

Is Self-Care Selfish?

By Jarett Hall

I bolted to the door as soon as the professor dismissed us. We had just finished an hour of trauma-focused classwork by discussing and exploring our own past traumatic episodes from childhood. All that was on my mind as I headed toward my car was, “Where can I get the biggest, unhealthiest hamburger?” I was craving comfort food. I needed fries. On my way, I couldn’t help but ask myself what was driving this especially strong yearning for grease and calories? Why this sudden urge to eat my emotions? If I were honest, I was craving the dopamine hit that comes from such tasty indulgences.

As I drove to the closest artisanal burger joint, I felt a sort of out-of-body experience. I was simultaneously witnessing these cravings pull at my cognitive faculties and whisper sweet promises that this was the most rational and logical path for me to tread down. But also, another part of me knew that I was straying from a hard-fought diet of healthy eating over the last year. Why now? Maybe these urgings were completely unrelated to my weight goals and had more to do with the content of the previous class.

What was the best way for me to navigate the conflicting desires wrestling within me at the moment? I settled on a spicy, black bean burger and a side of tater tots. But I walked away from the lunch ruminating on the complex mosaic of interconnected dynamics at play within me. **Just the hour I spent sharing and processing childhood hurts with a classmate had awoken biological, relational, cognitive, spiritual, and emotional realities within me.** Like a spider’s web, when my experience plucked one of those foundational strands, then all of them rang with a resounding chord.

Paul draws on a similar metaphor when describing the saints as Christ’s body, “For the body does not consist of one member but of many” (1 Co 12:14). Then in v. 26, he ties us together with the reminder that “If one member suffers, all suffer together.” What plays out on the larger scale of our

community represents the microcosm of our internal reality. Scripture refers to this as our heart, which in ancient times referred to the seat of our personality, intellect, memory, emotions, and will.

How many of our life choices are the reactive impulses of deeper forces at work within us? Formed and molded over our lifetime, these entrenched responses feel natural and as much a part of us as our physical body. Tuning in, becoming aware of, and taking note of them is the first step to a healthy paradigm for self-care. Since there are many different dynamics at work within us simultaneously, our response to the varying needs we have may differ with growing seasons or particular occasions in life.

From the outset of this question, “Is self-care selfish?” one should be careful not to confuse total depravity with utter depravity. When we declare people as “totally” sinful, then we are signifying the extent to which sin has warped and broken humanity within God’s image. There does not exist a single aspect of our being untouched by sin’s destructive reach. However, through God’s common grace, it also does not mean that we are as evil as we could be. Shards, though now cracked and broken, yet remain of the once good likeness in which God fashioned us.

I mention this because if one were to argue that self-care was inherently selfish, they would need to employ the same over-simplification and over-generalization as above. Can certain forms or definitions of self-care be selfish? Absolutely! Does it always have to be? Of course not! I think a more critical question we should be asking ourselves, especially those of us in ministry, would be, “Is self-care necessary?” I am going to argue that it is. Please read ahead, knowing that I would like to demonstrate that healthy, balanced “self-care” is both biblically mandated and engrained within the foundation of our make-up.

The triune God, who is in a perfect relationship within Himself, created us as relational beings to be in relationship with Him, others, and

ourselves. The topic of relationship with Him and others should be quite clear to us. But when I say that we are in relationship with ourselves, I am referring to the conclusions we've come to about who we are. I am referring to our self-understanding of our strengths, weaknesses, value, our similarities and differences with others, our fears, joys, hopes, and desires. I mean our self-critiques, "Why do I always do that?" Why can't I just do or say this? Why do I always have to respond like this? I am speaking of our current beliefs and estimations of ourselves.

Usually, these are the messages that play on repeat in our head. Again, these voices may have been with us for so long that they hardly register outside our conscious thoughts. In psychology, it is referred to as self-talk. Author Paul Tripp states it this way:

*"No one is more influential in your life than you are, because no one talks to you more than you do.' Whether you realize it or not, you are in an unending conversation with yourself, and the things you say to you about you are formative of the way that you live. You are constantly talking to yourself about your identity, your spirituality, your functionality, your emotionality, your mentality, your personality, your relationships, etc. You are constantly preaching to yourself some kind of gospel. You preach to yourself an anti-gospel of your own righteousness, power, and wisdom, or you preach to yourself the true gospel of deep spiritual need and sufficient grace. You preach to yourself an anti-gospel of aloneness and inability, or you preach to yourself the true gospel of the presence, provisions, and power of an ever-present Christ."*¹

The psalmist displays this in Psalm 42 when he asks, "Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? (v. 5)." We, the reader, are invited in to overhear this intimate conversation he is having within himself. He is exercising a healthy and balanced understanding of self-care by recognizing that a part of him is suffering, which affects all of him. He also demonstrates the right response: hope in God. Often, when we are not practicing the necessary intentionality to check-in with ourselves, then the messages or dialogue can tend toward isolation, vengeance, self-reliance, or self-pity.

Try this the next time you are brushing your teeth or driving down the road, and your mind is replaying that argument you last had. The one where you substitute in "what you should have said" or you imagine their face when you said just the right thing or got in that zinger. In those moments, how wholesome, faith-driven, and Christ-centered is the conversation? Do you remind yourself of your need? Do you point yourself once again to the beauty and practicality of God's grace? Do you tell yourself to move towards others in forgiveness? Or are you scheming up ways to get even? Do your words stimulate faith, hope, and courage? Or does your talk provoke doubt, discouragement, and fear? Do you remind yourself that God is near, or do you reason within yourself that, given your circumstances, he must be distant?

In Romans 7, Paul illustrates this same form of tuning in to the battle unfolding within his soul. Perched from the vantage point of his "inner being," he looks out bearing witness that some of his desires are good, but are often frustrated by sinful strategies at reaching them (v.15).

Christ voices an inner turmoil in Luke 12:50, “I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how I am distressed until it is accomplished!” (my translation). The same word translated for distressed, Paul uses in Philippians 1:23 to describe his emotional conflict between staying in earthly ministry and leaving to be with the Lord. In other contexts, this word refers to the intense pressure one feels from either something externally physical or spiritual, which then becomes overwhelming. In the garden of Gethsemane, we see how this internal turmoil took a physical toll on Jesus’ body (Luke 22:44).

In other places, Jesus tires and rests (Matthew 14:13, Mark 6:31, Luke 5:16, John 6:15). He was aware of the effects that his spiritual responsibility had on him. He knew the emotional limits that his body could withstand. He did not view his withdrawal as selfish, but rather necessary to continue ministering. My overall intention here is to highlight the wisdom and pattern of tuning in and taking note of the state of our internal realities. You cannot address what you are not aware of. Only after we have done so can we have any hope in making intentional and appropriate responses.

If the first step to balanced self-care is awareness, then the second lies in our reactions

to observed needs, deficiencies, emergencies, injuries, distresses, and abuses. What is my response to what I witness happening in me? If a lifeguard has a broken arm, should she still sit up in the tower and pretend before all the beachgoers that she can be counted on in an emergency? The appropriate response would be to get the help and care she needs to heal. So too, in ministry and life, ignoring our needs hurts us and others. “Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers.” (1 Tim. 4:16).

I would wager a guess, though, that it is our responses which have left some suspect to the term “self-care.” There are plenty of activities that we may misrepresent as self-care, which are, in reality, excuses for shirking off responsibility or avoiding the deeper issue. Was I wrong for eating something fried in response to an emotionally heavy class assignment? No; however, had my response been to get smashing drunk, then I would have chosen a destructive and unhealthy escape. Here is where we must resist the rigid, all-or-nothing mentality that says, “Since self-care can be abused, it is necessarily all evil and must be avoided.”



Healthy and balanced self-care is not having a cookie-cutter, predetermined answer for every circumstance.

Rather, it is in the careful weighing of a particular situation and responding in wisdom (James 3:17). For us in ministry, we spend our time focused on “spiritual things,” like prayer, scripture, encouraging one another, preaching or teaching, fasting, sharing the gospel with others, etc. Since this is the lens through which we are most equipped to view the world, it might be tempting to reach first to those graces when responding. And since we are holistic beings, there is a spiritual aspect to even the most mundane areas of our experience.

To be sure, our spiritual exercises and disciplines should be such ready tools that we reach for them without hesitation. However, we should not do so at the neglect of our whole being. We are not just spirits. Neither are we “brains on a stick,” as James K. A. Smith likes to remind us.² We are more than the products of neurological firings or learned behaviors. As stated earlier, we are a complex mosaic of interconnected dynamics embodied within a heart, soul, mind, and body.

When Paul is addressing the Corinthian’s abuse of the Lord’s Supper, he identifies the spiritual, ethical, and relational aspects of their sin. But he also offers a very practical and physical option to aid in their response: eat at home, so they do not show up hungry (1 Cor. 11:34). Also, in 1 Kings 19, Elijah is at the end of his rope. He is so disappointed, tired, afraid, and feeling defeated that he begs God to take his life. Instead, God sends him an angel to bake him a meal (twice!) to eat, sleep, and rest.

Fasting is a wonderful example of a spiritual discipline that reconnects us to our bodies and our physical dependency on God. But if I am honest, I become pretty grumpy when I fast. The lack of food makes me more aware of my impatience. The same happens when I need sleep. These are not excuses for squirming out of responsibility when I lose my temper, but I also cannot deny the connection that a proper diet and healthy sleep patterns have on my spiritual well-being. What if the reason I am not sleeping is that I have a loved one in the hospital or a global pandemic has left me isolated in quarantine? Now a biological, emotional, and spiritual need has coalesced into what

could be a downward spiral.

I give these examples because our responses will need to be as multifaceted as the needs and as unique as we are. I find a lot of mental, physical, and spiritual clarity when I am running through the mountains on a trail. To my wife, this same exercise would sound like torture. Some people need to clean their house or apartment because the clutter or mess creates a sense of anxiety, and the orderliness creates momentum to make further decisions. Some people need a structured time of journaling to externalize their internal experience. Some people need to write out their prayers, like in the psalms.

The psalms are a wonderful example of God’s people wrestling with complex emotions and situations.

They bear witness to the Holy Spirit’s invitation for us to join in with them and acknowledge when we are depressed, overjoyed, anxious, fearful, content, angry, worshipful, lonely, etc. Some people need a power nap. Some people need to meditate or exercise. Some simply need to hang out or play with others (not work or make stressful decisions). Some people need to play a musical instrument. Most of us need to turn off our phones for a bit. Perhaps an overburdened leader needs to volunteer somewhere they can serve without having to make all the decisions. The list can go on.

A common thread that flows through many self-care responses is the intentional time set apart to either reflect or regulate from an imbalance we have observed in another aspect of our life. The goal is to provide adequate space and time for you to realign one or many sources of stress or deficiencies so that you might return and bring your whole self to bear in your life, ministry, and relationships. We observe a similar rhythm of work and rest in the Sabbath. Stepping away from certain responsibilities and ministry is an act of faith that our life is not our own, but belongs to God.

To conclude, I would like to address two other objections. First, self-care is not an excuse to avoid legitimate responsibilities. It is not validation for going on a cruise once a month. If you notice that you have a strong desire not to do your work, proper self-care will provide the space to delve into the why. Is there a toxic relationship that you need to address? Are you genuinely over-

worked and need to remove certain tasks from your role? Or do you need to consider seriously stepping back altogether? Perhaps you need to re-evaluate your personal time? Especially as more of us are working virtually, are you “leaving the office” in the evenings? Are there factors in your life outside of work that influences your concentration?

If you or someone you trust has concerns about what you are labeling as self-care, then it is okay to examine the legitimacy of the claim. If you determine that your motivation is less about an intentional time of restoration and more about escaping, then you will want to reach out for help. Self-care is not about doing life on your own. Inappropriate sexual relationships, process addictions, like pornography, gambling, shopping, gaming (even food and exercise), or substances like alcohol and tobacco, are ways to escape and cope in isolation. Please reach out for help; it is available.

Your Member Care team is here for you.

Second, there exists false piety that tries to ignore the self altogether. Though this is a topic that we do not have much space for here, some would confuse self-care with prioritizing self over others. Biblical self-denial is not ignoring your physical and emotional needs. Just as we are to be in a right relationship with God and others, we must also have a right relationship with ourselves. If I ignore my own needs, then I will downplay the needs of others. Or at best, I will be like the lifeguard who’s trying to swim with one arm and barely keeping my head above water. To love God, but hate your neighbor, shows an imbalance and a lack of love for both (Mark 7:5-13, 1 John 4:20). Scripture repeatedly warns against our tendency to love ourselves more than others (Phil. 2:4, 2 Tim. 3:2, Ro. 2:8). But alternatively, the Bible does not promote self-hatred. It is instead tempering our default propensity toward self and balancing it with our love for God and others.

As Augustine argues, to love God is to offer yourself the best possible thing to love; therefore, God reorders our love by his commandment to love Him.³

We are not to be “in love” with ourselves, but we do show love and kindness to ourselves in believing and affirming what the Gospel has to say about us. We can forgive ourselves because God in Christ

has forgiven us. We can be loving, joyful, peaceful, patient, kind, good, and gentle towards ourselves because the Spirit bears those fruits in our hearts.

Finally, self-care is not about placing our ultimate hope in this life or ourselves. It is not about trying to distract yourself from your problems, which you can do just as easily with more and more ministry. Instead, it results from stewarding the precious gift God has placed within our command (Gal. 5:5). It is the active and intentional presence of mind for our here and now. It is the tuning-in and listening to our souls so that we can respond appropriately. Like the parable of the talents, we are not to bury our investments in the ground. But as stewards, we are to cultivate and flourish the life and soul that we’ve been entrusted with (Proverbs 19:8, 24:13-14).

¹ Tripp, Paul David. Dangerous Calling: Confronting the Unique Challenges of Pastoral Ministry (pp. 21-22). Crossway. Kindle Edition.

² “In ways that are more “modern” than biblical, we have been taught to assume that human beings are fundamentally thinking things. While we might never have read—or even heard of—seventeenth-century French philosopher René Descartes, many of us unwittingly share his definition of the essence of the human person as *res cogitans*, a “thinking thing.” Like Descartes, we view our bodies as (at best!) extraneous, temporary vehicles for trucking around our souls or “minds,” which are where all the real action takes place. In other words, we imagine human beings as giant bobblehead dolls: with humungous heads and itty-bitty, unimportant bodies. It’s the mind that we picture as “mission control” of the human person; it’s thinking that defines who we are. “You are what you think” is a motto that reduces human beings to brains-on-a-stick. Ironically, such thinking-thingism assumes that the “heart” of the person is the mind. “I think, therefore I am,” Descartes said, and most of our approaches to discipleship end up parroting his idea.” Smith, James K. A.. You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit (p. 3). Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

³ “But as this divine Master inculcates two precepts,—the love of God and the love of our neighbor,—and as in these precepts a man finds three things he has to love,—God, himself, and his neighbor,—and that he who loves God loves himself thereby, it follows that he must endeavor to get his neighbor to love God, since he is ordered to love his neighbor as himself.” Augustine of Hippo. (1887). The City of God. In P. Schaff (Ed.), M. Dods (Trans.), St. Augustin’s City of God and Christian Doctrine (Vol. 2, p. 410). Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company.