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THE REIGN OF NARCISSUS

In Greek mythology there is a story about a young man by the name of Narcissus. Narcissus was the handsomest man that ever lived. Women fell in love with him hand over foot, but he ignored them all. He just spent all his time wandering alone in the woods. One day as he was walking in the woods he came to a lake, and as he bent down to get a drink he saw his face reflected in the water for the first time. When he saw the reflection of his handsome face, he immediately fell in love with it. Unable to tear himself away, he just pined away gazing at his own reflection until at last he died. His body was never found but in the place where he died a small flower grew which bears his name to this very day

Like all fables, the story of Narcissus contains a psychological truth. That truth is that people who become self-focused and self-absorbed end up isolating themselves from the rest of humanity. God designed us to love and serve other people, not to love and serve ourselves, and when we reverse that order and spend most of our time and energy on ourselves, we begin to wither away, emotionally and spiritually. Over time, Narcissus' name was appropriated to describe people who are like this; they are said to be "narcissistic." Now it's important to understand that narcissism doesn't necessarily imply a positive view of one's self; a person can sink into self-loathing just like he can sink into self-admiration. In either case, the person collapses into himself, becomes isolated, and begins to die. It was this thought that moved Luther to write that sin was mostly a matter of "*turning in on one's self.*"

Is 65:1-3a
pg 4
The Bible describes a narcissistic state of mind in today's *Old Testament* lesson. Through the prophet Isaiah the Lord says, "*All day long I have held out my hands to an obstinate people, who walk in ways not good, **pursuing their own imagination...***" Though the Lord was speaking those words to 7th-century B.C. Israelites, he could well have been speaking them to 21st-century Americans, because our society has become passionately narcissistic. There are major industries that thrive on narcissism—the cosmetics industry,

the fashion industry, the entertainment industry. All of these industries market their wares to narcissism, because narcissism is the mother of vanity and the child of pride. And as we know, pride always goeth before the fall.

Consider the cosmetics industry, for example. Did you know that cosmetics are the top profit producer in a department store? That's why it's the first department you encounter when you enter a department store. Young girls use cosmetics so they can look like grown women. Then grown women use cosmetics so they can look like young girls. I remember hearing a sermon once about how each new wrinkle in a person's face was a love letter from God, telling that person that they were drawing closer and closer to being with Him in heaven. Try selling a product with THAT message! By the way, do you know where the word "cosmetics" comes from? It comes from the Greek word *κοσμος*, which meant "earth" or, in this case, "dirt." That's because the first cosmetics were made out of various kinds of dirt—especially clay. So I guess you could say that the same mothers who are admonishing their children to wash the dirt off their faces are, in many cases, putting dirt on their faces every morning.

Men are equally prone to narcissism. The man who takes pride in his successful career, his accumulated wealth or his majestic house is indulging in narcissism. And when it comes to his relationship with women, he is at least as susceptible to vanity. I'm pretty sure that if a woman hears a man tell her that she is the most beautiful woman in the world, she'll take the compliment with a grain of salt. Maybe a lump. But if a woman tells a guy he's the handsomest man she ever saw—he'll seriously consider the possibility that she might be right. So who is more vain?

The automobile industry also plays to narcissism. A consultant to Ford Motors once said, "*People don't drive cars, they wear them.*" In other words, we not only buy our cars for functional reasons; we buy them to make statements about ourselves. "*See my Mercedes? That means I'm rich!*" "*See my VW? That means I'm thrifty.*" "*See my Cooper? That means I have a deathwish!*" "*See my Viper...*" Oh never mind. Actually, it was partly due to that quote that I finally decided that I was a little old to be wearing a Viper.

But, someone will say, *"What's wrong with all this? Isn't it all just part of living the good life to have and enjoy all these things?"* Well, it depends on how you define "the good life." Good for who? Good for what? The truth is, the old *"I'm worth it"* adage, or *"Loving Yourself is the Greatest Love of All"* philosophy is as old as Narcissus himself and just as self-destructive. This "self" that we are so driven to please turns out to be a voracious and insatiable idol. Once you make your SELF the one you want to please most, you will find it increasingly difficult to do so, because he will want—actually he will demand—more and more as you go along. Paul speaks of people like this who live only to please their own appetites and desires, saying: *"Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame."* Not good for them. Not good for anything.

Phil 3:19

That's why the Bible teaches us that our selves are not the solution; our "selves" are the problem. Consider Solomon. When he ascended to his throne he was a mere child, and when God asked him what he wanted in the way of a blessing he asked God only to give him wisdom so that he might govern his people justly. God was so pleased with Solomon's prayer, that he blessed him as no king before him had ever been blessed. But as the years of his reign wore on Solomon drifted away from God and began seeking worldly pleasures and glory for himself. He built a grand temple for God, but he built an even larger palace for himself. He ended up in a state of what nowadays we would call depression, and as he looked back on his life he wrote these words; *"Vanity, vanity, all is vanity...I got me servants and maidens and gathered unto myself also silver and gold...and all the delights of the sons of men. Whatsoever mine eyes desired I kept not from them, I withheld not my heart from any joy...."* *"Then I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought and, behold, all was vanity and vexation of spirit, and there was no profit under the sun...Therefore I hated life...for everything is meaningless"* God will glorify the man who says, *"To God be the glory,"* but the man who says, *"To me be the glory"* He will turn over to himSELF. And remember, the self is an insatiable idol.

Ecclesiastes
2:

Maybe this puts a new light on Jesus' words: *"If any man would come after me he must deny himSELF daily, take up his cross and follow me."* Our instinctive response to the idea of self-denial is negative; it seems like we are rejecting that very part of us that is most precious

LK 9:23

to us. But that instinctive response is founded on the assumption that our natural “selves” are precious treasures that are to be protected and glorified at all costs. And we know from the Scriptures AND from experience that that is not the case. Our natural “self” is not a precious treasure; it is a wicked and demanding tyrant who wants to turn us into slaves to our appetites and our vanity. Our real treasure is what Paul calls our “new man,” the Spirit-created child of God who came to life in us at our baptism. This new creation in us, whom some have called our “better angel,” delights in God’s Word and Spirit and longs to love serve Him and love him and along with our neighbor—rather than ourselves. This is the one whom we should strive to feed and nourish and honor. And the way we do this, apart from using the means of grace which God has given us, is by denying our old self, whom Paul calls our “flesh” or “the sin that lives in our members,” and striving to love and serve our neighbors instead of our SELVES. This is the yoke or burden which Jesus describes as easy and light, once we have taken it up.

In the 8th Chapter of the Gospel of Luke, Jesus crosses the Sea of Galilee to the land of the Gerarenes where he encounters a demon-possessed man. It may seem odd to say, but I think it very possible that this Gedarene demoniac was a victim of narcissism. He shows all the hallmarks of the disease: though his friends tried to keep him under guard to protect him from hurting himself, he kept breaking his chains and fleeing to “solitary places.” He ended up living by himself in a tomb. His demon may well have been the demon of self-obsession or narcissism which was taking him on a train-ride to hell. When our selves become the main focus of our lives we have consigned ourselves to a vicious tyrant, not a grateful recipient of our love. In effect, we have fallen in love with self-destruction and death.

But the good news is that Jesus came into the world to offer us a new and different kind of life, a life filled with love of God and our neighbor, rather than slavery to our selves. If we will deny ourselves and take up the cross of brotherly love, we will find that the yoke is easy and the burden is light.

May God help us all accept this precious gift. Amen.

Isaiah 65:1 - 3a ¹“I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me; I was found by those who did not seek me. To a nation that did not call on my name, I said, ‘Here am I, here am I.’
² All day long I have held out my hands to an obstinate people, who walk in ways not good, pursuing their own imaginations — ³a people who continually provoke me to my very face, offering sacrifices in gardens and burning incense on altars of brick;