

Selfishness v. Selflessness

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One evokes images of children fussing over toys never thought to be shared. The other is redolent of a mature individual—perhaps a parent—placing the needs of another above self, perhaps even at great personal peril. The former is off-putting; the latter is refreshing, even inviting.

From its Founder to its newest disciple, the Christian faith summons women and men, old and young, to elevate vision beyond the simply self-concerned and instead to consider the needs and wants of those among whom we circulate. Perhaps this sense of selflessness is best epitomized in the words of Philippians 2:4—“Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.” In truth, while this second chapter of Philippians reports the travel activities of Paul and his companions, even as it admonishes the readers to faithful Christian living, it presents an even more impressive overall theme as exemplified in Jesus, Paul, Timothy, and Epaphroditus. The deeds of each of these individuals manifest selfless hearts concerned with and acting upon the needs of others, even at great personal cost.

Consider the precedent established by Christ Himself (2:5-8). The Word, part of the Godhead, enjoyed all the prerogatives of heaven. When Isaiah cast his gaze upon God seated on His throne (Isa. 1:1-6), the Word was present; this is confirmed with the remarks of John 12:39-41. Yet the Word descended to earth, embracing human nature and becoming Jesus (John 1:14). As Paul writes, the incarnate Word became subject to the directives of heaven as every human is called to be (Ecc. 12:13), and He remained faithful to God’s expectations even to the point of giving His life at Calvary (2:8). Why was this done? Because of humanity’s need for salvation through the blood given at the cross.

Similarly, Paul was willing to sacrifice himself in order to serve the needs of the Christians in Philippi (2:17). The apostle, himself under arrest in Rome, intended to dispatch Timothy to Philippi to be of assistance and encouragement, another example of selflessness, saying of him, “For I have no one like-minded, who will sincerely care for your state, for all seek their own, not the things which are of Christ Jesus” (2:20-21). Finally, a lesser-known disciple named Epaphroditus was mentioned by Paul as one who had nearly died in order to be of service to Paul and the Philippians (2:25-30). All four of these individuals have been lastingly remembered for embodying the plea of 2:4. This is the spirit of selflessness that should characterize the Lord’s people.

Selfishness is associated with another brand of character. It is linked with the likes of Ahab and Jezebel, hardly paragons of virtue and compassion. Figures like Hymenaeus and Alexander, making shipwreck of others’ faith (1 Tim. 1:19-20), or Diotrephes (3 John 9-11), aggrandizing self, are among the most egregious examples of selfishness. But this negative attitude can also materialize among otherwise thoughtful and faithful brethren: at times even the apostles concerned themselves with establishing some selfish pecking order (Matt. 20:20-28). And it can happen amidst Christians today.

When are selfless, we take time to reflect upon what others need for their own wellbeing and growth. We may even stop to reflect upon the wants and desires of others. We might ask ourselves such questions as these:

- Will my actions help my loved one or friend overcome a particular problem?
- Will my actions create unnecessary hard feelings or difficulties with my loved one or friend?

- Have I thoughtfully considered the wants or wishes of my loved one or friend, remembering that I have the power to help them find joy?
- Do my words and actions demonstrate a concern for others like what Jesus manifested for me (Phil. 2:5)?
- Do I have to have my way on this matter, or can I do just as well by allowing the other person to have their preference?
- Have I considered what the other person must be feeling or thinking in this situation?
- How would I want the other person to behave if our positions were reversed?

When we reflect on these questions, we are positioning ourselves to make good decisions or choices that take others into account. Of course, nowhere are we told to take no account of our own needs or preferences (Phil. 2:4), but we typically struggle with considering others too little rather than too much.

When we manifest a heart of selfless love and concern for others, we are imitating Jesus Himself even while inviting others to be similarly selfless. It is this kind of regard for others that helps us all to have peaceful, mutually-supportive relationships. It helps us to be Christ-like.