

“Repent of [Our] Selfishness” (D&C 56:8)

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Meekness is the real cure, for it does not merely mask selfishness but dissolves it!

In one degree or another we all struggle with selfishness. Since it is so common, why worry about selfishness anyway? Because selfishness is really self-destruction in slow motion. No wonder the Prophet Joseph Smith urged, “Let every selfish feeling be not only buried, but annihilated” (*Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, sel. Joseph Fielding Smith [1976], 178). Hence annihilation—not moderation—is the destination!

Surging selfishness, for example, has shrunken some people into ciphers; they seek to erase their emptiness by sensations. But in the arithmetic of appetite, anything multiplied by zero still totals zero! Each spasm of selfishness narrows one’s universe that much more by reducing his awareness of or concern with others. In spite of its outward, worldly swagger, such indulgent individualism is actually provincial, like goldfish in a bowl congratulating themselves on their self-sufficiency, never mind the food pellets or changes of water.

Long ago it took a Copernicus to tell a provincial world that this planet was not the center of the universe. Some selfish moderns need a Copernican reminder that they are not the center of the universe either!

The early and familiar forms of selfishness are: building up self at the expense of others, claiming or puffing 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](#)).

By focusing on himself, a selfish person finds it easier to bear false witness, to steal, and covet, since nothing should be denied him. No wonder it is so easy for governments to pander to the appetites of the natural man, especially if the trains continue to run on time, reassuring him all the while that his permissiveness is somehow permissible.

Selfishness likewise causes us to be discourteous, disdainful, and self-centered while withholding from others needed goods, praise, and recognition as we selfishly pass them by and notice them not (see [Morm. 8:39](#)). Later on come rudeness, brusqueness, and the further flexing of elbows.

In contrast to the path of selfishness, there is no room for road rage on the straight and narrow way. There will be no spouse or child abuse when there is unselfish love at home. Furthermore, unselfishness is best grown in the family garden, and, likewise, diligently performing seemingly ordinary Church duties can further help us to overcome selfishness. The unselfish are also more free. As G. K. Chesterton said, if we can be interested in others, even if they are not interested in us, we will find ourselves “under a freer sky, [and] in a street full of splendid strangers” (*Orthodoxy* [1959], 21).

In daily discipleship, the many ways to express selfishness are matched by many ways to avoid it. Meekness is the real cure, for it does not merely mask selfishness but dissolves it! Smaller steps could include asking ourselves inwardly before undertaking an important action, *Whose needs am I really trying to meet?* Or in significant moments of self-expression, we can first count to 10. Such thoughtful filtering can multiply our offering by 10 as a mesh of reflective meekness filters out destructive and effusive ego.

We can also meekly let our ideas have a life of their own without oversponsoring them. Rather, let the Spirit impel our worthy ideas.

Alas, gross, individual selfishness is finally acculturated. Then societies can eventually become without order, without mercy, without love, perverted, and past feeling (see [Moro. 9](#)). Society thereby reflects a grim, cumulative tally which signals a major cultural decline. This happened anciently when a people actually became “weak, because of their transgression” ([Hel. 4:26](#)). Speaking behaviorally, when what was once the lesser voice of the people becomes more dominant, then the judgments of God and the consequences of foolish selfishness follow (see [Mosiah 29:26–27](#)).

Cultural decline is accelerated when single-interest segments of society become indifferent to general values once widely shared. This drift is facilitated by the indifferent or the indulgent as society is led carefully down to hell (see [2 Ne. 28:21](#)). Some may not join in this drift, but instead they step aside, whereas once they might have constrained, as is their representative right. Of such circumstances Yeats lamented, “The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity” (W. B. Yeats, “The Second Coming”).

Today, in place of some traditionally shared values is a demanding conformity pushed, ironically, by those who eventually will not tolerate those who once tolerated them. While incremental iniquity may not cause a huge decline all at once, the same somber direction is nevertheless continued, subtly and carefully, with no arousing jolts or jars (see [2 Ne. 28:21](#)).

Such are some of the *proximate* consequences of selfishness, yet some of its consequences are *ultimate*—impacting us salvationally.

Selfishness is actually the detonator of all the cardinal sins. It is the hammer for the breaking of the Ten Commandments, whether by neglecting parents, the Sabbath, or by inducing false witness, murder, and envy. No wonder the selfish individual is often willing to break a covenant in order to fix an appetite. No wonder those who will later comprise the telestial kingdom, after they have paid a price, were once unrepentant adulterers, whoremongers, and those who both loved and made lies.

Some of the selfish wrongly believe that there is no divine law anyway, so there is no sin (see [2 Ne. 2:13](#)). Situational ethics are thus made to order for the selfish. So in the management of self, one can conquer by his genius and strength, because there really is no crime whatsoever (see [Alma 30:17](#)).

Unsurprisingly therefore, selfishness leads to terrible perceptual and behavioral blunders. For instance, Cain, corrupted by his seeking of power, said after slaying Abel, “I am free” ([Moses 5:33](#); see also [Moses 6:15](#)).

One of the worst consequences of severe selfishness, therefore, is this profound loss of proportionality, like straining at gnats while swallowing camels (see [Matt. 23:24](#); see also JST in footnote 24a). Today there are, for example, those who strain over various gnats but swallow the practice of partial-birth abortions. Small wonder, therefore, that selfishness magnifies a mess of pottage into a banquet and makes 30 pieces of silver look like a treasure trove.

Developmentally, what transpires is like what happened to an ancient group of children “who did grow up . . . , that they became for themselves”—hardened and errant ([3 Ne. 1:29](#); see also [3 Ne. 1:30](#)). Devastating cultural change can and does happen “in the space of not many years,” including replacing the much-needed spirit of community with a diversified alliance of dalliance (see [Hel. 4:26](#)).

Determined to walk in his own way, the natural man often persists to the point where he is “past feeling,” having been sedated by pleasing the carnal mind (see [1 Ne. 17:45](#); see also [Eph. 4:19](#)). Sadly, like the drug addict, he is always in need of a fresh fix.

The severely selfish *use* others but do not *love* them. Let the Uriahts of the world beware! (see [2 Sam. 11:3–17](#)). Centuries before Christ, the prophet Jacob warned unchaste men, “Ye have broken the hearts of your tender wives, and lost the confidence of your children, because of your bad examples before them” ([Jacob 2:35](#)). When love waxes cold, let the poor and the needy beware too, for they will be neglected, as happened in ancient Sodom (see [Matt. 24:12](#); see also [Ezek. 16:49](#)). Strange as it seems, when severely selfish people are no longer little in their own sight, everybody else shrinks! (see [1 Sam. 15:17](#)).

Even the early droplets of selfish decisions suggest a direction. Then the little inflecting rivulets come, merging into small brooks and soon into larger streams; finally one is swept along by a vast river which flows into the “gulf of misery and endless wo” ([Hel. 5:12](#)).

We actually have an obligation to notice genuine, telltale societal signs. It was Jesus who warned, “O ye hypocrites, ye can discern the face of the sky; but can ye not discern the signs of the times?” suggesting the need for a different kind of weather forecasting ([Matt. 16:3](#)).

For what happens in cultural decline both leaders and followers are really accountable. Historically, of course, it is easy to criticize bad leaders, but we should not give followers a free pass. Otherwise, in their rationalization of their degeneration they may say they were just following orders, while the leader was just ordering followers! However, much more is required of followers in a democratic society wherein individual character matters so much in both leaders and followers.

The prophet Mormon unselfishly consented to lead a people who were in steep decline. He prayed for them, but confided that his prayers were without faith because of the people’s wickedness (see [Morm. 3:12](#)). Other times a visionary leader, like Joseph in Egypt, lifts people

out of the endangered routine they're in by preparing them for the specific challenges of the future (see [Gen. 41:46–57](#)). A few, like Lincoln, though in a political role, provide spiritual leadership as well. Lincoln, by the way, warned of how individuals of ambition and talents would continue to arise and that such an individual “thirsts and burns for distinction, and if possible . . . will have it, *whether at the expense of emancipating slaves or enslaving freemen*” (cited in John Wesley Hill, *Abraham Lincoln—Man of God* [1927], 74; emphasis in original).

Of unselfish George Washington it has been written: “In all history few men who possessed unassailable power have used that power so gently and self-effacingly for what their best instincts told them was the welfare of their neighbors and all mankind” (James Thomas Flexner, *Washington: The Indispensable Man* [1984], xvi).

Power is most safe with those, like Washington, who are not in love with it! A narcissist society, in which each person is busy looking out for number one, can build neither brotherhood nor community. Aren't we glad in this Easter season and in all seasons that Jesus did not selfishly look out for number one?

No wonder we have been told, “Thou shalt have *no* other gods before me,” and this includes self-worship! ([Ex. 20:3](#); emphasis added). One way or another, the grossly selfish will finally be shattered, whimpering, against the jagged, concrete consequences of their selfishness.

In contrast, as I close, consider unselfish Melissa Howes, whose comparatively young father died of cancer several months ago. Just before, Melissa, who was then nine, was voice in family prayer, pleading, “Heavenly Father, bless my daddy, and if you need him more than us, you can have him. We want him, but Thy will be done. And please help us not to be mad at you” (letter from Christie Howes, 25 Feb. 1998).

What spiritual submissiveness for one so young! What an unselfish understanding of the plan of salvation! May unselfish submissiveness be our path too, in the holy name of Jesus Christ, amen!