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Presentation Transcript
Preaching To the Choir, Part 3 – Being Self-Centered
March 1, 2019

We're doing another presentation in our series, *Preaching To the Choir*, where we talk about human characteristics to which none of us wants to admit. Today's topic is about *Being Self-Centered*.

Since I have started working as a counselor, I have noticed the use of a certain word that has exploded. And that word is *narcissism*. We have even labeled an entire generation as narcissistic – the millennials. Since I've started doing this kind of work, in the late 90s, there have been two other explosions. One was *ADD* and the other was *bipolar*. For a while, everyone thought everyone else had ADD, then they thought everyone else had bipolar disorder. Now it's narcissism. Now people call anyone who offends them a narcissist. The word – the way it's being used now – indicates that being offended is now in style.

So how to think about and what to know about narcissism – that's what we're going to talk about today, with the idea of delicately helping each listener to accurately detect self-centeredness in others and themselves – a daunting task, to be sure. We also hope to cover a few ways to find balance between caring too much about self and not enough.

How many narcissists are there? Well, it might surprise you to know that it's impossible that an entire generation is narcissistic to the point of disorder, because only 1% of the population in the United States qualifies for a diagnosis of narcissistic personality disorder. But what about those who are narcissistic to a lesser degree, like your mother-in-law, or your boss? Well, that's where the trouble comes in. How should we think about how much self-centeredness is acceptable? Well, we're going to get to that a little bit later.

But first of all, what does it look like – narcissism? Well, if you're talking about the personality disorder, a narcissistic personality disorder prevents a person – or, for that matter, any personality disorder – prevents a person from managing their own emotions, holding on to a stable sense of self and identity, maintaining healthy relationships in work, friendship and love, and these folks

tend to be rigid in their thinking. And when we're talking specifically about narcissistic personality disorder, they tend to put their own desires ahead of others consistently. When a person is self-centered to this degree, then they could be diagnosed.

I had a client some time back who married a man and had a child with him. And he was diagnosed with bipolar disorder. I never did meet him, but when I listened to her talk about him, it seemed to me that his ups and down seemed closely related to his perceptions of what was going on around him, rather than by some abnormal mood rhythm. For example, if he criticized his little daughter – and he was prone to do that in a very manipulative and mind-gaming kind of way – and his wife would tell him that he was doing damage, he would fly into a rage of self-defense and then go on the attack. But, if she approached him saying, "I'm afraid your daughter won't like you if you approach it like that. Why don't you try X" – and she would come up with some other way of dealing with her – then he would seem to be more agreeable. But it always had to be about him getting what he wanted.

This man can't hold a job – or couldn't – has assaulted people in public, stole money from his own parents, and is currently in hiding from the law and the IRS, and still thinks it's everyone else's fault. He rigidly refuses to take any responsibility. So that sounds more like a personality thing than any bipolar person. So when you add all this to fact that his bipolar meds don't work, then what can we say? Probably, misdiagnosed.

Also, it's good to know that we are all narcissistic to some degree. And that degree can be considered a part of a continuum – with those who take the occasional selfie, and talk a bit too much about themselves at one extreme. And then there's the people who think everyone wants to know what they had for breakfast or where they've been yesterday – you know, Facebook and Instagram – a lot of that there – and those who are preoccupied with their own illnesses or other challenges, perhaps in the middle. And then those who are rigid in their thinking about their own worth, abilities, ideas, needs, etcetera at the extreme end of the continuum. They think all of those things about them are more important than about others.

So at this end, we can think about all dictators, who would know better what you need than I – that's kind of how they think about it – most politicians, most media-related people, including actors and musicians – I did say, "Most," not all. And these are usually on the extreme and tend to be manipulative, charming, deceptive, often altruistic – "I don't know a more generous person than myself" – along with being self-serving and self-centered. So did you notice that it's possible to be altruistic and still be narcissistic? It is – as long as you have distorted sense of how altruistic you are.

Sometimes people with health or mental health issues become self-centered about their situation. Is that good or bad? Well, it could be either. When someone is sick with a serious illness, it's good if they become an expert about the illness – or try to. So that takes a focus on self, but a person who's really sick *needs* to know what needs to be done and needs to be involved in the treatment. But, if they learn nothing, and just complain about it all the time, focusing tightly on

their own misery, then that would be bad, wouldn't it? They'd be dragging themselves down. Most people have learned that when someone asks you, "How are you?" it's just a social convention. Most people don't want to hear a four-hour regurgitation of all the wrongs done or pains experienced. They just say, "Fine, thanks." But others think what's happening with them is more important than the other person's schedule or their challenges. So people come to me quite often and say, "I don't have anyone to talk to. No one understands what I'm going through." Well, that's probably true. And they're smart enough to realize, or attuned enough to realize, that other people ask, "How are you?" just to be polite. So what I tell those folks is, when you come in the door, and I ask you, "How are you doing?" I want to know how you're doing. This is not like being out in society. This is counseling.

So let's ask the question, "How do people become narcissistic?" Where does it come from? Well, I was explaining to a 35-year-old man recently, who suspects he's too much like his uncle, who is a selfish person, who seemed to be way harder on others than he was on himself. So there's an indication that narcissistic characteristics can be inherited, if he's correct. And when I mentioned that, he started nodding his head. And research does indicate that it can seem to be a genetic thing that's carried on from generation to generation. But research also shows that environment and parenting can have an effect on it as well. I was explaining to him that a person can become narcissistic from two different ways of being parented.

One is that parents teach the child he's better than others – put him up on a pedestal, for example. And the other is by neglecting a child's physical emotional needs, so that the child has to focus on meeting them as best they can or go without. When this happens in childhood – where children really aren't equipped to take care of themselves, the focus seems to get locked in and the person becomes preoccupied with self-care.

And this young man was listening to me explain all of this, and he said, "I think with me, it might be part genetic – thinking of my uncle – and part the former – my mother, to this day, favors me over my brother. Now, this man does not have narcissistic personality disorder. He's just a bit bigger on himself than is realistic. For example, he tends to disrespect people who are not punctual and responsible, and believes himself to very responsible and punctual. And yet, to date, he's failed to show up more sessions without notifying me than any client I've had in a long time. Then when I put the full session fee on his credit card – as he agreed to in the beginning – he tries to talk me out of it, make excuses for himself, and think it's not fair. But this approach *is* starting to have a positive effect on his ability to see himself. I call it the one-hundred-dollar light bulb. But he hasn't completely let up on others when they're late or can't make appointments. He seems to do okay at work, but he tells me his girlfriend is extremely exasperated with him. Consequently, we can see that the way that he behaves is affecting his life in a negative way – but probably not to the degree necessary for a personality disorder diagnosis. But the disparity between how he was taught to see himself and the negative feedback he's getting from his girlfriend – and probably others as well – is causing him a lot of anxiety. There's a lot of ambivalence going on there. The feedback he's getting doesn't match up with what he learned at

home. And that's why he came to me in the first place – to get rid of the anxiety he was experiencing. So anxiety also plays a part for those who believe they're not good enough – and so play the role of a superior being to cover up their self-perceived weakness.

Now let's ask this question: Is narcissism too much self-esteem? No. Narcissism and self-esteem are two different things. Each one comes from different parenting approaches. When parents are warm and affectionate, and spend time with their children, and express interest in their activities, their children will gradually believe they are okay individuals. This is the core of a healthy sense of self. I can refer you to the books, *How To Really Love Your Child* and *How to Really Love Your Teen*, by Ross Campbell. On the other hand, parents who teach their children that they're better than others, by putting them on a pedestal, causes children to believe that they are superior. We learn, from our parents first, who we are and what we're like. And, if parents put us on that pedestal, we absorb that as reality.

So, it's better to say, "You did a good job," instead of you, "You deserve to be on top," or "Why weren't you as good as he or she was?" Instead of these, it might help to more simply ask – when a child accomplishes good, "How did you do that?" And that causes them to think about how they were successful. Helping a child to *be* the best they can be is better than teaching a child that they *are* the best. So, some bleed over there with the idea of competition. Some people try to teach their children to be winners.... Well, I talk about it this way: If competition helps a person be the best they can be, then it's good. But, if it teaches them that their the best, then it can be bad – if it extends out beyond the skill they are best at. Now, just because Michael Jordan was the best at basketball in his generation, doesn't mean he's a superior human being. You know, I only get to seem on underwear commercials, but he doesn't seem to come across as the kind of person that thinks he's better than others.

I had a 38-year-old in my office some time back – married, mother of four – and she was undoubtedly a genius – perhaps even a bit on the savant side – with some social deficits, as well incredible academic ability. She was telling me how easy college was for her, and yet, on the other side, how hard some aspects of relationship are for her – so deflated in one, inflated about the other, but realistic and accepting of both. You know, when you think you're less than you are, you're not lined up with the truth. And when you think you're better than you are, you're not lined up with the truth. But when you know your strengths and weaknesses, then you're in line with the truth. And that's where help is found. She did the best she could academically – and there was the best, for all practical purposes, in her small sphere. But she also was aware of her social deficits and was doing the best she could there as well. And that's why she came for counseling.

Now, some people think the way to minimize the negatives of competition is to give everyone who participates an award. But I can tell you a story that really locked in, for me, how that works. Years ago, I was asked to put on a regional track meet. And it was in the northeast, so there were teams from all over – and this was a church-oriented thing, so congregations sent their

athletes – all over the northeast – you know, the big cities, as far east, I think, as Ohio. And we had blue for first, red for second, and white for third place ribbons. And it was decreed on high, from the central organization, that there would be a participation ribbon – and that was green. So, I think they wanted to make everybody *feel* good. But that isn't what happened. After the track meet was over, I was standing up in the bleachers – my wife was with me, as I recall – and I looked out at the field, and everyone was gone. It seemed we were the last to leave the field. And there was not a red, white or blue ribbon to be found anywhere, but scattered all over the infield and in the bleachers were green ribbons. It made me wonder if anybody took theirs home.

So the way to minimize the negatives of competition is to teach our children from the womb that they are loved as they are – win or lose. Giving a green ribbon isn't the way to accomplish that. Parents have to do it – and, also, other people in the congregation, or coaches. We need to accept people, whether they're winners or losers – and I don't mean that socially, but in their skill.

Now, I know a woman who's 28. She had a six-year-old daughter and an uncommitted, promiscuous partner. She was depressed, because she believed that she could never change and lacks the courage to leave her partner – from whom she could catch a disease – and start taking care of herself. And, as it is, she felt like a sex slave, except that she was the one keeping herself there – in slavery. When I talked to her, I learned that she didn't feel good enough, smart enough, courageous enough to do anything about her situation. She had never learned that she is okay as a human being and worthy of respect. And so, she was willing to accept a position of *dis*respect in a relationship. A person who has a healthy sense of self, without being self-centered, would take steps to improve their situation, because they would respect themselves and their child. After learning about her terrible, deficient childhood, I saw that her sense of self was really what was keeping her in that relationship. I have a strong belief that, if work at helping her feel more secure with herself, she's going to find acting on her own behalf will going to become much easier. And, as time went by, that became true.

So there's a little bit about what's going on with narcissism and self-centeredness and healthy sense of self. Now let's look at this through a biblical lens. There's a biblical principle that puts it all in focus for me. It's really not that complicated if you know this.

Let's look in Matthew 22:37. This is Jesus talking:

Matthew 22:37 – *And He said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”*

So there's the two parts of the Ten Commandments expressed in two. The first four commandments show us how to love God. And the last six show us how to love our neighbor as ourselves. Let's say it says, “Thou shall not steal.” Well, you wouldn't want someone to steal

from you, would you? So you wouldn't steal from anyone else, if you love your neighbor as your yourself.

To make this more clear. Why would we love our neighbors as much as we love ourselves? Well, because we love God and we love God's children – an extension of Him. So why would we love God? Well, in 1 John 4:19, John tells us:

1 John 4: 19 – *We love God [Him] because He first loved us.*

So we're just reflecting back the love that God gives to us. And we can't help but notice, as our nation gets further and further away from God, we have a hard time loving each other and ourselves. There isn't any reason for it – the way we look at it. And, if you go that direction, eventually, as I think it was Tolstoy that said, "Without God, all things are permissible." And that's where we're headed right now.

You know, there are some states right now where aided suicide is legal, because they're losing the realization that life is from God and that it is sacred. So there are no values there, except in the US there remains the last vestiges of Judeo-Christian values. And as we lose that, we become a nation that's increasingly self-centered. Just look at the political stage.

You know, I have a friend who is opposite of me in political orientation. We can talk about it without thinking the other person is an idiot or a scoundrel, because we *know* each other. We know that we are not idiots and scoundrels. We have respect for each other. But in most quarters, both sides think of the other as stupid, ignorant and evil. So sides have been drawn up. And we have large segments of the political spectrum saying, "You're bad. I'm good." Well, if you think about it, that is essence of narcissism, isn't it?

So what does God say about all this? Well, in Romans 3:9, Paul asked the this question:

Romans 3:9 – *What then? Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all. For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin, as it is written: "None is righteous, no, not even one.*

We could just as well say, "Are Republicans better off? or, any Democrats better off? No, they're all the same. We're all under sin. That's what matters to God. When this nation is gone, so will be all our political parties. They're nothing to God.

So, let's think about what that scripture means. If a person loves others as self, it has several meanings. If everyone has a healthy sense of self, they will work hard to take care of themselves and other people. This situation is called teamwork. And it's called being a responsible citizen, too. Everyone works to meet everyone's needs – not just their own and not just the needs of others – *everyone's*. Think of what our country could be like, if everybody in our country did

that. I know some people can contribute more than others, but, if everyone's doing their best to care of each other, think of what that could be like.

There's another thing to think about here, too. This concept of love your neighbor as yourself is actually a foundation for a biblical marriage. In Ephesians 5:25, Paul said:

Ephesians 5:25 – *Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her.*

V-28 – *In the same way, husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself.*

So what does a marriage that's run this way look like? Well, would a husband make a lot of unilateral decisions? or, would the wife? Or, would he ask his wife, or would she ask her husband, what's important to her or him, as well as to self? Well – just from the man's side – if he loves her as much as he loves himself, he would, wouldn't he? Because he would want to please her as much as he would want to please himself. He would say, "She and I are the same thing. We're one, not two. It's not me *and* my wife, but *us* – one team. Well, who wouldn't like to be in a relationship with that kind of leader?

I learned some years ago that at Southwest Airlines, every Wednesday – which is the heaviest travel day of year – all the executives at Southwest Airlines fly to some location and help load bags that morning. I'm sure there are some exceptions. Some people may not be fit enough to do that. But most of them do that. They want to get out there and show their employees that they're all on the same team working together. If you fly Southwest, you'll notice there is a distinct attitude present among the people that work there. They all want to help you. They're generally pretty nice folks to work with. I flew – I think it was American – one day. I call it the airline of surprise. "Oh! You have bags?!" "Oh! Your plane supposed to leave now?" They were surprised by everything that was supposed to happen.

So who wouldn't like to be in a relationship with the kind of leader that considers what you need and want just as important as what he wants? To answer that question, the person that wouldn't like to be in that kind of relationship is a narcissist. Their needs *always* come first and they don't care what you want. So they would want to be in charge – not be underneath that. Their needs come first. In God's system, everyone's needs get met, because of love. So, if you focus on that, and you don't even think about the other, things will go good for you.

Now, let's ask the question, "Is narcissism growing?" Is it fair to call an entire generation narcissistic? Well, I think a lot of bad things are happening in our society. And that's been prophesied, too. It's in 2 Timothy 3:1, where Paul said:

2 Timothy 3:1 – *But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. Why? Because people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful – ungrateful for things that they’ve been given – entitlement, in other words – unholy, heartless – without empathy – unappeasable, slanderous – you know, there are some people in our society today that no matter what you say, they’re not going to like it. You can see them at political scenes, too. Things that are going on now, in President’s Trump term, were approved of when Obama was doing them, but now they’re not. And the Republicans do exactly the same thing. It just goes back and forth. So, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power. Avoid such people.*

So this descriptions is a pretty good description of narcissism, as well as sociopathic and oppositional behavior. Christians, however, are supposed to love others as self, because God loves all of us. And we’re to follow suit. We’re a family. So we’re supposed to stay the course and set an example of God’s love in the world. And the worse it gets, the darker things become, the brighter the light of God living in us shines out to others.

Here are two things we can do to accomplish this. Number one, don’t accuse other people of being narcissistic. You might think it, but don’t say it out loud. Instead, work toward taking care of yourself, and then, third, taking care of others the same way we take care of ourselves. It’s simple, if we just do what God says. It might not get easier for them, but it’s sure going to get easier for us

Okay, that’s a wrap for today. But remember this, you are *not* narcissistic if you’re taking care of others as you take care of yourself.

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