

JESUS AND NARCISSUS

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The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted (Matthew 23:11-12).

I just finished a book about an epidemic spreading through America, and possibly around the world. It's not the swine flu that everyone's talking about. This is an epidemic that's not so widely discussed but could turn out to be more damaging in the long run. The book is called *The Narcissism Epidemic*, and as the title suggests, the authors claim that more and more people are showing signs of a kind of self-centeredness that threatens to undo us spiritually, socially, economically, and politically.*

You may know the ancient myth of Narcissus. Narcissus was the handsomest young man in the world. He was so good-looking that all the girls swooned over him, but he was not interested in any of them. The trail of broken hearts he left behind bothered him not at all. In fact, Narcissus wasn't interested in much of anything except himself. One day he bent down to get a drink, and when he saw his reflection in the water he was transfixed. He'd never seen anyone so beautiful. All he wanted to do was stare at the image. He wouldn't eat or drink or do anything else, until finally he wasted away and died. The nymphs came and carried his body away, and a flower sprang up in the place where he died, a flower called the "narcissus."

The authors of *The Narcissism Epidemic* are two young psychologists who study the impact of narcissism in the lives of individuals, but also the trends in narcissistic behavior as measured by psychological tests and other social indicators over the last three decades. The story they tell is fascinating and more than a little scary.

There is a clinical condition known as Narcissistic Personality Disorder that describes someone who has at least five of nine criteria, including long-term patterns of grandiosity, a lack of empathy for others, an exceptionally strong need to be admired, and some kind of impairment such as depression, failures at work, or very troubled close relationships. The authors, Jean Twenge and Keith Campbell, claim that 1 of 16 Americans may fit the clinical diagnosis at some point in their lives.

Less severe than the clinical condition, but much more common, are high scores on something called the Narcissistic Personality Inventory. People who score high have an inflated self-image: they think of themselves as smarter, better looking, more creative, and more successful than most people, when in fact they are about average. Because they think they are exceptional, narcissists believe they're entitled to more: fancier titles and higher status jobs, greater authority and admiration, more money and status symbols. One of the main traits of narcissistic people is that they're not very committed to relationships. Relationships are mostly about them: means to reinforce their inflated self-image, rather than opportunities for giving and receiving love. So when a friendship, or a romantic relationship, or a marriage no longer suits them, they move on to someone else who they think will satisfy their ego needs.

Most of us could probably name a few people who qualify as narcissists by these non-clinical standards. We won't do that just now, but we could. And that's part of the point. Narcissists are increasingly common. The Narcissistic Personality Inventory and similar tests have only been around since about 1980, but the trend is clear: scores are going up, and the slope of the curve has gotten steeper. It may not surprise you to hear that men

* Jean M. Twenge and W. Keith Campbell, *The Narcissism Epidemic: Living in the Age of Entitlement* (New York: Free Press, 2009).

score higher in narcissism than women on the average, but women – especially younger women – are closing the gap.

Drs. Twenge and Campbell have all kinds of interesting observations, but I'll just mention a few for now. One of their principal claims is that the self-esteem movement so prevalent in recent decades, especially in education, has reinforced some of the very problems it was meant to combat, including heightened aggression and materialism, lack of caring for others, and poor achievement in school and on the job.

Raising people's self-esteem by telling them how special they are was supposed to make everyone more confident so they would succeed. Of course people with very low self-esteem are not likely to do well, so improving their self-image is a good thing. But according to Twenge and Campbell, studies show that when average children and adults are showered with praise for routine achievements, or no achievement at all, the result is that they often do *worse* in school and on the job. That makes sense, doesn't it? If I think I'm smarter than I really am, why should I bother to study? If I'm already exceptional, why should I try to improve? If I think I know everything I need to know, why would I even want to acknowledge my mistakes, let alone learn from them?

A generation of children that got trophies just for showing up on the soccer team, and were praised as though they were Mozart when they learned to play an instrument, might feel entitled to praise and rewards, rather than having to earn them. In fact there's evidence that this is exactly what's happening in America. During the very decades when our educational system was stressing self-esteem to improve performance, American students fell behind those from other countries in math and science, for example. The ethnic group with the *lowest* self-esteem scores in our country, Asian Americans, actually has the *highest* levels of academic achievement, on the average. As Twenge and Campbell put it, in some areas "We're not number one, but we're number one in *thinking* we are number one."

Why should we care about all this? There are lots of reasons.

For one thing, the more narcissistic we become, the less capable we are of building and sustaining committed relationships, especially marriage and family. The tragedy is that *other* people typically suffer from the narcissist's behavior – the narcissist, being self-absorbed, doesn't know or care how much he hurts others. Abandoned spouses struggle to make ends meet and raise their children alone, while narcissists move in and out of their lives when it's convenient, all the while imagining they are a good father or a good mother, just because they show up once in a while. The stresses of family dynamics play out in all sorts of ways, and often get passed on to the next generation, as young spouses and parents are shaped by the models they grew up with.

Society as a whole pays some of the costs of narcissists' behavior, by picking up the pieces for dysfunctional families. But narcissism affects society directly too. People who look out for themselves without much regard for others contribute little to the community – though they may volunteer a bit now and then if it makes them look good. Data show that people today give less money to church and charitable causes as a proportion of their income, volunteer less time, and participate less in civic affairs than they did a generation ago. Harvard political scientist Robert Putnam says that the Baby Boomers are worse than their parents' generation in this regard.[†] It's too early to tell how the next generation will do, though many college students today describe their own generation as focused on themselves, but they say that's all right because it's what you have to do to get ahead.

[†]Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

Twenge and Campbell offer theories about what's creating this epidemic of narcissism, including a focus on self-admiration, excessively child-centered parenting, the glorification of celebrity, the enormous attention-getting possibilities of the Internet (with Facebook, MySpace, etc.), and irresponsibly easy credit from both government and the private sector. A case could be made that our current economic crisis is due largely to greed and an inflated sense of entitlement – hallmarks of the narcissistic personality.

Twenge and Campbell describe the incentives that drive all this in exactly the way we've said why sin is so popular: the benefits come right away, while the costs come later, or someone else bears the costs. The psychologists point out that a disease that killed its host too quickly would not spread very far. Viruses and bad behavior have this in common: they spread because the consequences lag so far behind the causes.

None of this bodes well for a free and democratic society. When our founders drafted the Constitution they pointed out that government by the people will only work as long as citizens possess a degree of virtue: that is, as long as they look beyond their immediate self-interest to the good of society. If people don't do that, Madison and Jefferson and Washington and Franklin all agreed, the result will be chaos or anarchy; and then people will cry out for kings or dictators to quell the chaos. The founders thought that was the lesson of history, and they were right.

So what are we as Christians to make of all of this? If the thesis of *The Narcissism Epidemic* is anywhere near the truth, our country is in trouble at every level, for essentially moral and spiritual reasons. But that's where the church comes in.

Contrast the spirit of narcissism with the spirit of Jesus. Narcissism says, "It's all about you"; Christianity says, "Love God and love your neighbor as yourself." Narcissism says, "Look out for Number One"; Christianity says, "Do to others what you would have others do to you." Narcissism says, "Run hard to win the rat race"; Christianity says, "But even if you win the rat race, you're still a rat." Narcissism says, "Whoever dies with the most toys wins"; Christianity says, "Whoever dies with the most toys is still dead, and answers to God, and then what?" Narcissism says, "Promote yourself to get ahead"; Christianity says, "All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted."

Now you might think that's all well and good, but surely narcissists accomplish things because of their drive, while humble people fall behind. But just the opposite is often true. Jim Collins, in his influential management book *Good to Great*, says that the most successful leaders tend to be humble. They succeed because they surround themselves with other competent people instead of being threatened by them; they learn from their mistakes instead of being unteachable; and they work well with others because they're considerate of other people. That's exactly the opposite of narcissism, and it's completely consistent with biblical principles. The great leader of the ancient Israelites was Moses, who stood up to Pharaoh and led the people out of slavery into the promised land. But the Bible says, "Moses was very humble, more so than anyone else on the face of the earth." Humble people can be led by God, narcissists can be led only by themselves. Which ones do you suppose are more likely to succeed?

One of the funniest, and dumbest, quotations in *The Narcissism Epidemic* was from a well-known motivational speaker who said, "The best thing about Jesus Christ was that he had a mom who thought he was the son of God." There's the triumph of puffery over substance – as though, if we just flattered our children enough, they could become the second person of the Trinity.

We cannot be full of God if we're already full of ourselves. Someone has said that the smallest package in the world is a person all wrapped up in himself. We have to decide who we're going to be, and who we're going to raise our children to be. Will we follow Narcissus on the self-absorbed path to destruction, or will we be filled

with the Spirit of Jesus, who brings us life? Everything from the state of our souls to the state of society hangs on whose spirit we seek.