

# 7Sides Chapter 3



By Nikki Rutz

## CHAPTER THREE: SELFISHNESS

It would take volumes to describe my mischievous behavior as a kid. Truly – volumes. I think part of the reason I was prone to such ways was that I didn't have a sister growing up. I had a big brother (well, more like five brothers since his friends practically lived with us on a daily basis), and I wanted to be like them. And let's face it – everyone knows boys are more mischievous than girls. Of course, looking back now, I think that I really did grow up with a sister, so my excuse for being mischievous is a lame one. Her name was LaVonda and though she was my cousin by "blood relation", she was definitely my sister by "heart relation." LaVonda was as unique as her name – and as kind as anyone you have ever met. Clearly, LaVonda and I were drawn to each other because we were polar opposites. She was that shining example of patience and good manners. I, however, was the one who kept it interesting.

In particular, one summer day comes to mind as being specifically interesting. It was a hot day, as I recall. Hot enough that the southern Illinois heat and humidity were keeping most people indoors. I spent my summer days with Vondie (as I called her back then) because my parents worked during the day and my Aunt Millie (Vondie's mom) was kind enough to let me stay at her house. I loved Aunt Millie's place – it was in the country surrounded mostly by fields and hills for as far as you could see – and time out there seemed to pass slower than in town where my family lived. Because we were finally at our summer break and out of school for a few months, Vondie and I were bound to not let a minute of freedom (i.e., time out of school) pass us by. Summer meant taking advantage of neighbors' yards to play in and swimming in pools or lakes until you were water-logged. It meant doing anything besides social studies and mathematics homework. It was a great time in life and Vondie and I felt much older than our actual ages of 11 and 7, respectively.

Given our desire to enjoy every moment of the summer sun, we decided to plan a special day for ourselves involving adventure and food. The goal was to pack a picnic lunch and hike the road in front of her house north to a particular shady spot under one of the biggest oak trees in the state of Illinois. (Well, it was a pretty big tree to me back then, although I'm not sure that it would have made it into any record books. When you are a kid, things always appear bigger than they actually are.) This particular day it felt like the time was getting away from us so I whined and complained to Vondie about her taking so long to pack the picnic basket. It was, after all, 10:30 a.m. and we were going to miss the sunlight if we didn't get going.

So off we went. The picnic basket was heavy, so I encouraged (demanded?) that Vondie carry it. She obliged. She always obliged. Kind people have a way of always serving people in even the littlest of gestures. Selfish people, like me, have a way of taking advantage of such kindness. We were walking for miles and miles and miles....okay, reality reveals that it was more like two blocks. We went around one neighbor's house at the corner of the road past a small field and then down this long dirt road to the big oak tree: our destination. It was 10:40 a.m. now as we arrived at the tree and we were getting hungry for that amazing lunch we had packed (peanut butter & jelly sandwiches and lipton cup-o-soup as I recall....a total package of refreshing food for a hot summer's day as there is nothing like soup to cool you off....). We were ready to dig-in and start eating.

Now Vondie was not only kind, she was polite. I found her kindness and politeness really annoying at this moment as such character traits were interfering with my desire for lunch. But Vondie had good manners and she insisted on letting the owner know that we were picnicking under her tree (I may have failed to mention that the big oak tree was standing in the middle of one of her neighbor's yards). Vondie knocked and knocked on the front door, but no one was home so she gave up and came back to sit on the ground next to me. Realizing that all of that walking had made us really thirsty, we decided to drink some water before we began to eat. I was ready to get started so I unpacked everything in a hurry. Now here is where the story gets interesting. My Aunt Millie had been kind enough to fill two large Tupperware glasses with ice water for us. She had closed them with their matching Tupperware lids and stored them in our picnic basket so they would not spill over. How practical! So we each grabbed a glass and began to drink. Well, I began to drink. Vondie, in an attempt to release the suction-proof Tupperware lid, accidentally spilled her drink all over the ground. We both gasped as we saw the water run down the slope from the tree toward the dusty road we had just been walking on. All of her water was gone. The dried-up ground from the hot sunny day soaked it up in a matter of seconds. We sat in silence, stunned at what had just happened.

"Well," she said matter-of-factly. "Can I have some of your water to hold me over until we get back to the house?" I thought about this question for a few seconds as I gazed at her steadily.



with some degree of selfishness in our lives. If we're honest, we want what is best for us and us alone. We are imperfect. We are sinners. And at the root of all of it is the fact that we are selfish.

Jesus told us that we must be unselfish. He countered our natural way of doing things by commanding the unnatural in us. He said that if we want to follow Him, we must put aside our selfishness – our “selfish ambition” – “shoulder up” our cross, and follow Him.<sup>1</sup> Paul reiterated these thoughts by saying,

Don't be selfish; don't live to make a good impression on others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourself. Don't think only about your own affairs, but be interested in others, too, and what they are doing. Philippians 2:3-4 (NLT)

If we want to be like Christ, to take on His attitude and His way of living each day, we must train ourselves to focus on others. Our goal as it pertains to our selfish desires, then, is to stop focusing on ourselves and start focusing on others. When we can focus our thoughts on others and their needs, it should follow that we will begin serving them instead of our interests alone. It requires us to develop an interest in the affairs of others. Of course, this all sounds nice and is great to write about...but living it in each moment is and will be a challenge for us for the rest of our lives. It is simply counter to our human nature.

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What does it mean to be selfish? Webster's online dictionary defines selfishness as being “concerned excessively or exclusively with oneself: seeking or concentrating on one's own advantage, pleasure, or well-being without regard for others.”<sup>2</sup> It goes on to further define “selfishness” as “arising from concern with one's own welfare or advantage in disregard of others.” My mom defines it in a simpler way, however. She says that being selfish is “simply caring about your life and your own schedule so much that no one else can interrupt it or it bothers you.” If I go with my mom's definition, then I confess that I am a pretty selfish person.

Of course, there are several areas of our lives in which we find ourselves more prone to selfish behavior than others. If you grow up without siblings to teach you that things in life are meant to be shared and not merely kept as yours alone, then you will be set up for a rude awakening upon hitting college and discovering “roommates.” (I still remember my shock at my roommate helping herself to my clothes – even a shirt that I had just purchased, but had not worn yet!) Some women even develop friendships in a very selfish manner. I currently have a friend whom I have been observing for some time. It seems that she migrates toward friends who have a perceived higher social economic standing and/or higher income than she does. In a way, she appears to be choosing her friendships based on what will help her climb a “social ladder” faster. She lives vicariously through these friends via her association with them in a way that necessitates her leaving other friends behind. I have also witnessed, as mentioned in the chapter on Motives, young women “befriend” certain people to get to know a particular guy. Is this true friendship? Or is it selfish behavior? (Or even manipulative behavior?)

Obviously, these are just minor examples of areas that we can find ourselves drawn to seeking our own interests above others. More common examples include being selfish in the areas of our money, our possessions, and the hardest one for me, personally: our time. These are things that we deal with on a daily basis. The struggle is that we want these things (more money, more possessions, more time) in our lives because they benefit us – they give us what we believe will make us “happy.” We perceive having money, possessions, and free time as a personal commodity. Accordingly, if I have earned or received money, then it is mine. (Notice the emphasis on the word: mine.) We typically do not want to let other people have our money, receive our money, or even borrow our money. It is ours – we earned it. We received it. It was designated for us, and it is now in our possession. Those toddler years come back to us quite easily in these situations and we find our inner voice screaming: Mine! Mine! Mine!

But for the Christian, there is a simple truth that counters this line of thinking: these things are not ours. Just because things like our money can be said to be ours doesn't mean that it really is ours. The reality is that it's God's – always has been...is now...always will be. Our possessions, money, and time are really an ownership issue – and most of us don't understand the issue very well. We are told that everything is created for and belongs to God:

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 16:24 (NLT reference).

<sup>2</sup> See [www.merriam-webster.com](http://www.merriam-webster.com).

For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. Colossians 1:16-18 (NIV)

Everything is God's. If we truly understood this "ownership issue", then it would be easier to not be selfish because it is not ours to begin with anyway. It would be that "light bulb" that goes on in our head when we realize "oh, these things really aren't mine so there is no need for me to hold on to them so tightly." We can just relax. Our possessions (or time or money) are things that we simply have stewardship over here on earth, but they are not really ours and that should be a comforting thought to us. Having stewardship means responsibility and that can often make us feel possessive – but really we should proceed with comfort in knowing that we are merely temporary, earthly holders of God's possessions.

Sooner or later, everyone has to settle "the ownership issue" (maybe you know what I mean). Whose life are you going to live – yours or God's? Whose name and honor will you invest your time and energy and passion in – yours or God's? - Chris Tomlin<sup>3</sup>

This idea of ownership is worthy of note. We seem to think that if we have ownership of the right things – if they are truly ours – then they will bring us satisfaction and happiness. I can think of many times when I've been a part of discussions where the conversation was centered around dreams of future stages in life and how "happy" the person would be when this and that was attained, etc. But do possessions truly satisfy? Is there anything on earth that will completely satisfy us so that we never feel hurt, want, or pain again? Is there ever a time when you reach those "goals" and finally have that true satisfaction you have been seeking all along? Ask an older and wiser person these questions and they will tell you that the answer is "no." The reality is that we will never be satisfied until we are finally with Christ in heaven. But while we are here on earth, we think that we will be satisfied if we can attain certain items. We are driven to please ourselves...and note the focus there: self.

It has been my experience that most of the things we want in life fall into one of two categories: 1) things that we did not have growing up and have always wanted; or 2) things that we have been told are the "key" to happiness. These "things" aren't necessarily possessions or money. Sometimes, we are most selfish with gifts that God has given us. He blesses us with a job, a spouse, or a ministry opportunity and we suddenly become completely focused on the blessing and not the Blessor or the ones He wants blessed through us. For instance, when God leads you into the "perfect" job scenario, are you willing to let go of that job if He asks you to? Are you willing to move from living in the "perfect" city if God asks you to minister to others in a different part of the world? How tightly do we cling to things because we do not fully recognize where they've come from in the first place? I have seen students graduate from college and enter into what they perceived to be the perfect job, the perfect marriage, or the perfect graduate program. These are great seasons of life and great blessings from God undoubtedly. But a tension arises when we hold onto these blessings so tightly that they become our whole purpose for living. We start living for the pleasure of self and not in service of others. When we lose perspective and our focus on God and what He is doing in what He has given us, we are treading waters that pull us away from His purposes for our lives. To counter our selfish tendencies in every area of our lives, we must view our possessions and opportunities with open hands. And that can be very hard to do.

Andy Stanley, at the 2006 Thirsty Conference in Atlanta, Georgia, talked about his role as Senior Pastor at one of the fastest growing churches in the country, Northpoint Community of Alpharetta, Georgia. He mentioned that each morning he gets up and says a prayer to God about the position he holds within his church. Andy said that he holds out his hand in a tight, clasped fist. He then prays to God and acknowledges that the position of leading Northpoint Community is God's position, not his, and he opens his fist to physically signify what he is praying at that moment. With an open hand, he "gives back" to God what was already God's to begin with. I was at the Thirsty Conference when he spoke about this and had each of us stand up and go through the prayer with him as it pertained to our own, individual lives. I have never forgotten that experience. Something happened in me at that moment, and I try to recapture it everyday in every area of my life. Everything is God's. He made all of it. I don't have to center myself on what He has given me – what is His to begin with – I can just center myself on Him.

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<sup>3</sup> Tomlin, Chris. "The Way I Was Made", p. 35.

You alone are the LORD. You made the heavens, even the highest heavens, and all their starry host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them. You give life to everything, and the multitudes of heaven worship you. Nehemiah 9:6 (NIV)

I think that it probably goes without saying that one of the hardest challenges for Christians who are trying to be unselfish is that we live in a culture that actually condones selfish behavior. People are encouraged to gain more and more for the edification of self and for self-enjoyment. Yes, there are those instances of philanthropical behavior where one is praised for heading up a charity event, or for walking in a walk-a-thon, etc. But sometimes it seems that even those endeavors are praised primarily for what the person has gained personally in doing so (e.g., "Oh Margaret, you are such a wonderful person for putting on the charity banquet!"). It sometimes becomes about self-gain and not meeting the needs of others. It's about making oneself look, act, and feel a certain way. It's about independence and strength that is perceived to be gained only through a primary focus of edifying oneself above others. Is this the example that Christ gave us? Is this how we are to live as Christians?

You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love. The entire law is summed up in a single command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." Galatians 5:13-14 (NIV)

Our own selfish behavior grows as we continue to take our focus off of God and put it onto ourselves. When this happens, the enemy is given an opportunity to work in our lives not only through our direct disobedience to God's call for our lives, but also in the fact that we are not meeting the needs of others and are not allowing God to mature us. Eventually, our own selfish behavior will steal away our joy as God did not create us to meet our needs alone, but to aid our neighbors as well. John MacArthur has said, "But if we love ourselves more than God, we will question God's wisdom and become upset and bitter. If anything is dearer to us than God, then He must remove it for us to grow spiritually."<sup>4</sup> What is God trying to remove from your life that keeps you from being free to serve others?

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As we embark on this journey of becoming a less selfish person, there are several somewhat philosophical issues that come up. These are areas of intellectual tension that we must deal with as they raise their heads at different times and challenge God's call to us to be less selfish. The first is the argument that there is no such thing as a truly selfless act. In any act of servanthood, it can be said that the servant always gets something for herself out of it – so it is not a selfless act. For example, let's say you use your Saturday mornings to clean the house of an elderly woman in poor health. It is not a truly selfless act because you feel good about yourself having done it and you get a pat on the back from others who hear about it. Plus, you receive the appreciation of the elderly woman you have helped. The answer to this dilemma (the question of whether or not we can ever act truly in a selfless manner) is not that we act out of ideological, extremely perfect, altruistic motives, but that we choose to be obedient to God in serving someone in need. We aren't perfect – so our motives aren't always 100% perfect. But if we wait until our motives are perfect, we will never serve anyone.

The second issue is selfishness versus self-care. We are called to serve others with our time and money, but that does not mean you are called to live a life of poverty. There will always be a tension between caring for yourself and giving to God, and there might be times that God calls you to give when it truly hurts to give. The key to the balance of materialism, self-care, and selflessness is regularly bringing up these issues to God and seeking His will in our daily circumstances. God promises to meet our needs, but we need to remember to be faithful stewards to what He gives us.

I wonder if there might be times when it would be a good idea to be a little selfish. Now don't lose me here...keep reading. The question is, when does selflessness equal being taken advantage of? At what point do we need to pull back a little to take care of ourselves? Is this selfishness or merely self-preservation? And regardless of what we call it, is it okay when it comes to this side of our character? I used to think that being a Christian meant we should offer hitchhikers a ride. Well, we should be hospitable toward others and especially those in need. But I also don't think it is very wise for a woman to be driving by herself and then offer a hitch-hiker a ride! (I had a friend in college who was

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<sup>4</sup> *Benefitting from Life's Trials; The Purpose of Trials* by John MacArthur: <http://www.biblebb.com/files/MAC/sg59-5.htm>

assaulted after offering a hitch-hiker a ride near our campus.) Call it selfishness, but I'm going to make a judgment call that there is a wise way to behave and an unwise way to behave in those situations. One is self-preservation. The other can be warned as potential self-destruction. We may call the first an act of "selfishness", but I believe that it's the better option of the two when it comes to personal safety. Quite simply, this idea of "self-preservation" adds a tension to our aim of getting rid of selfish behavior – but it's a good tension and one we cannot ignore.

Let's look at it from another angle. What if a person has asked you for a copy of your notes from class? What if she has asked you for the third time now? The sixth time? At what point are you being taken advantage of instead of being merely unselfish with the notes that you have worked so hard to put together? Do you feel the tension here? There are times when it's difficult to read what Jesus said in Matthew 5, if we are honest.

But I say, don't resist an evil person! If you are slapped on the right cheek, turn the other, too. If you are ordered to court and your shirt is taken from you, give your coat, too. If a soldier demands that you carry his gear for a mile, carry it two miles. Give to those who ask, and don't turn away from those who want to borrow.<sup>5</sup>

How do we come to terms with this? Is there a clear answer? Do we continue to hand over our class notes without question? Perhaps an answer lies in looking at our goals, motivations, and expectations in a given situation – i.e., our heart. If we continue to give our classmate our class notes, is that really the best learning situation for her? It isn't that we don't want to help her out by providing our homework for her (our motivation), but that we want what is best for her and that would be for her to learn the material on her own. So, we might decide that after so many times of letting her borrow our homework, it's time to encourage her to attend class and take notes on her own. If we are in a growing relationship with Christ, I believe He will give us the discernment to handle those tricky situations. We will know when to keep giving, and when it is best to refrain from giving.

Seek his will in all you do, and he will direct your paths. Proverbs 3:6 (NLT)

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The Bible gives us no less than five reasons for developing a character that is selfless and seeking to serve others. Those five are as follows:

We are out of God's will for our lives if we do not serve others because serving others is commanded.

Our spiritual growth is limited if we do not serve others.

Serving others is being a good steward of what God has given to us.

Serving others is a key aspect of leadership.

Serving others creates community.

#### 1. We are Out of God's Will for Our Lives if We Do Not Serve Others Because Serving Others is Commanded

The Bible tells us specifically that we are to love God and we are to love others. In fact, we are told that loving God and loving others are equally important.<sup>6</sup> This is further emphasized in Paul's letter to the church at Philippi in which he commands us to have an attitude like Christ.

Your attitude should be the same that Christ Jesus had. Though he was God, he did not demand and cling to his rights as God. He made himself nothing; he took the humble position of a slave and appeared in human form. And in human form he obediently humbled himself even further by dying a criminal's death on a cross. Philippians 2:5-8 (NLT)

If God wants us to be selfless and we choose to be self-centered instead, then we are in direct disobedience to His will for our lives. It is, quite simply, an attitude check for us as we seek to be more like Christ. Disobedience drives a wedge in our relationship with God and that alone can have other, more serious effects.

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<sup>5</sup> Matthew 5:39-42 (NLT).

<sup>6</sup> See Matthew 22:37-39.

You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love. Galatians 5:13 (NIV)

Dee Brestin in her book *Falling in Love with Jesus* says that “the Bible says that the mark of a Christian is love. When we can live a life of love, the world sits up and takes notice.”<sup>7</sup> Christ showed us how to serve one another by a simple act of washing the feet of his disciples.<sup>8</sup> In a time where people walked on dusty roads using sandals as their shoes, you can rest assured – people had pretty dirty feet! I imagine that few jobs were more degrading than being the person whose responsibility it was to clean the feet of people coming in the house. Christ, even so, did this act out of love. He did this as an example to His disciples and to us. He then went on to demonstrate the ultimate act of love by giving His life for us.

But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Romans 5:8 (NIV)

He gave up His life out of obedience to God’s will. Obviously, Jesus set a very high standard for us in our attitude of service toward others. Granted, we are not into the practice of washing others’ feet when they arrive at our homes; however, how many of us have approached life in such a way that we try to continually grow in servanthood and away from selfishness? I’m not sure how many of us – if it came to it – could give our lives up for another (maybe it would depend on the person we were being asked to save). But day to day life is not about us physically dying for another person. It is about developing a servant heart – one that is more focused on serving God and others and less focused on ourselves. The key is to acknowledge that serving others as God commanded is not something we are capable of doing on our own. Only through maturing in our relationship with God and by His strength will we have the ability to be a true, Godly servant. As our passion for that grows, so will our passion to serve others in obedience to God’s commands. Don’t deceive yourself. We are not born with this level of maturity. It takes time, prayer, and hard choices to grow in servanthood; and I suspect that those who truly love the things of the Lord more than the things of this earth will continue to grow in this until they die. Only Christ was perfect. We are not called to be perfect, but to strive after His example.

How often would you say that you serve your: Roommates? Friends? Family members? Spouse? Classmates? Co-workers? \_\_\_\_\_? (Fill in the blank!) Do you make a point to find avenues to help others? I hear more and more that the United States is entering an interesting time of cultural change because the “Boomer generation” is moving into retirement and “senior citizen” status. I wonder how many of us are looking for ways to serve them? Or leaders in our churches? Have you offered to babysit for anyone recently? When you look back over the past month, what have you done to serve others? Have you ever spent an hour doing something that wasn’t for yourself? We are called to be servants. This is an active process, not a passive process. Do you ask God, “who do You want me to serve today?” Are you unaware of people in need around you? If you don’t see an opportunity to serve, then you simply aren’t praying and looking. Opportunities are everywhere.

## 2. Our Spiritual Growth is Limited if We Do Not Serve Others

When we seek to meet our needs only, we develop an inward focus that causes our character growth to become stagnant. We do not learn from life’s situations because we see everything through our own selfish perspective and not God’s. Our faith, as a natural effect, becomes stale. We miss the joy of helping others out and we miss the growth that comes from serving others with a Christ-like attitude in everyday situations. We miss out on the essence of what living the Christian life is meant to be.

When you follow the desires of your sinful nature, your lives will produce these evil results: sexual immorality, impure thoughts, eagerness for lustful pleasure, idolatry, participation in demonic activities, hostility, quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambition, divisions, the feeling that everyone is wrong except those in your own little group, envy, drunkenness, wild parties, and other kinds of sin. Let me tell you again, as I have before, that anyone living that sort of life will not inherit the Kingdom of God. Galatians 5:19-21 (NLT)

But when the Holy Spirit controls our lives, he will produce this kind of fruit in us: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Here there is no conflict with the law. Those who belong to Christ

<sup>7</sup> Brestin, Dee and Kathy Triccoli, *Falling in Love with Jesus*, p.188.

<sup>8</sup> See John 13:12-17.

Jesus have nailed the passions and desires of their sinful nature to his cross and crucified them there. If we are living now by the Holy Spirit, let us follow the Holy Spirit's leading in every part of our lives. Galatians 5:22-25 (NLT)

In looking at these two sets of verses, it's easy to see that we have a choice. We can either do what comes naturally out of our sinful nature or pursue a life that is yielded to the Holy Spirit. As Christians, we "say" we want to grow in Christ and the fruits of the Spirit – but we often fail to make the choices necessary to break free from our sinful nature. We are often not willing to give up our personal ambitions so that we are fully yielded to God and His plans for our lives. A character that is produced in us from the Holy Spirit comes only from following and knowing Jesus Christ.

Then Jesus said to the disciples, "If any of you wants to be my follower, you must put aside your selfish ambition, shoulder your cross, and follow me. Matthew 16:24 (NLT)

### 3. Serving Others is Being a Good Steward of what God has Given to Us

My mother has forever said to me that "you simply cannot out-give God." I have heard it so much that when I waiver on whether to donate my time to a ministry or give that extra little bit to our church, etc., I can hear her voice in my head reminding me of this truth.

And who could ever give him so much that he would have to pay it back? For everything comes from him; everything exists by his power and is intended for his glory. To him be glory evermore. Amen. Romans 11:35-36 (NLT)

The fact that we cannot out-give God should encourage us to be very generous with what He has given us. When God blesses us with possessions, money, or even our time, it's hard to imagine that He does not want us to enjoy them. But the truth is that He does want us to enjoy them and the primary way in which we do that is by having the right attitude that seeks to bless others through them.

Remember this--a farmer who plants only a few seeds will get a small crop. But the one who plants generously will get a generous crop. You must each make up your own mind as to how much you should give. Don't give reluctantly or in response to pressure. For God loves the person who gives cheerfully. And God will generously provide all you need. Then you will always have everything you need and plenty left over to share with others. II Corinthians 9:6-8 (NLT)

My inlaws are possibly some of the most giving people I have ever known. Some would put it as "they possess high spiritual gifts in the area of giving." The neatest thing for me, though, is to witness how God has blessed them with more than they could have imagined, and yet they continue to give more than they ever thought possible. The giving, for them, is an automatic first step of whatever they receive. They see their income as a way to give more to other people. They see their time as a way to serve others in foreign ministry endeavors. They see their possessions as gifts from God to be shared with others. They haven't always had an easy life – they have many stories to prove this point – but it has never phased their unselfish hearts. And...God has always returned the blessing in a greater way than they would have ever dreamed. Giving, you see, is just another way that we serve others.

A word of warning on giving – we give out of obedience to God, and hopefully with a cheerful heart. We do not give with the expectation of financial blessings in return from God. If God chooses to do this, then great –but that is not to be our motive or expectation. The idea that if we act like a good Christian and give "a lot" then God will return the favor comes from an unbiblical "health and wealth" philosophy that God's goal for us is to be physically healthy and materially blessed. This concept is espoused by some televangelists that are seen on TV and is completely ignorant of the fact that the life of a Christian who is truly obedient to God is often a difficult one with trials and tribulations (I recommend you read much of Paul's letters and the accounts of the disciples' lives by way of example). We all have rough times – this is true. For the Christian, however, we have the hope of Christ. But there is no promise that "health and wealth" will be ours if we give. The world's definition and the Bible's definition of a "blessing" is not always the same thing.

### 4. Serving Others is a Key Aspect of Leadership

The movie Gladiator became one of the most popular movies of all time, even winning several awards. Joining in the vast majority of movie goers, my husband and I became fast fans as well (having seen the movie no less than three

times in the theater when it first came out). I think that part of the reason the movie was so popular is that Maximus (Russell Crowe's character) was an incredible leader. He played a military General in the Roman Empire and the men under his command were willing to die for him – they respected his leadership that much. His ability to lead others was fueled by his ability to make others want to follow him (such as the other prisoners/gladiators with whom Maximus came in contact after he became a slave). His powerful leadership seemed to flow out of one simple truth: he was a servant to his subordinates. The story of Maximus in *Gladiator* drives home the idea that being a servant inspires loyalty.

And they began to argue among themselves as to who would be the greatest in the coming Kingdom. Jesus told them, "In this world the kings and great men order their people around, and yet they are called 'friends of the people.' But among you, those who are the greatest should take the lowest rank, and the leader should be like a servant. Normally the master sits at the table and is served by his servants. But not here! For I am your servant. Luke 22:24-27 (NLT)

Christ tells us that to be a great leader, you must be a great servant. It's having a heart of humility – that can direct others while not viewing them as beneath or lesser than yourself. I have read many books on leadership, but very few of them spend time addressing this topic. Being a servant means taking time to care about those you are leading and meeting their needs.

## 5. Serving Others Creates Community

Our pastor says that "community" is "experiencing Christ through one another." He goes on to say that "the enemy of community is self-sufficiency and self-protection."<sup>9</sup> If we become self-centered, we rely less and less on others. We look only to ourselves and thus have no need for other people in our lives. We end up very alone. Serving others is a natural part of community. It is how we interact, how we can encourage, and how we bless one another. It is how we, in turn, are also encouraged and uplifted.

And let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but encourage and warn each other, especially now that the day of his coming back again is drawing near. Hebrews 10:25 (NLT)

Christ was in community with his disciples. We have seen his example of serving them and His command for us to do so as well. Withdrawing from others and avoiding ways to serve them not only destroys our ability to be in community with others but keeps us from sharing the hope that Christ offers. A close friend of mine and I were recently talking about how being around others also allows God to speak to us through them...even the ones we may not like as well as others. In fact, it's often the people that we might least prefer to be with that will be the very ones that God uses to give us insight into ourselves. We must seek out opportunities to be in community and serve others. This can happen through a local church, fellow classmates/coworkers, and other groups that we are connected to either via friendship or via service. Volunteering at church or for a not-for-profit organization are just two examples of ways to connect with others. If we choose not to be in community and become too independent, then we miss opportunities to effectively witness to others. In truth, is there any greater way to serve someone than to introduce them to Christ?

If anyone says, "I am living in the light," but hates a Christian brother or sister, that person is still living in darkness. Anyone who loves other Christians is living in the light and does not cause anyone to stumble. Anyone who hates a Christian brother or sister is living and walking in darkness. Such a person is lost, having been blinded by the darkness. I John 2:9-11 (NLT)

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Early in my collegiate years I learned of a way to serve those around me that can have a life-long impact: the giving of my time by just listening. All around us, everyday, are people who long to be listened to – to be heard, to be understood, and to be loved. Dee Brestin pointed out in *Falling in Love with Jesus* that Christ never saw people as interruptions.<sup>10</sup> We should take a lesson from His example. One of the ways we can feel free to be interrupted (and

<sup>9</sup> Darrin Patrick, Pastor of *The Journey*, St. Louis, Missouri.

<sup>10</sup> Brestin, Dee and Kathy Troccoli, *Falling in Love with Jesus*, p. 171.

unselfish with our time) is when we are in regular communication with God. We can learn to be sensitive to His leading in knowing when to stop what we are doing and listen to someone in need. This is, quite simply, the idea behind “bearing” with and loving other people despite their faults.<sup>11</sup> Of course, we are often not very good listeners because we have other motives. For instance, we act like we are listening when we are in reality just listening enough to get the information needed to provide our response, to push our own ideas, etc. But if we first seek to understand where the speaker is coming from (her position), then we can hopefully gain insight into what she is saying, where she is coming from, and what she is feeling. After truly listening to her we will then have a much better opportunity to speak truth into her life in a meaningful way.

Students often ask me about ways to “get out of themselves” and find opportunities to serve others. I always hear that students are “poor” so the idea of asking them to donate something is out of the question. (Of course, I think we all know this is not necessarily the case – they definitely buy the things they want to buy or the marketing industry would not target their age group on a regular basis.) But I do think that there are ways to serve others by meeting their material needs without giving money, per se. I have been so proud of several students I know who have chosen to let their hair grow long enough so that they can cut it off and donate it to Locks of Love (a not-for-profit organization that takes donated hair to manufacture hair pieces for children with long-term medical hair loss).<sup>12</sup> Just a simple decision to not cut one’s hair for several months, and then donate that hair to Locks of Love, can have a powerful effect on a child. That is an act of a servant heart. There are other not-for-profit associations to which one can donate items or time – too many organizations to list here. I will mention one here, however, that I believe provides an easy way for women to help other women: battered women’s shelters. These shelters are always looking for donations by way of clothing, old cell phones, toys, etc. Women often arrive at these shelters with only the clothing that they are wearing and often times have their children with them. A little giving can go a long way for them.

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We’ve already discussed motives in this book, so it goes without saying that to properly be focused on serving others we need to examine our motives. God is not pleased when our hearts do not line up with our actions, so serving others with the wrong motivation sort of negates the service in the first place. For example, it’s easy to serve others that we like, but we should not serve them only because we like them. Why is this? Because if your motivation is based on a feeling, once the feeling is gone you will cease to serve. In other words, your decision to serve someone is based on their behavior and people are, well, human. Humans do stupid things. We lose motivation to serve them the minute they become ungrateful or are mean to us and we stop liking them. God’s call to service is foremost out of obedience to Him – not because we like someone or something. My father-in-law often says that there were times that he did not like the ministry work that he did in Mexico, but he served out of a heart of obedience. If he had based his willingness to donate his time to the ministry out of his “feelings” toward others involved in the ministry or even those that they were ministering to, he would not have always wanted to go on the bi-annual mission trips. Service is about our obedience to God, not someone else’s. We serve others out of obedience to God and for His glory (because we are obeying Him) – not ours. But if you find yourself looking for recognition from others for your good works, you need to check your motives. If you find yourself feeling envious when others are applauded for their acts of service and you aren’t, you need to check your heart. Remember, it’s not all about you. It’s about God and His glory – and that is enough.

A heart lined up with Christ’s character serves others for God. We reflect Christ’s character in serving others and people start seeing something bigger than ourselves, because they see God. People cannot help but see Christ in us when our focus is on their benefit and not our own – it’s not logical in today’s world, so people wonder what’s behind our actions. It’s funny how another’s act of kindness can really intrigue us. For example, my husband had a roommate in college that refused to wash his dishes. There were four guys living in his apartment at this time and, as you can imagine, dirty dishes would stack up quickly if each person wasn’t doing his own dishes. But when one roommate outright refused to clean his dishes yet continued to use dishes and leave them on the counter, there was obvious conflict. My husband prayed about the situation and decided that God was calling him to serve his roommate by doing his dishes for him. He did it – for an entire school year. They did not live together after that year, but the roommate did come back to confess how impressed he was with my husband’s character and servant heart. He knew that my husband had done it

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<sup>11</sup> **Ephesians 4:2.**

<sup>12</sup> For more information, visit <http://www.locksoflove.org>.

because of his faith. In the end, my husband's obedience to God in taking a humbler position and serving his roommate resulted in his roommate seeing God in Kevin's actions.

The flip side of this scenario is a situation that I often hear female students tell me about. When a female friend has gone over to a guy's off-campus apartment to do his laundry (and his roommates' laundry), one has to ask "why is she doing that?" This act of kindness may look like it's to "serve" the guys living in the apartment, and maybe it is...but in the scenarios I hear about, it's usually more about finding a way to be near these guys and less about actually serving them by cleaning their laundry. I guess the "test" of the motives here would be to ask if the friend would be doing the laundry of an apartment full of girls? Or is she finding self-worth in having the guys be impressed with her kindness? Is this the right heart of service? It isn't necessarily wrong to do this, but let's call it what it is: flirting, not service.

Serving others with no expectation on their behavior (i.e., not basing our actions on their actions) is serving with a right heart. But can we ever expect something in return? Absolutely! The key is to only expect something from God by way of the natural benefits of growing closer to Him. The very point of being a servant is that you are not expecting something in return. When we take our expectations to God because we are serving others out of obedience to Him, we are really doing something that He loves: we are worshipping Him. We are saying that He is greater than any of our circumstances or any of the people around us – we are serving because we love Him. Do you see how He gets the glory when we serve others?

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One last area that we must look at when it comes to service is the area we'll call "Obstructions to Service". If you're having a hard time getting the focus off of yourself and onto others, then you are probably falling victim to one of four obstructions to service:

- Pride
- Jealousy
- Fatigue
- Selfish Ignorance

Pride is a killer – emotionally and spiritually. It keeps us zoned in on our desires/wants/needs because it tells us that we are more important than everyone else. It tells us that we are owed something in return as if any act of kindness/service has to be paid in full. Bishop Clarence McClendon in his book *The X Blessing* noted that he had "discovered that every step up in the Kingdom of God is first preceded by one step down in the flesh."<sup>13</sup> I love this statement because it verbalizes very quickly what this chapter on Selfishness is about. To grow in our character – to be more like Christ – we must take one step down in our flesh and stop focusing so much on ourselves. The prideful person is either "too good" or "too important" for the menial task of serving others or is looking for personal recognition.

What makes you better than anyone else? What do you have that God hasn't given you? And if all you have is from God, why boast as though you have accomplished something on your own? I Corinthians 4:7 (NLT)

You younger men, accept the authority of the elders. And all of you, serve each other in humility, for "God sets himself against the proud, but he shows favor to the humble." I Peter 5:5 (NLT) [Emphasis added.]

The issue of jealousy is a topic for a whole other chapter (one that will probably appear in a sequel to this book). If we are jealous of someone, the last thing that we will want to do is to serve them. But we are told that jealousy has no part in the Christian life. So when you feel the root of jealousy coming into your heart, take quick action and remember that whatever you are jealous of is an issue between that person and God, not you and God. Are you mad because your friend is engaged to be married and you're not even dating anyone at the moment? Then remember that God is working specifically in your friend's life and the timing of her marriage is between her and God, not you. Are you bitter about your friend's financial situation and how "easy" life seems for her? Then recognize that God has you in your specific financial situation for a reason – seek what He wants you to learn through it. Are you envious of others who perform better academically than you do or are advancing faster in their careers than you? Then acknowledge what

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<sup>13</sup> McClendon, Bishop Clarence E., *The X Blessing*, pp.97-98 (2000).

God is doing in your specific academic endeavors and recognize where He is taking you – leave your classmates' future to Him. God has His own plan for your life – He doesn't want you looking at others, but instead looking to Him to figure it out.

For jealousy and selfishness are not God's kind of wisdom. Such things are earthly, unspiritual, and motivated by the Devil. For wherever there is jealousy and selfish ambition, there you will find disorder and every kind of evil. James 3:15-16 (NLT)

Another obstruction to serving others is one that may sound strange, but will definitely play into not wanting to get the focus off of self and that is: fatigue. My husband has always said that if he wasn't so tired and in need of more sleep, he could do so much more for others. We marvel at friends of ours who only need 3 or 4 hours of sleep a night when we each need a good 7 to 8 hours. When fatigue sets in, the last thing you will want to do is serve others. You will, instead, want to serve yourself by getting rest. The way to combat this particular obstruction to serving others is simple: decide your priorities. Have you booked yourself so tight that you have scheduled yourself out of time to serve God? If you are being lazy or not organizing your schedule properly, you will not leave much room for serving others. I believe that one of the key lessons to learn as quickly in life as possible is time-management. You have to start prioritizing your life and making sure that your daily schedule reflects your priorities. You can do it, but you have to want to and you have to be disciplined.

The last area mentioned here as an obstruction to service is "selfish ignorance." In other words, you simply don't tend to think about the needs of others because you live in "your own little world." It's not that you wouldn't serve, necessarily, but that you just are busy with your own life and don't think about it. You probably don't ask God in your prayers to show you who He wants you to serve. The clear approach to getting past this is to wake up and realize that there is a world taking place all around you. As mentioned earlier, ask God, "who do You want me to serve today?" When you seek to serve, you will find opportunities to serve...and you will find that there is a much bigger world outside of your own.

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There are many benefits of growing closer to God by being obedient in serving others. In scripture, we are told that by serving others we will have rewards in heaven<sup>14</sup>, rewards on earth<sup>15</sup>, and even a treatment for depression.<sup>16</sup> Just these reasons alone should be encouragement for all of us to get the focus off of ourselves and onto serving others!

So what are some practical ways to start serving others right now? Some have already been mentioned here, but I think the first and most obvious way is to serve those with whom you live. Roommates, housemates, a spouse, and/or family members are always in need of service. If you live alone, then serve your neighbors. Without being asked, step up and clean, do laundry, give a ride to a roommate or neighbor whose car has broken down, etc. Give your attention to people who interrupt you during your day. Take a few moments to be sensitive to them. God might want to use you in that situation. Serve people within your church: offer to baby-sit for a staff member, befriend someone who is sitting alone or looking lonely, or have a group of people over for a cheap dinner.

And if you really want to serve others in a way that may seem extraordinary, pray for them. Pray for others for at least as much time as you pray for yourself. Pray for God to show you opportunities to serve those for whom you pray, to serve within your church, to serve those with whom you live. And then, watch and wait. He will show you where He wants you to serve...and it will probably happen sooner rather than later.

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<sup>14</sup> Luke 14:7-14.

<sup>15</sup> Proverbs 16:7

<sup>16</sup> John 14:17

## SPEECH: APPLICATION

*"If we love ourselves more than God, we will question God's wisdom and become upset and bitter. If anything is dearer to us than God, then He must remove it for us to grow spiritually."* John MacArthur

**\*GOAL: Get focus off of yourself, and focus on the needs of others**

*Don't be selfish; don't live to make a good impression on others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourself. Don't think only about your own affairs, but be interested in others, too, and what they are doing. **Philippians 2:3-4***

### I. STEPS FOR CHANGING OUR HABITS AS IT PERTAINS TO OUR SELFISHNESS:

- a. Memorize a verse.
  - i. Choose a verse from the scriptures listed below
  - ii. Put the verse up on a mirror, or other location, to aid in memorization
- b. Spend 5 minutes each night journaling about the following:
  - i. Was there a time during the day that I felt like I acted in a selfish manner?
  - ii. Why was I selfish in that moment?
  - iii. Was God pleased with my attitude in that moment?
  - iv. How should I have acted/reacted?
  - v. Was there a time during the day that I felt like I served someone else?
  - vi. How did I feel when I was serving someone else?
  - vii. How did I feel afterwards?
  - viii. Was my focus on glorifying God or glorifying myself?
- c. Pray for other people's needs/requests/concerns you know about.
- d. Pray for opportunities to serve.

### II. ACCOUNTABILITY QUESTIONS (Commit to doing these suggestions – alone or with a partner – daily for the next two weeks.)

- a. Have I acted selfishly recently?
  - i. Why did I act that way?
  - ii. How should I have acted?
  - iii. What steps can I take to act differently next time?
- b. What are specific things that I can do in the coming weeks to "get outside myself" and serve others?
  - i. What concrete goals do I want to set for myself accordingly?
- c. Without being asked, have I done the dishes, laundry, or some other task to serve the people with whom I live?
- d. Have I allowed my life to be interrupted in such a way that I stopped what I was doing to give my attention to that person?
- e. Have I been praying for others?

SCRIPTURES TO LOOK UP ON YOUR OWN (just 2 or so each day...)

*(These scriptures were originally read from the New Living Translation Bible for this study)*

**Matthew 25:40**  
**Isaiah 58:10**  
**Proverbs 11:25**  
**Psalms 41:1**  
**Proverbs 19:17**  
**Luke 6:32-34**

**Proverbs 28:27**  
**Malachi 3:10**  
**Romans 5:8**  
**Matthew 6:19-21**  
**Luke 6:38**  
**Romans 15:1-3**

**I Corinthians 10:24**  
**II Corinthians 5:15**  
**Galatians 5:19-23**  
**I John 4:7-8**  
**I John 4:16**  
**Matthew 16:24**  
**Hebrews 10:25**  
**I John 2:9-11**  
**Luke 9:23**  
**Philippians 1:17**  
**I Peter 5:5**  
**James 3:13-15**  
**Romans 12:15**  
**Philippians 2:5-8**  
**Matthew 22:37-40**  
**Galatians 5:13-14**  
**Philippians 4:5**  
**Psalms 112:5**  
**Philippians 2:3-4**  
**Nehemiah 9:6**

**Galatians 6:2**  
**Philippians 2:20-21**  
**John 13:12-17**  
**I John 4:11-12**  
**I Corinthians 13:4-5**  
**II Corinthians 9:6-8**  
**Mark 8:34**  
**Romans 11:35-36**  
**I Samuel 30:22-25**  
**I Corinthians 4:7**  
**II Corinthians 12:20**  
**James 3:15-16**  
**Luke 1:42-43**  
**Luke 14:7-14**  
**Mark 9:33-35**  
**Matthew 5:7**  
**I Peter 4:7-11**  
**Luke 22:24-27**  
**Colossians 1:16-18**  
**Matthew 5:39-42**

*\*As you read the following passages, note any selfish and/or unselfish tendencies*

**Romans 7:14-25**  
**Psalms 42:5-11**  
**I Corinthians 13**  
**Jonah**

**Some Known Examples of Serving → Choose one to do on a weekly basis:**

1. Go over to person's house and do their laundry (they have been sick, they have several children, whatever the reason...)
2. Surprise a friend/church member who recently had a baby – offer to do “the midnight watch” (spend the night and do all feedings and diaper changes, etc.)
3. Volunteer your time/“sweat labor” for a not-for-profit ministry/organization
4. Offer to babysit for free
5. Mow lawn, rake leaves, or shovel snow for someone
6. Help a friend pack, move, and/or unpack after the move
7. Invite someone you see at church to lunch – especially a fellow college student who looks like she could use a friend
8. Give clothes you never wear to a friend, someone else who really needs them, or a battered women's shelter
9. Donate your old cell phone to a battered women's shelter
10. Surprise someone on their birthday with a birthday cake
11. Invite someone over for a cheap dinner – spaghetti, soup, ramen noodles, whatever!
12. Listen to someone who needs to talk
13. Take a basket of chicken noodles soup, crackers, cough drops, tissue, etc., to someone who is feeling under the weather
14. Work in the nursery/children's area at church
15. Work in “set up crew” or “clean up crew” or whatever after an event, etc.

*What are other examples that you can think of?*