

Question: It is difficult to be unselfish when everyone around you seems to only look out for themselves first. What would Jesus do?

Thankfully, there are many kind and thoughtful people in our world, but we are also plagued by a lot of selfishness. To illustrate this point, Dylan Selterman, a social psychology professor at the University of Maryland, offered his students an opportunity to earn extra points on their final online paper. They could choose to earn either 6 points or 2 points. However, there was a catch. If more than 10% of the class chose the 6 points, the opportunity would be withdrawn. No one would get extra points. Since the offer was begun in 2008, only one class has received extra points. Apparently, too many students are too selfish to consider what their peers may be thinking when they face the prospect of extra grade points. Such actions fit the dictionary definition of selfishness which is being “concerned excessively or exclusively with oneself: seeking or concentrating on one's own advantage, pleasure, or well-being without regard for others” (Miriam-Webster Dictionary). But selfishness is not always as advantageous as it may appear.

In contrast, the apostle Paul wrote to the Christians in Philippi: “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others” (Philippians 2:3-4 NIV). He pointed to the attitude and example of Christ Jesus who “did not consider equality with God something to be grasped” or something he was unwilling to give up for the sake of others. Christ left his position of divine authority to become a mere human. As a human, he became a servant who went so far as to unselfishly die for others (Philippians 2:5-7).

Jesus changed lives by teaching and modeling unselfishness and trust in God's justice. Of himself, Jesus said, “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). He taught that in the eternal Kingdom of God “many who are first will be last, and the last first” (Mark 10:31). The evening before Jesus was betrayed and crucified on a cross, he picked up a towel and basin of water and washed the feet of his disciples, including the feet of Judas whom he knew would soon betray him (John 13:1-30). Therefore, we should not be surprised that he told his followers, “If anyone would

come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9:23). What a blessed world this would be if everyone followed the example and teachings of Jesus on unselfishness!

How then do we live unselfishly in a self-centered world? We may have little control over the selfish behavior of others, but we can control our own actions and reactions to what others do. We can allow selfish conduct to irritate us so that we try to take revenge, or we can maintain self-control and demonstrate a clear spirit of unselfishness and calm faith in God who will ultimately see that justice prevails. The first alternative is rejected by biblical writers and is also selfish in nature. Jesus modeled the second reaction.

Although Satan continues to control much of our world, the reign of God has arrived and is marching forward. Those who would be the people of God must not be discouraged or overcome by the spirit of the world. Those who trust in Jesus and follow his example may face hardships; but by the power of his Spirit, they can shine the light of unselfishness in the midst of a dark world of selfishness.

Now, back to the choice of extra points given to students by the professor. One might think the students would have easily recognized the personal advantage of taking the two points instead of six. But selfish desires apparently dominated the reasoning of too many of them. Ask yourself, “What would I do in this situation? Why would I make this choice? What does this answer tell me about myself?”

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