Jesus comes as lamb – sacrificial lamb of reconciliation. By the time some preachers are through with it, you would think Jesus is coming as the BEAST. That is a mixed message. The trouble with mixed messages is that our psyches take them in and pretty soon we think it's okay sometimes to beat the bloody hell out of *our* enemies too. We think that if Jesus sometimes does that, then we can do it too – and still be His good and loyal followers.

One of the church's worst mixed messages in our time centers around this business of being “unselfish.” If you look inside the minds of most Christians today and come to the place where they store their beliefs about the importance of self, selfishness, selflessness, ego, self-esteem, self-sacrifice – if you come to the door marked “SELF” and open it – most often you find this big, smelly, gooey mess. And it is not static. The mess is churning and bubbling, and a new axiom pops up about every thirteen seconds: I have to take care of myself. I'm too selfish. I have to get rid of my ego. I don't have enough self-esteem. Our only purpose here is to help others. I have to stand up for myself. I should be thinking only of the good of others. I need to take more time out for myself. I need to be more self-assertive. I must be more loving and forgiving.

Ye gods! No wonder eight percent of the world is on aspirin, or worse, with that kind of racket going on inside. The racket outside is bad enough.

Part of the confusion comes from our modern penchant for trying to mix Eastern and Western religious systems. In Hinduism or Buddhism, selflessness is clearly the goal. In our time, some Eastern folk are getting pretty confused about their traditions too. But in reincarnation, the soul is important and the self is not. The self is in the way, an impediment to spiritual progress. It is keeping us locked onto the wheel of *samsara*.

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The self and its desires are the very reason we are caught in the endless cycles, forcing us to return to life after life here in various forms. To be free of the self and find release – and then go on to Nirvana – is the only hope. But in Western religion, selflessness is anathema. God loves you. You are an individual with infinite worth, and God has destined you for eternal life. Not only would it be a crime to throw away your self, it is imperative that you discover its true identity and purpose, and keep bringing it more and more into its true destiny.

Trying to be half Eastern and half Western dumps you into a major morass of mixed messages. There is no self and there can be no selfhood in Nirvana. But Heaven is unthinkable apart from individuals. Its very purpose and meaning is about ongoing relational life between us and God, between us and each other. You cannot get to Nirvana with a self, and you cannot get to Heaven without one. Trying to walk up the middle of this one only makes us schizophrenic. We will not go with the Buddha and we will not go with the Christ, so we end up stuck with self-centered nonentities that we do not like but cannot get rid of. Becoming narcissistic zombies is not a pretty fate.

You think I exaggerate? Do you try to encourage your children to “make something of themselves,” or do you encourage them to “make nothing of themselves”? Do you teach them they are just as important as anybody else, then turn right around and tell them to be unselfish? How confusing! Be self-confident, but trust in God? Believe that the Omnipotent, Eternal God loves you, but never let anybody know that you like yourself or think you are important? It is bewildering on the inside to be caught in this strange crossfire between ambition and self-negation, between conscientiousness and self-denial. Some people see it as a choice between loving people and seeking security (acquiring things). Others look for ways to live apart or on the fringe of structures they see as hopelessly caught in impossible contradictions. Some compete for honors more fiercely than ever. Others cut out, or seek a whole new truth system. Most are caught somewhere in between – being selfish one day, selfless the next – getting the best of neither, and often the worst of both. You would think that coming to a church like this one, I would find myself in a congregation far more confident and self-aware than most. And you are. But I have led prayer retreat after prayer retreat among you, and do you know what the biggest hang-up is in every one of them? I cannot get you to pray for yourselves. Someone or something has taught you that it's only okay to pray for others. You believe God should care about others but not about you. Of course, that ends up

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acing you out of the pilgrimage. You keep saying to God, "Go work on Joe, but don't interfere in my life." I have to jump up and down, rant and rave, plead, beg, cry, and carry on to get you to try praying for yourself. But it is the only way any of us can have our *own* relationship with God.

Are you too selfish – or not selfish enough? Do you teach your children to be selfless – or to be selfish? Do you believe for yourself and others that Jesus comes to bring us abundant Life – or that He comes to get us over wanting anything at all for ourselves? Some of you, I suspect, would count selfishness as the greatest sin, outranking even pride and greed and sloth. You might even quote Scripture to me (at least others have): "*If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it.*" (Matthew 16:24) Or, "*I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.*" (Galatians 2:20) Or, "*We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin.*" (Romans 6:6)

Yet each time the New Testament puts down the self, it is in order to bring it back a stronger, truer self. It is never to get rid of self. But there are many Christians who still do not know or believe this. In verse 8 of the Romans passage, it continues: "*But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.*" The dying is not the object of the game; the dying is only the way into a better Life. In the Galatians passage, after it is no longer I who live and I have been crucified with Christ, who does Christ live in? ME! If you keep putting down the ME, being ashamed of the ME, trying to get rid of the ME, do you think that will make Christ happy? How will He then have any way to deal with you, guide you, love you, save you? In the passage from Matthew 16, I did not finish Jesus' thought – just like a great many Christians never do. They stop, turn off, never hear the end of it: "*If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.*" Is this passage about losing life – or finding LIFE? The WAY may be strange and sometimes hard, but finding Life – enhancing the self – is the goal.

Would you like God to go selfless? If God loves us, that changes everything! But it is God doing the loving that makes all the difference. Take God out of it and there is nothing left to the love. Love is a meaningless verb without a subject and an object. "I love you" is one of

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the most powerful phrases in the universe. Take away the “I” and the “you,” and love is not even a wisp of smoke. Throw away the “I” and there is nothing left to do the loving. Christ is always trying to enhance, increase, transform, empower, and free the “I” so that love may flow with power and glory. If you love somebody and it doesn’t even lift them, change them, or make a difference in their lives, it must be some poor, pathetic, small kind of love. It means somebody threw away too much of the “I.”

Of course, we do have problems with our “selves.” We get mad at our selves, kick our selves, feel bad about our selves; we wish heartily some days that we could deny or do away with at least part of our selves. That is what makes selflessness look so appealing at times. Dwight L. Moody – evangelist, preacher, spiritual reformer – once remarked: “I have had more trouble with my self than with any other person I have ever met.” Most of us could echo that sentiment. On some days, we might be tempted to add, “If you think it’s tough being you, Dwight, you should try being me sometime.”

To be sure, there is a type of self-centeredness and blindness to others that we all abhor wherever we find it – in ourselves or in others. But truly it is not selfish. It is as blind to the self within as it is blind to the selves all around it. It is frightened on the survival level and unawakened on the spiritual level – and only love and grace can awaken it.

True selfishness is God-given and essential to the Christian Life. It draws us toward God. It is a selfishness that cooperates with God’s love for us. It is a guide that, by its very satisfactions and rewards, informs us when we are moving in the right direction, and rebukes us when we go off course. Its fruits are excellent for us, and equally excellent for others. There is no desire in the universe more selfish than to want communion with God. A second selfishness is like unto it: to want to help and be helped by other people, and to love and receive love from other people. From such enlightened selfishness comes all the joy, love, service, and self-sacrifice in the world. It merely takes the grace and power and love of God to bring forth and direct such enlightened selfishness. So the problem is not that we are too selfish. The problem is that we are not selfish enough. The selfishness we call “evil” is not revealed by how much good we want for ourselves but by how little good we want for ourselves, and that always translates into our wanting very little good for others.

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So to those of you who think you are too selfish, let me suggest that you stop trying to get rid of your selfishness. Christ, if you will allow it, can change your puny little selfishness into a grand and glorious selfishness. Only, when you go home and tell your friends that your minister told you to try and be more selfish, I hope you will mean it. I also hope you will be able to explain it. You might start out by asking them why they think Jesus was always talking about REWARDS if we are not supposed to want anything for ourselves.

Consider the thing that really exasperated Jesus with His own disciples. It happened once when Jesus was asleep in the boat and His disciples woke Him up because of a great storm. *“Why are you afraid, O men of little faith?”* It happened another time when Peter tried walking on water and started to sink. *“O man of little faith, why did you doubt?”* It happened again when the disciples misunderstood His words. *“O men of little faith, why do you discuss among yourselves the fact that you have no bread? Do you not yet perceive? Do you not remember the five loaves of the five thousand, and how many baskets you gathered?”* It happened yet again when the disciples were unable to heal a man and they came to Jesus asking why. *“Because of your little faith,”* was His answer. *“If you had faith as a tiny grain of mustard seed”* The smallest living seed He could think of had more faith than these men who thought they believed in God.

In every case, Jesus was exasperated because the disciples were content with too little, asked for too little, expected too little! Do not bother God with your stingy little requests, He seems to be saying. God is not some two-bit Houdini. Ask God to move mountains! Ask God to give sight to the blind! Ask God to raise the dead!

Poetry and song are full of the pleas of lovers. “Put my love to the test!” they cry. “I’d climb the highest mountain, swim the swiftest river, fight the fiercest dragon.” But love begins to wither when the hero finds out that the lady holds his love in small regard. Maybe in the long run it’s harder to empty the garbage, help with the cooking and cleaning, and run errands, but you better mix a few dragons in with the lesser requests or you may find him out slaying them for some other damsel. Ask him to tame the hurricane and do not remind him to take his galoshes. He will love you for it, because you thought his love was worthy of something.

Well, God is a lover too. The very best! Over and over, God has said to his children, “I love you.” So we mutter a half-hearted “thank you”

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and say a shy and tentative prayer about a few drops of foam on the crest of one wave – and if it isn't too much trouble, God, could you maybe do something about it? Not only is that insulting, it makes God really bored. Ask God to calm the whole storm! Be magnificently selfish. You are loved by a magnificent God.

Forget that plea for the moment and consider this: Dr. Seabury, a well-known psychiatrist, gave some lectures at an adult forum where my sister attended high school. I was still in grammar school, but my parents wanted to attend and they didn't like to pay babysitters. I want to tell you, I have heard a lot of lectures since I was in grammar school but I still remember his. On the last evening of the lectureship, Dr. Seabury told the crowded hall: "If I could get people to take seriously just one principle, I could put most of my profession out of business." Then he said: "Whenever you make a decision, try to remember this principle: WHAT IS REALLY RIGHT FOR YOU CANNOT POSSIBLY BE WRONG FOR ANYBODY ELSE."

I will give you only one of his illustrations. It concerned an engaged couple he had known. As the wedding date approached, the girl realized that this marriage was not what she really wanted. But having come so far – the invitations already out, the dresses made, so much money spent and planning done on the part of her parents, so much potential embarrassment to her fiancé and his family if she backed out now – under the pressure of what she thought everybody else wanted and expected, she went through with it. A fine, unselfish thing to do. Three years later they were divorced, having acquired two children in the meantime. If only she had known how to be more selfish!

WHAT IS REALLY RIGHT FOR YOU CANNOT POSSIBLY BE WRONG FOR ANYBODY ELSE. I have fought with it for years, looking for meaningful exceptions. Hundreds occur, only to die away on closer examination. God has thought it through more carefully than we suppose. If we can cull out some right choice or action – some truth that really holds the very best for us – the rightness of it will remain consistent, even if the whole universe gets involved. The truth behind it is simple: God loves all of the children – including you! In the long run, rightness for one is blessing for all.

Yet this simple truth grows treacherous indeed in the hands of someone who has not developed true selfishness. If they short-change their own happiness, they short-change the happiness of everyone around

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them. If they ask for only a little good for themselves, they short-circuit the channels of blessing all around them. If they have never learned to look beyond instant gratification to the things they truly long for, then telling them to be selfish will lead to ruin. But that is not because selfishness is wrong. It is because they have no concept – no awareness – of themselves.

The world is full of people who have been so stingy with themselves that they have only asked for a few nights of sex, when they might have asked for a marriage full of love for a lifetime. The world is crowded with people who ask only to survive, when they might have asked for years of challenge and excitement in a true vocation. So many of our requests are puny. We ask for pity, when our real need is for courage. We ask for smooth roads, when our lives cry out for adventure. We ask for comfort and safety, when our souls are dying for risk and purpose and costly service. After a while, we don't even know what we want anymore, what we really care about, or what kind of happiness or purpose we seek. And the truth is: UNHAPPY PEOPLE DO NOT MAKE OTHER PEOPLE HAPPY.

Be magnificently selfish! Otherwise we waste our lives on the half-good, the wrong job, the little fears: waiting for some distant future that could be ours already – yet will never be ours until we learn to trust God's goodness. And it is *not* our idea. Real selfishness never is! It is God who keeps trying to get us to be selfish. *"Ask and you will receive. Seek and you will find. Knock and it will be opened unto you.... I came that you might have life, and have it abundantly.... God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believeth in him might not perish but have everlasting life."* It is not our idea! True selfishness never is.

One more quick picture: An increasing number of people are noticing that Jesus puts commandments in a way that reveals eternal principles. *"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength."* We are commanded to do that consciously. Yet on another level, it is a statement of inescapable fact. We cannot help it. We *do* love God with heart, mind, soul, and strength. But the truth suddenly twists around on us. *How much* heart, mind, soul, and strength do we have? How much of who we were designed to be have we become? My problem is not with motive. My heart is simply too small to love God aright. Alas, why have I not let it grow bigger? Too busy guarding it, I suspect.

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Same thing with that other statement: “*You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*” How terrifying when that shifts from command to principle. Especially if you think of yourself as the neighbor. Would you want most of the people you know to love you the way they love themselves? What a nightmare! But we do that to each other. We cannot help it.

Do you want some guilt-ridden, repressed, and joyless Christian calling you “neighbor” and trying to fulfill Jesus’ command by loving you the way they love themselves? Well, then, get truly and gloriously selfish so that when you love your neighbor, it can do them some real good. Get so magnificently selfish that you will settle for nothing less – not for yourself and not for your neighbor – than LIFE in Christ Jesus: the limitless adventure of God’s Eternal Kingdom.