



It's all about **ME!**

In the first century A.D. the apostle Paul predicted that in the last days *"people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive ... ungrateful, unholy, heartless ... without self-control ... reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God ..."* (2 Timothy 3:2-4).

We are still living in the last days.

Jean Twenge's five-year-old daughter came home from kindergarten last month and showed her mother the worksheet she'd been busy with. On the front of the paper the children had been told to draw a picture of themselves to illustrate the words "I'm very happy to be me." But that was not all: on the other side were the words to the "Special" song, which the kindergarten children sing to the tune *Frère Jacques*. The words go like this: "I am special, I am special. Look at me! Look at me!"

That was San Diego, California. So far, so American. But what about us? This week, the *New Zealand Listener* magazine's cover story sounded an alarm. "It's all about Me" is not a good slogan, warns journalist Joanne Black. Societies that teach their children to think they're the best thing since sliced bread may be in for deep trouble. Joanne's investigation begins with Jean Twenge's story, but moves on to her book, and the wider issues it raises. Twenge, apart from being a mother, is Associate Professor of Psychology at San Diego State University, and also a world-acclaimed researcher and author on the subject of narcissism. Twenge's central thesis is that because so many children, young people and adults are being urged to focus on themselves and their own "entitlement", society itself is at risk. Marriage breakdown and the current mortgage crisis are but two evidences of a self-absorbed culture out of control.¹ These trends, Joanne Black notes, are common to many western societies.

In the U.K., Samantha Brick's recent *Daily Mail* article on why women hate her "for being beautiful" stirred a furore and incited over 5000 comments.² Likewise, when British employment minister Chris Grayling asked employers to consider hiring the local "surly young man in a hoodie" in preference to the enterprising Eastern European with five years' experience it prompted the indignant response that if young Brits think they're so entitled to express their "Authentic Self" that they won't even take their hoodies off for an interview they shouldn't be surprised that employers "feel similarly entitled to hire the Hungarian in a suit, instead."

There is much in Jean's thesis that Joanne thinks rings true in New Zealand. Take marriage breakdown, for instance. In 1950 U.S. births to unmarried mothers were 5% of the total – now they are 40%. The acceptance is growing that people won't get married – they just "hook up" temporarily. There is no commitment, nothing long term. A major contributor is the habit "of thinking your personal happiness and desires are more important than anyone else's." How can anyone maintain a strong relationship with another person acting on the basis of that belief?

Some people argue that self-belief is good for academic achievement and career prospects. Confident people take risks and go places. Jean doesn't agree. Apparently self-esteem is measurable – and Asian-American children have the lowest self-esteem – yet they do best in school. Likewise with employment – there is no positive correlation between self-esteem and success at work. Jean suggested to Joanne that the same may well be the case in New Zealand. Probably it is.

What is narcissism?

But let's just clarify what it is that Jean and the other psychologists Joanne quotes – including New Zealand academics Marc Wilson (Victoria) and Chris Sibley (Auckland) – call “narcissism”. According to them being happy with yourself isn't so much of a problem. It *is* a problem, though, when it gets out of control to the point that you think you're much better than others – better looking, more intelligent, more popular, and so on. But even worse is when it leads you to think that if things don't work out then it's someone else's fault – you've been misunderstood. A further problem is that narcissists seem unable to be empathetic. They mainly think about themselves and how others see them. Obviously, this trend is a continuum – you can be more or less narcissistic; and thus more or less a problem to yourself and others. Similarly, some cultures are more or less narcissistic – you can be a whole lot more narcissistic as an individual and not be perceived so in, say, the U.S., than you can get away with being in, say, Japan.

The psychologists are pretty interested in what narcissists do on the social media. It's early days yet, of course, but they suspect that the use of Facebook and other media will have a reinforcing effect. Narcissistic people will “Tweet” (microblog) or update their “status” and photos to promote themselves – to let everyone know “how flash they are.” Obviously, it's important that everyone knows you have a lot of “friends” – and if I have 800, that surely shows I'm special. (To be honest, I've often wondered if Facebook pages and some blogs are little more than an opportunity for exhibitionism. The sort of trivia that people want to tell everyone they're up to seems so uninteresting to anyone but the writer. “Here I am sitting under a tree and the air is sooooo cool. I'm thinking...” You know what I mean?)

The most serious problems arise when narcissists are thwarted by others; and not given the ego-boosting treatment they are in the habit of receiving from parents, teachers and others. Perhaps someone reaches their forties or fifties even and their spouse gets tired of being a sycophant, tired of building them up, even propping them up – tired of being a supporting act or chorus of praise. What then? Most close-up personal relationships can't stand that sort of strain – we are sinners, after all. Sooner or later there will be a shock; they may get told some home truths. Narcissists are frequently unable to take it. (They've been cocooned in unreality all their lives, some of them). Things can occasionally get nasty – take the recent cases of Anders Breivik (Norwegian mass-murderer), or Clayton Weatherston (Otago university lecturer and killer of Sophie Elliott). These are extreme examples, but we all probably know of people who had high views of themselves, couldn't take criticism, and “threw the toys out of the cot” when things didn't go their way.

By now you're probably wondering why on earth we should need psychologists building careers on what is an obvious problem. Aren't we just dealing with plain old self-centredness? Yes! Good on Joanne the journalist and three cheers for Jean the mother. (She at least phoned the kindergarten teacher and suggested the “Special” song was a mistake.) But the thing is, we're also dealing here with decades of deliberate – even institutionalised – encouragement of this self-centredness. How many years have we heard people talking about the “problem” of low self-esteem? Or the lack of self-worth? Or the need to encourage children's self-expression? How long have parents been puzzling over school reports that never say anything negative about a child's performance? Or grades that never hit any clear failure-level? How long have employers been lumbered with loads of self-congratulatory CVs? The self-esteem movement has worked a revolution in our culture's thinking about itself. And we're reaping the whirlwind in adults who can't cope with criticism, let alone failure. Paul's words in 2 Timothy about what characterises the people of the last days are deadly accurate.

A Christian response

How should Christians respond to the problem? What should we say to the narcissists we meet? The first thing I think we need to do is be sure in our own minds that self-love, self-praise and self-absorption are all wrong. Nowhere does the Bible commend such a view of ourselves. In fact, throughout, the Scriptures teach that we should not be “*lovers of self*”, that we should let others praise us and not our own lips, and that we should not think more highly of ourselves than we

ought. This used to be the common view of our culture. In fact, while discussing this subject with me, my mother recalled that when she was at school (the 1940s) they were told that “self-praise is no recommendation at all.” Let all writers of CVs take note! But not all Christians are quite certain of this, and many of us, not having thought the issue through at a principial level, flirt unwittingly with self-esteem pop-psychology. We need to be clear that it is part and parcel of the sinful, natural man’s reflexes to love himself. Sinners will do this by nature. We need to realise that it is something to be rescued from – not encouraged.³

What should we say to someone floundering in the mire of self-centredness? The person who’s finally recognised, post-university drop-out, post-job-loss, or post-marriage-failure, that they have a problem? That some thing has gone wrong (though probably, in their mind, it is someone else’s fault)? It is at this stage that you might be having a conversation with an unbeliever, who’s unhappy, a bit desperate perhaps, and God puts her in your path somehow. What do you say to her?

Obviously, much depends on the specifics of her situation and your knowledge of it, but it seems to me there are several important and helpful things to convey along the way. Above all, her troubles are an opportunity for her to hear the gospel of Christ from you. While it may not be what she wants to hear – or be willing to accept right away – we all need to know that none of us are as great as we think. In fact, the truth be known, we’re all a lot worse than we think! And unless a person realises that, she’s not going to respond to the only help there is – salvation from that condition by Christ’s work on the cross. But we should explain this humbly – with the admission we ourselves fall short, every one of us. No matter how “together”, admired, cool, calm and collected or successful you may seem, you, too, are a sinner. And we should be patient. Without doubt it takes a lot of talking, thinking and reflecting for a person who’s been fed a diet of “you are special” to realise she is not.

But, of course – and here is good news, after all – there is a biblical sense in which each saved sinner is special. Think of the parable of the lost sheep. Every saved sinner can think of herself as a sheep sought – and found – and thus begin to build a proper, biblical, identity of “specialness”. Jesus really did die for *my* sins. But that very fact tells us that my life, from now on, is not all about me at all; it’s all about Jesus, and denying myself to follow him.

Our aim? Friends who give up singing the “Special” song and sing “Amazing Grace” instead.

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Notes

¹ Joanne Black, “It’s all about ME: The rise of narcissism is affecting us all – and not always in a good way”, *New Zealand Listener*, May 19-25, 2012; pp. 16-21. Twenge has co-written her book, *The Narcissism Epidemic* (Free Press, 2010), with Keith Campbell.

² <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-2124246/Samantha-Brick-downsides-looking-pretty-Why-women-hate-beautiful.html>

³ If you are unsure about the biblical truth concerning sin, especially where it relates to love of self, it would be helpful to read the Puritans. Their humble realism about their own sin greatly impressed me in my university years, when I had the privilege of reading a good number of their books. You could start with John Owen on *Sin and Temptation*, or such books as Jeremiah Burroughs’s *Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment*.