

# CAN I BE SELFISH?

There are certain themes repeated over and over, season after season, on NBC's *The Biggest Loser* weight-loss reality show. One of those themes used to really rub me wrong way—the idea that contestants like me needed to put ourselves first, to make ourselves the priority, and to stop worrying so much about others.

We were literally told to be selfish, that it was “our turn now.” To my ears that sounded like such an un-Christian and un-pastoral value, something of the world and reality TV—and certainly not of God. And I just didn't get its connection to weight loss. Why couldn't I be selfless and healthy at the same time?

## Saying “No”

But here's the underlying commonality so many contestants (myself included) shared—we all were unable to say “no.” Whether it was with family, work, or church, others always came first to the point where we were choosing to sacrifice our personal health. In a world where busyness not only is acceptable but respected and encouraged, it's easy to fall into the trap of going at such a pace that time for health—both physical and spiritual—becomes a “luxury” that many opt out of.

It's not that we make active decisions to avoid taking care of ourselves; it's just “bumped from the plan” for the day (or the week, or longer) because of this need, some crisis, and that event. Clearly these immediate needs dropped in my lap are more important than me getting some time in the gym, right? I'll always have the gym, after all. But if I say “no” to this person's request or want or whim, the heavens might just fall to the earth as a result.

## Guilt-Free Zone

Last week I was leading a mission trip in Nicaragua. (If you haven't been to Nicaragua, you have to go! There's something like 18 active volcanoes in that tiny little country—there's no place on earth like it.) As it happens, I experienced a really bizarre moment while watching one of those volcanoes.

I was just sitting there looking at the smoke swirl out of the top of this volcano across the lake, and suddenly I realized I'd been sitting in the same spot for an hour and a half, literally doing nothing...and I didn't feel guilty. Not one bit. No anxiety. I wasn't letting anyone down. No meetings were falling apart without me. All that took up my attention was that volcano and my team swimming in the lake—and I was relaxed. Relaxed like I haven't been in years.

Then it occurred to me that there's something not right in the world if I can't sit and just be for 90 whole minutes and not feel guilty about it. That experience shouldn't have been so surprising and mystifying to me. But that's not my normal way of reacting—and sadly my impression is that it's not the norm, either, for most youth pastors and youth workers out there.

## Out of Balance

We're expected to maintain office hours (I'm still waiting for the explanation for why most of my hours are expected to take place while kids are in school and unavailable), attend meetings, show up to events at night, be on call for every emergency and crisis (which apparently, for the under-20 crowd, only ever happen between the hours of 10pm and 2am), nurture a healthy family life and be there for our own children, set an example for everyone with our like-clockwork devotional lives, and after all that, somehow live balanced lives that make time for at least eight hours of sleep a night while maintaining our physical health!

But for me, such expectations only translate to stress, anxiety, too much to remember, and a life fueled mostly by urgency and caffeine.

## Time Away

Don't get me wrong. This isn't a new thought, and other writers and speakers have and will continue to communicate these notions in ways far better than I've done or can do. But it bears repeating here: The reality is that at some point you absolutely have to start saying “no” to others and “yes” to you.

It may feel selfish, but it's not.

How many people did Jesus walk away from? How many crowds did Jesus stop ministering to? How many sick, paralyzed, dying people did Jesus leave without healing? At times Jesus had thousands of followers in addition to a dozen-strong “youth group” that was with him 24/7—yet Jesus still consistently set aside significant time for his own spiritual health. And I honestly don't doubt for a moment that had Jesus come to earth today instead of 2,000 or so years ago, he'd eat healthy and take time to exercise his body (despite too many hours behind the wheel in the church van).

## “No One Else Will”

Scripture speaks of our bodies as the holy and sacred dwelling place of God—the temple of the Holy Spirit. If you won't make your spiritual and physical health a priority, no one else will. The ministry will survive in spite of giving time to you—in fact, over time it'll be stronger because of it. And you will have modeled something powerful to those you're leading.

So be selfish for your health.

When all is said and done, it's one of the more unselfish things you can do in ministry. 🍎



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