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Selfishness and Love

(by Michael Kinzer, JD, MA, LMFT)

I used to teach classes about healthy relationships to prisoners. The topic of selfishness came up in class after a class member asked me how to integrate what I was teaching into his own life after his release from prison. This prisoner had killed someone with a gun at point-blank range. He didn't want to "blaze a weapon" ever again. I told him I didn't know how to answer his question. I asked the class to help us figure it out. The answer we came up with: he needed to be **more selfish**. I remember thinking, "this feels right, but can this be right?" I now incorporate that answer into my daily life and my work.

I searched the internet for the definition of "selfish." Here are the two primary definitions I found:

- 1) Caring supremely or unduly for one's self in disregard, or at the expense, of others; and
- 2) **Believing or teaching that the chief motives of human action are derived from love of self.**

The first definition is the one we most often think about when we think of the word "selfish;" that selfishness is a bad thing, because it means we **only** care about ourselves, and do not care how we affect others. This definition is not only incorrect, it is harmful. Why? For one thing, selfishness is unavoidable. Even if we'd like to think we are not selfish, we are. Everything we do is based on selfishness. Ask yourself this question: is there anything anyone does that is not in some way based on what we want for ourselves, even if it also means sacrificing ourselves? No. There is no point in denying our selfishness, or pretending that we are not selfish. In fact, pretending we are not selfish, trying to see ourselves as something other than selfish, can confuse us, and lead to bad decisions—because it prevents us from acting in a real way, it prevents us from seeing ourselves as we really are, it prevents us from asking ourselves what we really want and need for ourselves and from others, it keeps us in denial about why our lives and our relationships have problems. Denying selfishness removes the possibility of taking honest responsibility for our decisions, and why we make them.

If we embrace selfishness, not based on the first definition I found, but on the second one—that **what we do starts with love of ourselves**—if we act in accordance with "love of our self," then we can finally begin to internalize what we learn, to own who we are, and to make our life our own. We can then take responsibility for what we want and need, and make better choices for ourselves, which will in turn be better for our partners, children, family and everyone we love. We can shed the pretense that what we do is not for ourselves, but is for others. We can accept that love of self is where everything begins.

There is a second part to selfishness, which is no less important. It isn't enough to merely see that everything we do is motivated by love of ourselves. We have to ask ourselves what do we really want for ourselves, what do we really need? I believe that what we all want for ourselves is **love and respect for and from the people in our lives**. We want to feel like we belong somewhere—we belong with the people we love; our family, our communities, our friends, even the stranger on the street. Is that a bad thing? No. It is a beautiful thing. And it is also selfish. And that makes selfishness not only reality, but good. Sometimes we make mistakes about how to give and get the love and respect of others. We ask what others seem to want from us, and then pursue that, things like big houses, large incomes, social status or sacrificing ourselves for others without knowing why. Instead of asking what others might want from us, we need to be more selfish, we need to ask what we want for ourselves, and realize that money, big houses, and social status will not get us real love and respect, just false respect, and maybe no love at all. Learn what you want and need and then learn how to ask for it. Then, you can offer love and acceptance to others. We must first have hope, compassion and love for ourselves, to truly offer them to others.

My therapy work is not "faith-based," although many of my clients' faith is a powerful part of their internal strength. I respect all faiths. I also respect those that have no religious beliefs at all. Still, we can all learn from religious teachings. So, I want to offer a quote that sums up everything I am saying here about selfishness. "Love your neighbor as you **love yourself**." Jesus said that 2000 years ago. He understood that, in order to truly love others, you have to start with love of yourself. That is selfishness, and it is good, and real. Starting with love of yourself will lead to important changes in the lives of all of the people you love, including most importantly, and I really do mean most importantly, you.