

The Good and the Bad in the Human Soul: Self-Need vs. Soul-Thirst



Larry J. Crabb, Ph.D.

Experience: Founder and Director of NewWay Ministries in Silverthorne, Colorado

In this lesson, I want us to look at the content of our interior world. I want us to understand something of the self-centered mess that gets in the way of providing effective SoulCare.

You are sitting across from somebody who says to you, “I really feel like I am on a thin edge.” What do you do? Do you probe? What does SoulCare look like at that moment? Perhaps you might ask an open-ended question. You might say, “Well, what’s going on? You say you are on a thin edge. Tell me what is happening in your life. If you want to discuss it more, I would love to listen.”

Suppose the person said, in response to that, “You know, I really don’t know what is going on. All I know is that I break down and cry at least a couple times a day. I just feel so tired and defeated.” Now, does that not just scream at you in terms of, “I want to ask a question. I want to know what to do. Could not somebody who is going to teach me how to do SoulCare tell me what to do at this point? What do I do?” It is an opportunity for SoulCare.

But you have heard me suggest so far that you must not begin with the question, what do I do? The question you must begin with is, what is going on inside of me? All of us, I have suggested, are deeply self-centered and the passion of self-centeredness rules within us and in most of our interactions with people. In a child, it is obvious. A child will say, “I don’t want my vegetables, give me my dessert, I want it now!” We say, well that is just being self-centered. You have to live by higher rules than your own desires. In a child that may be obvious, and in us it is a little less than obvious sometimes. To a hurting friend, we might say, “Things sound really tough, but I want you to know that I believe in you.” Maybe as we are saying that, in a voice that is so soft we cannot hear in our own souls—in our own interior worlds—we are saying something like, “There, I think I did the right thing. Did I measure up to the standards? I think I proved myself to be adequate.”

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What is the ruling passion? That is an illustration of self-centeredness. As I have indicated before, how often has a husband seen his wife crying, and comes over to her and holds her and asks, “Honey, what’s wrong? I want to be here for you.” But to himself, he says, “I hope that was a good thing to do. It really seems to me that I’ve done a good job with her tonight. So the next time I am hurting I am going to expect something from her.” There is a self-centeredness that underlies a lot of what we do.

So often in our attempts to provide SoulCare the passions that control us are not the passions of the Spirit of Christ. They are the passions of self-centeredness. I want to spend our time putting content to that. I want to suggest to you that the most natural energy in each of our souls is self-centeredness. When someone shares a concern with us, the very first thing we need to do is to pay attention to our own natural inclination to think of ourselves. I’m really naturally more concerned about me than I am about you, even when your life is falling apart. That is a hard thing to say. It is a hard thing to see. But it is true.

Here are a couple of illustrations to make the point, and then let me put some conceptual content to the idea. My wife and I have been married now for thirty-four years. We met when we were ten years old. We could not start dating then because Rachel was going steady with Karl. When she had the wisdom to break up with Karl when we were both twelve, I stepped into her life and we began dating. During the years of our courtship, we fell in love. What does that mean?

Well, I was a guy who had my set of struggles. I used to be a bad stutterer. I would not be able to say words that began with “L”—my name is Larry—or words that began with “P.” I was raised among a church group called the Plymouth Brethren. I was raised in Plymouth Meeting, Pennsylvania. When Dad wanted to buy a Plymouth, I said “Get a Ford”—at least I can pronounce it! I had problems. And I was not sure if a guy that stuttered was very valuable, was very accepted, was very liked. I was laughed at. I was jeered. But Rachel never laughed at me. There was something in the way she responded to me that made me feel like beneath the stuttering problem that maybe I had value. So, we fell in love.

I wonder what that means. At age twenty-one, we got married. We stood before the preacher, and we said all the right words. We followed the directions of the pastor who married us. I said things like, “I promise to love, honor and cherish . . . until death do us

part.” But suppose you could have seen beneath the waterline into the passions that were ruling in my heart at the point of my marrying my wife thirty-four years ago. I think what you would have seen would have been something like this, I think what you would have heard would have been something like this, “You know, I really had not felt very good about myself in a lot of ways (for a lot of other reasons that are more severe than stuttering, but that was one part of it). I really don’t feel very good about myself. I am not sure who I really am. But, you are a pretty girl. You are intelligent. You’re fun. You’re bright. You’re attractive. You’re everything I want in a girl. You seem to like me. I like the way you make me feel. Therefore, my commitment to you is to marry you, to give you the chance to keep on making me feel about me the way I want to feel. Do we have the terms clear?” That is what I was saying in the core of my soul.

My wife, on the other hand, was saying something very similar. My wife, and of course I say this only with explicit permission, has been the victim of sexual abuse. When she stood before the preacher to marry me, I believe what she was saying was something like this: “I have been enjoyed in such an illegitimate way that made me feel cheap, that made me feel dangerous. But Larry, after my courtship with you I’ve come to believe that you value me at the level of my soul. You see something beautiful in me that you are maybe going to cherish. Maybe you are going to treat me with a level of dignity, care, and concern. And I like the way you make me feel. That means that I must love you, so I am going to marry you, and let me explain the terms. I am marrying you so that you can treat me the way I want to be treated, so I can begin to feel the way I long to feel, which is so different than the way I felt in the middle of my sexual abuse, and many other circumstances. Those are the terms.”

Can you see the obvious self-centeredness that underlies even the beginnings of a good marriage with two people that love each other? Can you see that the relationship is really not dissimilar from the relationship between a tick and a dog? What is a tick there for, to bless the dog? Or is a tick experiencing its own emptiness and looking for a nourishing host to sink its, whatever it has, into the host’s flesh and suck out of the host what would bring fullness to the tick?

See, I believe in most relationships—marriage included, a parent-child relationship, SoulCare relationships—the fundamental dynamic that is often going on is no different than a tick-on-a-



dog relationship. Of course, the problem with most marriages is that there are two ticks and no dog—that presents a few problems. In all of our relationships, the self-centeredness is what really gets in the way. That happens in parenting. We have two sons, two sons we are enormously proud of, who God has blessed in wonderful ways, so we are excited about it. But I will tell you, not much thanks to me—maybe no thanks to me, maybe it is all of God—when our kids were little, I know that I wanted so much to have our kids be godly and wonderful and responsible and all the things that a parent wants their children to be. So I decided, I am going to see to it that my kids mature into godly young men. I am going to teach them the Bible every day of their lives. You know what I did? For family devotions, I literally purchased an overhead projector. I made my two poor kids sit in front of me with an overhead projector. I did Old Testament survey, New Testament survey. By the time my kids were six years old, they could define the word “propitiation.”

What is the energy going on inside of me as I am laboring so hard to get my kids godly—is it love for God? Is it wanting to bring praise to the glory of His name? Is that what I am after? Or, am I saying, “I know how I will feel if my kids rebel. I know how I will feel if my kids do well. I want my kids to respond in wonderful ways. I am going to work really hard at it”? Is it possible that, even what appears to be our best intentioned behavior, whether it is as husbands and wives, or parents with their children, or with friends or with people for whom you are providing SoulCare, is it possible that there is really something going on in the core of us that interferes with the process of relationship, that interferes with SoulCare, that is fundamentally the disease, the poison of self-centeredness?

Well, I want to think about that with you. I want to put some conceptual framework around the self-centeredness. The reason I want to do it is because I want us to understand self-centeredness clearly enough for us to be able to recognize it in ourselves to the point where we are disgusted by it, and to the point where we see it is so pervasive and strong that we are helpless in its presence, that all we can do is stand broken in the presence of a Holy God and trust His redeeming grace to not punish us with the punishment that we deserve. Maybe in our brokenness before God over how self-centered we are, maybe that is the process through which the love of Christ begins to bubble up in our hearts and come out in our SoulCare, and we begin provide the kind of relationship that SoulCare requires.

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| THE IMAGE OF GOD:

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Well, let us look at self-centeredness this way. In order to understand the profound disease of self-centeredness within every human soul, we need to understand two theological concepts, two very basic truths that the Bible teaches. The first is: we need to understand something of what it means when the Bible says that we bear the image of God. I am created in the image of God and so are you. Now whatever else that very rich and deep theological concept means, it means at least this: that you and I in some way resemble God. Now let us just keep that in our minds. We bear the image of God and in some way we resemble God. Something has happened. The second theological truth that we have to grasp is that we are fallen beings. 1. We bear God's image; but 2. Something has happened. It happened way back in the Garden of Eden. It has been affecting us ever since. Every single person who has been born, except Jesus, has been affected by a disease that is now in the center of our image-bearing souls. We have to understand that. If we are going to come to grips with what self-centeredness is really all about, then we are going to need to understand that the profound issues of self-centeredness emerge from understanding these two theological truths.

1. We bear God's image. Again, whatever else that means, it means that we resemble God. How? Do we look like God? Does God have a body that is like ours with five fingers on this hand and five fingers on that hand and a nose and a couple of ears? How do we resemble God? Well, let me suggest to you what most theologians would agree is at least a part of the center of our resemblance to God, and that is this: that you and I were built with the capacity to relate, just as the God in whose image we were created is a relational God. Recall, I said earlier that perhaps the cornerstone doctrine of the entire Christian religion is the doctrine of the Trinity. God is a relational God. He exists eternally as a community, and you and I have been built, have been designed, with the capacity to enter into relationships that are like the relationship that God has forever enjoyed within His own community of the three persons of the Godhead. To say as simply as I possibly can, I would put it this way: to bear His image means that you and I have the capacity to enjoy good relating. We have the capacity to enjoy good relating. To elaborate that with just one simple addition, we have the twin capacity to receive love as the Son received love from the Father. The Father was loved by the Son. We have the twin capacity to receive love, and we have the capacity to give love.

Now, because you and I have the capacity for love, the capacity to

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receive love, what follows very naturally and necessarily is this: that whenever we are in a situation where we are not receiving love—whenever we are in a situation where we do not feel love coming toward us, where we do not feel the acceptance and the enjoyment and the celebration of who we are by somebody else, whenever the love is not coming toward us—we become aware, not of our capacity to enjoy love; rather, we become aware of our desperate longing to receive love. What is a capacity becomes a longing when the capacity is not filled.

How many of you would say that every moment of your life you are just deeply aware of being loved by your spouse, your parents, your kids, your friends, your pastor? How many of you would say that of every moment there is a love just flowing into you that feels just so wonderful? Or how many of you would say, far more spiritually, that you are aware of God's love for you at every moment? When the diagnosis comes back and the doctor says "cancer," something in you bursts out with, "I know how deeply God loves me?" Is that where you are? That was not where I was when I got that diagnosis.

How many of you are aware of how deeply God loves you when something happens in your family that breaks your heart? Or one of your children goes in a very, very bad direction? And you have worked so hard to be the right kind of a parent. You immediately say, "My longing for love is so deeply satisfied." Are you thoroughly enjoying the fact that God is deeply loving you? Our health as persons, the health of our souls, depends on whether we first receive love (because we are dependent beings, we must be loved by someone outside of ourselves), and then our health depends just as much on whether we give away the love that we receive, because that is what the Trinity does. They receive love from each other. They give love to each other. It's an interdependent relationship of fully-loving people, radically other-centered persons who give themselves to the other and who receive the love that they so much enjoy from the other.

If we are in a personal relationship with God—if you are a Christian, and you are; I am a Christian, and I am—then it does mean that we are ongoingly receiving the unconditional love that we were designed to enjoy. So what that means is at my core, even as I stand before you right now, whatever else is happening in my life, and you do not know what is happening in my life—you do not know how my wife and I are getting along right now; you do not know how my kids are doing; you don't know my friendships are

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going; you don't know much about me—but, you do know this: that because I am in a relationship with God, that fundamentally at my core, I am not a needy person. Because I have been given the love that my soul longs for in relationship with God. I am not a fundamentally needy person.

How many Christians do you know who come across as needy? Why? Why is there this lack of awareness of the fact that God's love has touched our souls at the deepest level where satisfaction becomes our real reality? Why are we out of touch with that and so often experience ourselves as needy?

We bear the image of God. We long to be loved. We are in a relationship with God; therefore, we are loved. Therefore, we can say that we are not needy persons; we are satisfied persons. Again, that is not our experienced reality. It is not what is happening inside of us much of the time. Why?

Well, that takes us to the second truth, that we are fallen people. We bear the image of God, Truth 1.; but 2. We are fallen people. Now, what does it mean that we are fallen? I think that one of the great problems in the church today is that we understand sin in a very trivial, superficial fashion. With many audiences, I have said to people, "Write down the last time you've sinned—don't take long to think about it, just write down the last time you have sinned." People will look kind of confused and think, "last time I sinned ... when was the last time I sinned?" They will write down something like, well I went faster than the speed limit allows yesterday, so I guess that was breaking the government's rule, and I guess that is sin.

What is our awareness of sin? Is our awareness of sin only what happens above the waterline, the things that we visibly do that transgress known standards? Or do we have a deeper understanding of sin? What does it mean that we are sinners, that we are fallen people? Think about it this way: even though we are bearers of God's image, even though we resemble God and we were designed with the capacity to relate to both receive love and to give love—even though that is true, and even though we are people who have the privilege of bearing God's image in a way where we can move toward God in worship for the love that He has given us and then take the love He has given us and move it towards other people and give it to them, even though that is the design, even though that is the way we are built and with the capacities we have—something has happened. We are fallen

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What that fundamentally means is this: Every one of us has turned away from God as the source of the love that we need. Every one of us has turned away from God, and we have really told Him that essentially we are just “not interested in receiving the kind of the love You provide.” Recall that very disturbing passage in Jeremiah, where God looks out at His people, and He calls the heavens, the stars, the sun, the moon and He says, “Come here, take a look at this. Here are my people who are thirsty. They long for the water that I can give. They long for the relationship that I can provide. Look what every one of them is doing; they are walking right by the springs of living water. They are turning away from Me and they are going over to other sources. They are digging for themselves broken cisterns that really can't provide water for their souls at all. They are foolish people; sin is absolute insanity.”

We are fallen people who take who we are as image-bearers and turn away from God and say to somebody else, “You take care of me.” Do you see that is the deal with my wife? When I met Rachel at age ten, I thought she was pretty, but she was taken. At age twelve, she became available and I stepped into her life. We had a courtship, and I think that there was something inside of me that said, “I long to receive something that gives me a deep sense of my value, a deep sense of my worth, a deep sense that I am loved, a deep sense that I am wanted, a deep sense that I am enjoyed. I long for that. You know, God's my Savior ... and I will go to Heaven ... and I worship him on Sundays, but what I really want is something that God can't provide. Rachel, you are doing a pretty good job. Tell ya what, let's get married.” That is a fallen image-bearer who moves toward a woman out of the energy of self-centeredness.

Now, let me tell you a very, very tragic thing that happens. When you and I turn from God, and all of us naturally do exactly that, our longing for love becomes a demand. No longer do we simply turn to God with a notion of “I long for love, and you have given it to me. I am a satisfied person who's whole. I am not an empty person. I am not a ghost; I am a solid person. I am an alive person who can give of my substance to another. I can love my wife when she lets me down. I can love my husband when he's not there for me because I am not desperately demanding his love. I am full. I have the love of God.” When you turn from God, that longing to receive love turns into a demand. Now the mood is, “Look, this

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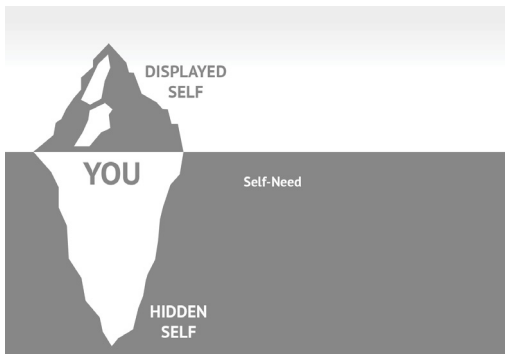
Deep **personal pain** makes us feel justified in doing whatever it takes to **relieve the pain**.

longing is a need and you jolly well better satisfy it. Or at least somebody better!" We become absolutely ruled by the passion. This is not extreme language. There is no hyperbole here. This is what really happens if you take an honest inside look into your own heart. We become absolutely, not partly, ruled by the passion to get somebody to give us at least a little of what we need. Now, whose well being are we thinking of? Well, ourselves. That is called self-centeredness. I want somebody to give to me what I deeply need, and these longings that could be satisfied in a relationship with God now become desperate demands.

You all can relate to this: you have been in relationships where there has been some level of rejection or some level of criticism, where someone has not enjoyed you, where you have been put down or demeaned. What do you feel at that point? Why does that pain feel so intense? Because, you were designed to experience something very, very different. The real pain of not receiving love becomes something (now listen carefully) that is so deep and so bad and so hurtful that every one of us takes the position that whatever provides relief from that pain feels justified.

Why does the man who has an affair rarely feel profound guilt, but feels somehow justified, even though he knows that it is not the law of God? Why does the person who gets a divorce say, "I know this is wrong; it goes against God, but I just have to do it. But I know that God will forgive and He will understand?" Because there is a pain within that justifies whatever measures we take for relief. Folks, this is happening inside me; it is happening inside of you. It is happening inside of the people for whom we provide SoulCare. This is the dynamic, this is the reality, this is the passion, this is the self-centeredness that is going to get in the way of SoulCare.

Fallen image-bearers, we can say then, feel an inner neediness that drives them, like the thirst of a person in the desert. We are ruled, therefore we can say, very simply, by self-need. Now, let us look at it this way: let us go back to our familiar iceberg once again. Look down beneath the surface into my interior world, and maybe the first thing that we are going to see is what I am going to call "self-need." As I come to you to provide SoulCare, am I fundamentally saying, "Yeah, I want to provide you SoulCare, but I have needs, and I want my needs met in this relationship of SoulCare"? If that is the fundamental thing you are saying, it is going to interfere with the power that you might have to provide meaningful SoulCare.

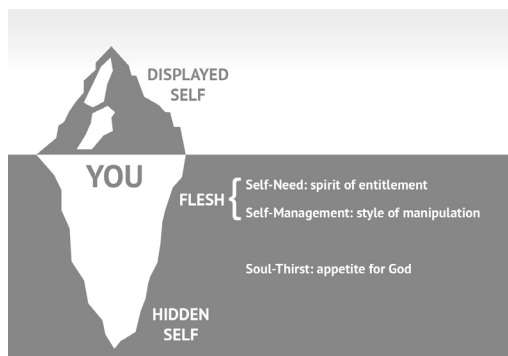


Self-need, the first reality: I have got to find somebody who is going to take care of me. Of course the fact is that I do not trust anybody to take care of me. I have learned, as everybody has learned, that absolute trust in anybody is suicide. Have any of you, even with the best parents in the world, experienced a parent who has been completely and fully and wonderfully sensitive to your every need? Nobody ever has. There is no husband, there is no wife, there is no parent, there is no child, there is no friend, there is no pastor who has ever done that, and so we learn that we have this self-need, but nobody is going to do it for us. Therefore, what I must do, is, I must take responsibility to get my needs met.

The second dynamic that we experience in the deepest part of our soul, therefore, I would call “self- management.” I am committed to taking care of myself. Self-need: I hurt. I need to be loved and honored and valued. Self-management: I will find some way to get what I need, whether it is by depending upon my natural talents to impress people or a social style that is analytical or fun. Whatever it is, I am going to find some strategy in relating that is going to get you to get me something of what I need.

Self-need: the spirit of entitlement—it is what I need. “Give it to me, you should!” Self-management: the style of manipulation. You see the Bible takes these two ideas of self-need and self-management and just calls it the flesh. It is the driving energy in everybody’s soul apart from God.

So you want to provide SoulCare, and I want to provide SoulCare. I want to sit down with a friend who tells me his daughter has had an abortion. I want to sit down with a friend who tells me his wife has left him and tell him, “I would love to provide SoulCare.” But this is the energy inside of me: I can’t do it. But if I am a Christian, what has happened at the point of my Christianity is, in the core of my soul something else has been planted. Now it is not just the energy of self-need and self-management, but now I become aware that in the core of my soul there is a thirst that only God can meet. And now as a redeemed, fallen, image-bearer, my appetite for God is implanted within me and I turn to Him, and I say “God, it is not my wife, it is not my husband, it is not my kids, it is not my friends—somehow it is You! You are the one I depend on. You are the one that I am going to trust. You are the one that I am going to enjoy. You are the one that I am going to celebrate. You are everything. You are all that I need.” There is a soul-thirst in the core of my being, and the soul-thirst, the more I relate to God, leads to a deep soul-trust, that says “God, you really



are supplying me with everything that I need.”

Folks, if you and I are going to become effective in SoulCare, then we are going to have to learn what it means to live out of the deepest part of our being. The thirst that is satisfied by God, the appetite for God that only He can satisfy, and a trust in Him that says, “Even when you do not like me, even when you are hard on me, even when I fail you, I can still move toward you.”

With the passions of the Spirit, we are now prepared to think about, “What does it mean to enter another person’s life?” We have talked about passion. Now we are going to talk about wisdom.