

Put Off the Natural Man, and Come Off Conqueror

Neal A. Maxwell CR Oct 1990

So many times prophets warn about the dangers of selfishness—the inordinate and excessive concern with self. The distance between constant self-pleasing and self-worship is shorter than we think. Stubborn selfishness is actually rebellion against God, because, warned Samuel, “stubbornness is as ... idolatry.” ([1 Sam. 15:23](#).)

Selfishness is much more than an ordinary problem because it activates all the cardinal sins! It is the detonator in the breaking of the Ten Commandments.

By focusing on oneself, it is naturally easier to bear false witness if it serves one’s purpose. It is easier to ignore one’s parents instead of honoring them. It is easier to steal, because what one wants prevails. It is easier to covet, since the selfish conclude that nothing should be denied them.

It is easier to commit sexual sins, because to please oneself is the name of that deadly game in which others are often cruelly used. The Sabbath day is easily neglected, since one day soon becomes just like another. If selfish, it is easier to lie, because the truth is conveniently subordinated.

The selfish individual thus seeks to please not God, but himself. He will even break a covenant in order to fix an appetite.

Selfishness has little time to regard the sufferings of others seriously, hence the love of many waxes cold. (See [Moses 6:27](#); [Matt. 24:12](#); [D&C 45:27](#).)

The last days will be rampant with the cardinal sins, just “as in the days of Noah.” Society in the days of Noah, scriptures advise, was “corrupt before God” and “filled with violence.” ([Gen. 6:11–12](#); [Moses 8:28](#).) Corruption and violence—sound familiar? Both of these awful conditions crest because of surging individual selfishness. When thus engulfed, no wonder men’s hearts in our day will fail them because of fear. (See [Luke 21:26](#); [D&C 45:26](#).) Even the faithful can expect a few fibrillations.

Some selfishness exists even in good people. Jane Austen’s character Elizabeth mused, “I have been a selfish being all my life, in practice, though not in principle.” (*Pride and Prejudice*, New York: Airmont Books, 1962, p. 58.) The selfish individual has a passion for the vertical pronoun *I*. Significantly, the vertical pronoun *I* has no knees to bend, while the first letter in the pronoun *we* does.

Selfishness, in its preoccupation with self, withholds from others deserved, needed praise, causing a deprivation instead of giving a commendation.

We see in ourselves other familiar forms of selfishness: accepting or claiming undeserved credit; puffing deserved credit; being glad when others go wrong; resenting the genuine successes of others; preferring public vindication to private reconciliation; and taking “advantage of one because of his words.” ([2 Ne. 28:8](#).) All things are thus viewed selfishly—what are their implications for “me,” much like the mattress on the highway which delayed traffic. When frustrated motorists finally got around the mattress, none stopped to remove it because now there was nothing in it for him.

The Prophet Joseph Smith declared, “Mankind [is] naturally selfish, ambitious, and striving to excel one above another.” (*The Words of Joseph Smith*, comp. Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University, Religious Studies Center, 1980, p. 201.)

Saul, swollen with selfishness, was reminded about an earlier time “when thou wast little in thine own sight.” ([1 Sam. 15:17](#).)

Selfishness is often expressed in stubbornness of mind. Having a “mind hardened in pride” often afflicts the brightest who could also be the best. ([Dan. 5:20](#).) “One thing” the brightest often lack: meekness! Instead of having “a willing mind” which seeks to emulate the “mind of Christ,” a “mind hardened in pride” is impervious to counsel and often seeks ascendancy. ([1 Chr. 28:9](#); [1 Cor. 2:16](#); [D&C 64:34](#).) Jesus, who was and is “more intelligent than they all,” is also more meek than they all. ([Abr. 3:19](#).)

Jesus put everything on the altar without fanfare or bargaining. Both before and after His astonishing atonement, He declared, “Glory be to the Father.” ([D&C 19:19](#); [Moses 4:2](#).) Jesus, stunningly brilliant, nevertheless allowed His will to be “swallowed up in the will of the Father.” ([Mosiah 15:7](#); see also [John 6:38](#).) Those with pride-hardened minds are simply unable to do this.

Stubborn selfishness leads otherwise good people to fight over herds, patches of sand, and strippings of milk. All this results from what the Lord calls coveting “the drop,” while neglecting the “more weighty matters.” ([D&C 117:8](#).) Myopic selfishness magnifies a mess of pottage and makes thirty pieces of silver look like a treasure trove. In our intense acquisitiveness, we forget Him who once said, “What is property unto me?” ([D&C 117:4](#).)

Such is the scope of putting off the burdensome natural man who is naturally selfish. (See [Mosiah 3:19](#).) So much of our fatigue, brothers and sisters, in fact, comes from carrying that needless load. This heaviness of the natural man prevents us from doing our Christian calisthenics; so we end up too swollen with selfishness to pass through the narrow needle’s eye.

Anne Morrow Lindbergh wrote of the need to “shed my Martha-like anxiety about many things, ... shedding pride, ... shedding hypocrisy in human relationships. What a rest that will be! The most exhausting thing in life, I have discovered,” she said, “is being insincere. That is why so much of social life is exhausting.” (*Gift from the Sea*, New York: Vintage Books, 1978, p. 32.)

Unchecked selfishness thus stubbornly blocks the way for developing all of the divine qualities: love, mercy, patience, long-suffering, kindness, graciousness, goodness, and gentleness. Any

tender sprouts from these virtues are sheared off by sharp selfishness. Contrariwise, brothers and sisters, I cannot think of a single gospel covenant the keeping of which does not shear off selfishness from us!

But what a battle for some of us! We are all afflicted in different degrees. The question is, “How goes the battle?” Is our selfishness being put off—even if only gradually? Or is the natural man like “the man who came to dinner”? Divine tutoring is given largely in order to help us shed our selfishness, “for what son [or daughter] is [there] whom the father chasteneth not?” ([Heb. 12:7.](#))

Restoration scriptures tell us much more about how we can really be forgiven through the atonement of Christ by means of which, finally, “mercy . . . overpowereth justice.” ([Alma 34:15.](#)) We can have real and justified hope for the future—enough hope to develop the faith necessary to both put off the natural man and to strive to become more saintly.

Furthermore, because the centerpiece of the Atonement is already in place, we know that everything else in God’s plan will likewise finally succeed. God is surely able to do His own work! (See [2 Ne. 27:20–21.](#)) In His plans for the human family, long ago God made ample provision for all mortal mistakes. His purposes will all triumph and without abrogating man’s moral agency. Moreover, all His purposes will come to pass in their time. (See [D&C 64:32.](#))

However, without these later and other spiritual perspectives, see how differently we behave. Take away an acknowledgment of divine design and then watch the selfish scurrying to redesign political and economic systems to make life pain-free and pleasure-filled. Misguided governments mean to live, even if they live beyond their means, thereby mortgaging future generations.

Take away regard for the divinity in one’s neighbor, and watch the decline in our regard for his property.

Take away basic moral standards, and observe how quickly tolerance changes into permissiveness.

Take away the sacred sense of belonging to a family or community, and observe how quickly citizens cease to care for big cities.

Take away regard for the seventh commandment, and behold the current celebration of sex, the secular religion with its own liturgy of lust and supporting music. Its theology focuses on “self.” Its hereafter is “now.” Its chief ritual is “sensation”—though, ironically, it finally desensitizes its obsessed adherents, who become “past feeling.” ([Eph. 4:19;](#) [Moro. 9:20.](#))

Thus, in all its various expressions, selfishness is really self-destruction in slow motion!

Each spasm of selfishness narrows the universe that much more by shutting down our awareness of others and by making us more and more alone. Sensations are then desperately sought precisely in order to verify that one really exists. A variation occurs when one is full of self-pity over affectional deprivation. He ends up in transgression.

Surging selfishness presents us with a sobering scene as the natural man acts out his wants. Many assert their needs—but where have we lodged the corresponding obligations? So many have become demanders, but where are all the providers? There are many more people with things to say than there are listeners. There are more neglected and aging parents than there are attentive sons and daughters—though, numerically, clearly it should not be so!

Just as Jesus warned that some evil spirits would *come out* only with “prayer and fasting” ([Matt. 17:21](#)), the “natural man” does not *come off* without difficulty either.

Of this personal battle, the Lord has urged us to so live that we would “come off conqueror.” ([D&C 10:5](#).) But we cannot “come off conqueror,” except we first “put off” the selfish, natural man!

The natural man is truly God’s enemy, because the natural man will keep God’s precious children from true and everlasting happiness. Our full happiness requires our becoming the men and women of Christ.

The meek men and women of Christ are quick to praise, but are also able to restrain themselves. They understand that on occasion the biting of the tongue can be as important as the gift of tongues.

The man and woman of Christ are easily entreated, but the selfish person is not. Christ never brushed aside those in need because He had bigger things to do! Furthermore, the men and women of Christ are constant, being the same in private as in public. We cannot keep two sets of books while heaven has but one.

The men and women of Christ magnify their callings without magnifying themselves. Whereas the natural man says “Worship me” and “Give me thine power,” the men and women of Christ seek to exercise power by long-suffering and unfeigned love. (See [Moses 1:12](#); [Moses 4:3](#); [D&C 121:41](#).)

Whereas the natural man vents his anger, the men and women of Christ are “not easily provoked.” ([1 Cor. 13:5](#).) Whereas the natural man is filled with greed, the men and women of Christ “seeketh not [their] own.” ([1 Cor. 13:5](#).) Whereas the natural man seldom denies himself worldly pleasures, the men and women of Christ seek to bridle all their passions. (See [Alma 38:12](#).)

Whereas the natural man covets praise and riches, the men and women of Christ know such things are but the “drop.” ([D&C 117:8](#).) Human history’s happiest irony will be that the covenant-keeping, unselfish individuals will finally receive “all that [the] Father hath”! ([D&C 84:38](#).)

One of the last, subtle strongholds of selfishness is the natural feeling that we “own” ourselves. Of course we are free to choose and are personally accountable. Yes, we have individuality. But those who have chosen to “come unto Christ” soon realize that they do not “own” themselves. Instead, they belong to Him. We are to become consecrated along with our gifts, our appointed

days, and our very selves. Hence, there is a stark difference between stubbornly “owning” oneself and submissively belonging to God. Clinging to the old self is not a mark of independence, but of indulgence!

The Prophet Joseph promised that when selfishness is annihilated, we “may comprehend all things, present, past, and future.” (*The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, comp. Dean C. Jessee, Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1984, p. 485.) Even now, however, in gospel glimpses we can “see things as they really are.” ([Jacob 4:13](#).)

Indeed, the gospel brings glorious illumination as to our possibilities. Scales fall from our eyes with the shedding of selfishness. Then we see our luminous and true identity:

*On a clear day, rise and look around you,
And you'll see who you are.
On a clear day, how it will astound you—
That the glow of your being outshines every star ...
And on a clear day ...
You can see forever and ever more.”*

In the name of Jesus Christ, amen!