

Principles for Transformation: Connecting Personal and Public Life

C. S. Lewis on Greed, Selfishness, and Self-Interest By Dr. Art Lindsley



John Mackey, CEO of Whole Foods, claims business is under attack today. Speaking to the Greater Boston Chamber of Commerce [in February](#), he said,

Humanity has been lifted up by business and yet it has been completely hijacked by its enemies who create a narrative that business is selfish, and greedy, and exploitative.

Business provides good context for thinking biblically about selfishness, self-interest and greed. Are all business people selfish? Certainly not. Moreover, selfishness is not exclusive to the business world. There are selfish teachers, physicians, pastors, and firefighters. Selfishness is an equal opportunity employer.

The more pressing question, however, regards self-interest. Is self-interest necessarily selfish?

The Bible tells us not to follow our flesh or our hearts, because they are prone to selfishness and sin (Prov. 4:23; Jer. 17:9, Rom. 7:18).

The Bible also calls us to care for the poor and live a life of self-sacrifice (Matt. 25:35, John 15:13). How should Christians understand selfishness?

C.S. Lewis wrote much about the tension between self-interest and selfishness, offering renewed clarity on these topics. To Lewis, there is a huge difference between self-interest and selfishness, and there is a proper place for self-interest in our lives.

When Lewis first came to faith, he did not think about eternal life, but focused on enjoying God in this life. Lewis later said that the years he spent without the focus on heavenly rewards, "always seem to me

to have been of great value,” because they taught delight in God above any prospect or reward. It would be wrong to desire from God solely what he could give you, without delighting in God himself.

Lewis never disparaged the place of heavenly rewards, but he saw that the paradox of reward might be a stumbling block for some. On the one hand, the purest faith in God believes in him for “nothing” and is not primarily interested in any benefits to follow. On the other hand, the concept that we are rewarded for what we do is taught in numerous biblical passages and presumably is a positive motivation for doing what is good.

Certainly, a sole focus on rewards might pander to selfishness. Lewis discusses this paradox in *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century*:

Tyndale, as regards the natural condition of humanity, holds that by nature we can do no good works without respect of some profit either in this world or in the world to come....That the profit should be located in another world means, as Tyndale clearly sees, no difference. Theological hedonism is still hedonism. Whether the man is seeking heaven or a hundred pounds, he can still but seek himself, of freedom in the true sense—of spontaneity or disinterestedness—nature knows nothing. And yet by a terrible paradox, such disinterestedness is precisely what the moral law demands.”¹⁰

One way to resolve the tension between believing for nothing and believing for reward is to realize that self-interest is not the same thing as selfishness. Some maintain that Mark 8:35-36 is Lewis’ most quoted passage of Scripture. Jesus appeals to self-interest as a motive for self-denial, saying, “For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel shall save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?” We are being encouraged to truly “save” our lives and not “lose” our lives or “forfeit” our soul. The appeal is to our own self-interest.

Unless we have a sufficient reason to sacrifice something we love, the cost will always be too great. Lewis expresses this dilemma in the last paragraph of *Mere Christianity*:

The principle runs through all life from top to bottom. Give up yourself, and you will find your real self. Lose your life and you will save it. Submit to death, death of your ambitions and favourite wishes every day and the death of your whole body in the end: submit with every fibre of your being, and you will find eternal life. Keep back nothing. Nothing that you have not given away will be really yours. Nothing in you that has not died will ever be raised from the dead. Look for yourself, and you will find in the long run only hatred, loneliness, despair, rage, ruin and decay. But look for Christ and you will find Him, and with Him everything else thrown in.

It is not in our self-interest to be selfish. Rather, self-denial is in our self-interest.

Lewis argues elsewhere, that self-interest does not necessarily make our motives impure. He says in *The Problem of Pain*:

We are afraid that Heaven is a bribe, and that if we make it our goal we shall no longer be disinterested. It is not so. Heaven offers nothing that a mercenary soul can desire. It is safe to tell the pure in heart that they shall see God, for only the pure in heart want to. There are rewards that do not sully motives. A man’s love for a woman is not mercenary because he wants to marry her, nor his love for poetry mercenary because he wants to read it, nor his love of exercise less

disinterested because he wants to run and leap and walk. Love, by its very nature, seeks to enjoy its object.

When we are lost in wonder, awe, and praise of God, we can become more joyful and less self-conscious. When we are focused on God, we are not focused on self. Lewis summarizes this un-self-conscious experience: "The happiest moments are when we forget our precious selves...but have everything else (God, our fellow humans, the animals, the garden and the sky) instead." In this experience, we are pursuing our own joy, but not selfishly.

In Lewis' classic sermon, *The Weight of Glory*, he articulates this same dilemma between selfishness and self-interest ("disinterestedness").

In that context, he gives what has become my favorite C.S. Lewis quote:

Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink, sex, and ambition, when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.

We might not pursue our own self-interest strongly enough. We often settle for selfish desire and deprive ourselves of "infinite joy." We are all too pleased with the meager pleasures we get and say "NO" to greater, higher, infinite pleasure. The more we pursue our own true self-interest, the more we will glorify God. It is in our self-interest to give up lesser pleasures that may satisfy for a while, but sooner or later lead to "hatred, loneliness, despair, rage, ruin and decay."

The distinction between self-interest and selfishness seems to be so blurred in current public discourse that self-interest nearly means selfishness. But Lewis clearly believes that self-interest was not necessarily selfish, and that selfishness is not in our self-interest. If we pursue our own self-interest, we will deny ourselves and choose eternal life, and true life in the present. To condemn selfishness is in our legitimate self-interest.