

# SELFISH?

selfish 1: Concerned excessively or exclusively with oneself: seeking or concentrating on one's own advantage, pleasure, or well-being without regard for others 2: arising from concern with one's own welfare or advantage in disregard of others.

## Definition

According to the above definition, selfish means that I disregard other people in making decisions and make decisions based exclusively on what *I* want or need. Whenever we do this we run the risk of controlling and manipulating others to get what we want which results in perpetrating abuse or disrespect against another person. It means putting ourselves in a one-up position over another. It destroys equality and mutuality and the possibility of intimacy and connectedness. It creates fear and shame and perpetuates fear and shame for both parties.

## False Interpretation

But the word selfish has, through a subtle twist of Screwtape or his nephew Wormwood,\* become a word that is used to control and tyrannize others. People are taught to believe that if they ever consider their own feelings, needs and wants; if they do not anticipate and meet the needs of others and be overly concerned about other peoples' feelings that they are "selfish" and bad people. This is just the flip side of the same coin - the same evil at the other extreme. If we consider only the needs of others to the detriment of ourselves, we become victims instead of perpetrators, allowing others to use us to their own gain, to get their own needs met. Often those who call others selfish are using a control tactic to get their needs met - they are the selfish ones! How often one hears things like, "I can't believe how selfish... is," or "She is such a giving person - she always puts others first." How often we hear children being told not to be so selfish when they ask for what they want or need. How often we hear parents instilling guilt and fear in their children when their children ask for their needs to be met. How often children are praised for putting their own needs to one side while caretaking their parent's needs.

Being loving and selfless does not mean sacrificing oneself and one's needs and wants to meet the needs and wants of everyone else. Love means maintaining a balance between assessing what is in my best interests and what is in your best interests at all times. It means never being in a one down position or a one up position. It means never being a victim or a perpetrator. Churches are full of victims. Screwtape works overtime in churches subtly convincing people that the way to heaven is through being a self-sacrificing victim. There is nothing noble in this, nothing good, nothing loving. If we allow ourselves to be victims, we allow someone else to be a perpetrator. We live in a skewed system of those on top and those at the bottom.

What people often believe to be a true need and want is nothing other than something that helps them not feel bad and so protects them from underlying negative feelings. Getting the need met by others is not necessarily in their best interests at all - it is as destructive to them as the person meeting the need. For instance, if someone demands that others do things for them all the time, they never get to face the underlying feelings of inadequacy and dependency that they have and so never learn a sense of competency in the world.

\* Screwtape is the Devil who collaborates with his nephew, Wormwood in the book "The Screwtape Letters." Screwtape corresponds with his nephew who is at work in the world subtly corrupting humankind over to "their side" and away from God.

## Motivation

The motivation for being selfless or not being selfish cannot be out of need for approval, having people like us, being popular, being seen as a good Christian, a good person, or out of *fear* of what others think, fear of feeling guilty, fear of rejection, criticism, judgment, anger or conflict ..... - to do so is ultimately selfish - the gain is all ours. We get our needs met and avoid confronting our own fears. The best motivation for doing anything for another is love, which means considering what is in both persons best interests, maintaining balance, equality and mutuality. Love results in connectedness, intimacy and freedom - not guilt, fear and control.

Unfortunately, because most people, as adults, are to some extent impaired by no longer being aware of their feelings and needs, which lie buried under layers of defense, designed to hide the suffering and shame of having had them in the first place, they do not know that they are caretaking, enabling, rescuing, fixing, advising and helping others out of this unaware pain of feeling shame, fear and needing the love and approval of others. So they do "good" things, to get unaware needs met from others. This can NEVER work. Until we get aware and learn to meet our own unresolved needs and attendant pain caused by them not being met ourselves, no amount of approval, love, attention, gratitude, admiration, etc. will ever heal the split in your own psyche. This work has to be done by each and every person. The unfinished parenting of our own wounded inner child can only be done by our own inner work of getting aware and forming an inner loving relationship with ourselves. It cannot be healed by focusing our control on getting others to meet those unaware needs.

"Good" things done out of unaware control to get a need met, will always have a destructive consequence or outcome. Doing "good" things for others is not necessarily a loving thing. However, love is always good. Our work is to root out the actual reason for why we do what we call "good things" for others, so that our goodness can come from the healing love we have brought to our own woundedness.

## Christian Context

Christ's death was not out of need for our approval and not out of fear of what anyone would think. Christ's death was the result of his love for himself and for others. He refused to at anytime compromise who he was, what he believed in, what he thought and what he stood for to please or placate anyone. If Christ had given in to his human *fear* of death, degradation, torture, shame and rejection and if he had *needed* people to approve of him he could not have been true to himself, could never have fulfilled his divine destiny, could never have achieved an eternal connection to humankind and we would not have the example of how to be reconciled to ourselves and God. *The way of reconciliation is to be true to ourselves no matter how afraid we are.* The "sacrifices" we make for others out of fear and need are selfish, self serving and un-Christian. We need to rethink and redefine the ways in which we have been programmed to "not be selfish."

Selfish: taking under the guise of giving out of fear or need

Selfless: taking or *giving* out of love as a result of inner reconciliation with our own suffering

## Reference

Lewis, C.S. (1961). *The Screwtape Letters*. New York, N.Y: Macmillan Paperbacks Edition.

