

Giving Up Self-Centeredness for a Life of Love

Big Idea: Following Jesus means giving up self-centredness in place of an others-orientation in order to gain the life of love Jesus calls us to.

Main Teaching Point: To realize that following Jesus means making my life "not about me" and instead making my life about "others".

I'm going to show you a few photos and I'd love for you to raise your hand if you're a fan:

- Spring flowers—tulips and daffodils
- Roll up the rim coffee cups from Tim Hortons
- And my personal favorite: Cadbury Mini Eggs

When I was growing up, spring flowers, roll up the rim at Tim's, and Cadbury mini eggs in the stores had a way of letting me know we were in the season leading up to Easter. I now know there's a name for this season—Lent—the weeks leading up to Easter, intended to guide and prepare our hearts for the significance of what's coming up...the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Often in this season of spiritual preparation, we associate Lent with "giving something up"—chocolate, social media, caffeine, shopping—as a way of following Christ's example of sacrifice. The point isn't just dropping a bad habit though, it's about becoming more like Jesus through spiritual growth, reflection, and repentance. Giving up something in order to gain the life that Jesus has for us.

This Lent, as a community, we're asking the question with that focus: Not just, what would we give up for Lent, that *we* want to? But more specifically, **what would we give up for Jesus, and for the life of love he calls us to, especially in our relationships with one another? What would we give up, not for us, but for love?**

And to help us consider that, today, we're considering the first and most important thing we need to give up if we're going to experience the life of love Jesus has for us in our relationships with one another.

We're anchoring this series in the apostle Paul's letter to the Ephesians, where in Ephesians 4:1 he writes: "Live a life worthy of your calling." Throughout this Lent series, we're talking specifically about our calling to follow Jesus in his life of love. We'll be looking at many things in Ephesians 4-5 that Paul says we'll need to "give up" in order to live out this calling and grow in Jesus' love together.

For today, our key verse is Ephesians 5:21: "**Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.**"

Now, I know "submit" can be a loaded word, so let me unpack what Paul means here. The Greek word translated as "submit" is *hypotassō*, which is a compound word:

- hypo = "under"

- tassō = "to arrange" or "to order"

Literally, it means "to arrange oneself under" or "to place oneself under in an orderly fashion." It was originally a military term used for soldiers arranging themselves under the authority of a commander.

Here's what's significant about *hypotassō* in this context though:

First, it's voluntary, not forced. This isn't about being viewed as lesser because of some archaic class system or cultural pecking-order; it's about choosing, from a place of being deeply grounded in our equality before God, to submit to another. It's a choice, an act of the will. Something you do because you want to.

Second, it's mutual. Paul instructs us to submit "to one another." That true voluntary submission in a healthy and loving relationship is a two-way deal. Which is what sets up many of Paul's applications in the verses that follow about how to live out this mutual submission in a variety of relationships, including between wives and husbands, children and parents, bosses and employees. In all these relational dynamics, mutuality is essential.

Third, it's motivated by reverence for Christ. By reverence, Paul means awareness of who God is, deep respect, a sense of awe. So, when Paul says "submit to one another out of reverence for Christ," he's saying: let your awareness of who Christ is and his love for you deepen your love for others and motivate you to put others first. That your vertical relationship with Christ is intended to flow out into your horizontal relationships with people.

And this is why submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ is the starting point for this whole series because the first thing we need to give up if we're going to experience the life of love Jesus calls us to is our natural instinct to put ourselves first. We need to give up our self-centeredness and sense of entitlement.

Let's be honest: we all naturally think of ourselves first 99.9% of the time, don't we? For me, it begins when I wake up:

I find myself asking, what time is it?

What's the weather like?

What do I want to eat?

I need coffee.

What's on my list to do today?

What deadlines do I have?

What errands do I need to run?

Without even realizing it, I am seeing the world through the lens of my social location, from my place of privilege – all the while observing what I like, what I prefer, what I need, what fills my cup, and noticing what I am feeling.

Yet when it comes to following Jesus, Paul says our default setting needs to become one of submission to others—giving up our natural self-centredness in favour of having an others-centeredness.

We may not think of ourselves as self-centeredness but consider some examples of ways we put ourselves ahead of others—the opposite of submission:

- Talking over others, dominating a conversation, or redirecting it back to you
- Dismissing the concerns of others
- Dismissing the feelings of others
- Cutting in line at the store or in traffic
- Giving the silent treatment to someone as a way of punishing them
- Refusing to apologize or admit when you have hurt someone
- Always needing to be right in disagreements
- Assuming your needs should take priority over others
- Speaking to or about others in a way that is destructive or harmful
- Avoiding hard honest truth because it's uncomfortable
- Choosing to hold a grudge and refusing to resolve conflicts and disagreements

Philippians 2:3-4 says it this way: "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others."

How many things out of selfish ambition? No things!

And why? Because this is what Jesus' love looks like! In Philippians 2:5-8, Paul goes on to describe how Jesus himself didn't grasp at equality with God but humbly gave himself up, taking the form of a servant on the cross.

Or consider 1 Corinthians 13: 4&5: "Love does not envy or boast, is not proud... does not dishonor others, is not self-seeking."

Notice the theme here? Love refuses to treat people as less than. Jewish theologian Martin Buber talked about the concept of I-it, which is about relating to people as objects, focusing on what "it" does for us. This I-it tendency keeps us relating to

people as something to be used. In contrast, the "I-Thou" concept is the idea that when we stop treating ourselves and each other as objects, it's then that we experience the sacredness in the other and we really see one another and can be present with one another. Everyone is worthy of God's love simply because they exist. And that includes you and me. Self-sacrificing, others-oriented love means that we don't dehumanize people.

How we speak about others matters. How we treat others matters deeply. Because each person we encounter is made in the image of God.

And why are we called to this submissive others-centredness?

Because self-centeredness gets in the way of a life of love. It negatively impacts our relationship with God, with others, with ourselves. We want to live healthy lives of love—relationships that are flourishing and lives that are overflowing with love. The reality is that love cannot flow freely when there is self-centeredness.

And, the entire gospel is rooted in the concept of grace. Grace offers what can't be earned and isn't deserved. It's simply given. So, when we live with a self-centred sense of entitlement, our self-centredness gets in the way of love. And the "I deserve..." sense of entitlement actually (get this) stifles grace.

(Can I also say that the next generation is watching us? If faith is more caught than it is taught, then living a life of love is essential and has impact beyond just our lives and our generation.)

As a disclaimer, here's what I am NOT talking about – I'm not talking about betraying yourself for the sake of another, I'm certainly not condoning abuse, and I'm not talking about neglecting to care for yourself. Not one bit. Your needs and your feelings and your well-being matter because you are worthy of love - you are beloved and made in the image of God. And it's from that place of deep belovedness that you and I can de-center ourselves and center ourselves around loving God and loving others.

Following Jesus means giving up self-centredness in place of an others-orientation in order to gain the life of love Jesus calls us to.

I've spent quite a bit of time with people at the end of their lives—in the final days and hours. I honestly find these moments so sacred, so telling. Being so up close to death has made me acutely aware of what matters and it has changed how I live.

What's the pattern I've noticed? Without fail, the last days and hours of life are a time of reflection, and it's not income or success or professional identity that people want to talk about. It's only love. *Who did I love and who loved me?*

On your deathbed, will you still care about the arguments you won, all the times you proved to others how "right" you were or how "enlightened" you were?

Spoiler alert: you won't.

It was only ever about relationship. About connection. It was only ever, always about love.

So how do we start giving up our instinct toward self-centeredness to gain an others-orientation and grow in the love we truly desire?

1. Awareness and Reflection

There is a quote that I love by psychologist, professor and bodywork practitioner, Alan Fogel, Ph. D, who explains that

“Awareness is medicine”

We grow through awareness—not through trying harder.

Ask yourself: What's behind my selfishness? Get curious about that. And when you see selfishness in others that upsets you, that is often serving as a mirror—an invitation to look within.

What's beneath our resistance to submission, to laying our lives down? What stories are we telling ourselves that may be incomplete or inaccurate?

Sometimes we are self-absorbed and not aware of it, and conversations like this can awaken us. Sometimes when we are hurtful toward others, there is actually a part of us that is hurting, and it's easier to project our hurt onto others than to look inward. You may have heard the saying: "Hurt people hurt people." Perhaps the invitation is to begin to share what's hurting within you with a trusted and safe

person, to begin your process of healing so that you can offer healing—not hurt—to the world.

2. Spiritual Practices

Deepen your alignment with love, with Jesus - through prayer, scripture, silence, journaling, worship. These practices reorient us away from ourselves and move us toward God and others. And, the more we steep ourselves in Jesus and His Good News, the more we're reminded of and rooted in the fundamental dynamics of grace. Focusing on who Jesus is, and what He's done for us frees us of any sense of entitlement.

3. Community

It's really tough to do this alone. We need each other on this journey.

What supports us? Life groups, therapy, spiritual friendship—safe relationships create the space for us to grow and experience transformation.

We become like the people we bond with. Neuroscience shows us that our closest relationships literally shape our brains. They influence our emotional responses, decision-making patterns, and daily behaviors. Over time, who we attach to rewires who we become. The people you include in your circle of safety have a profound impact on your life.

And so, how can we work together to support one another in letting go of our stubbornness, our entitlement, our need to be right? How can we nudge each other—gently and not so gently—toward releasing our grip so that we might live a life of love, a relational life of fullness that embodies the love of Jesus? Who in your life will show you that, and lovingly and courageously speak into that—and in whom will you speak that way?

We are interconnected with one another. My well-being is tied to yours, and yours to mine. We do not exist in isolation. My liberation depends on your liberation, just as yours depends on mine. To love God is to love you, and to love you is to love God.

4. Picture What's Possible

Has anyone read the book *The Correspondent* by Virginia Evans? I finished this novel a few weeks ago and it was the kind of book I didn't want to put down. The main character, Sybil, steps into a new level of self-awareness and reflection at the end of her life. She shifts from a posture of self-protection to one of genuine connection by embracing her vulnerability, expanding her small world, and choosing genuine relationship.

She engages in the spiritual practice of writing and begins to allow people in—all of which brought her to a place of transformation as she loosens her grip on her stubbornness and self-absorption (which were really just her forms of self-protection) for the sake of relationships.

Through the process of letter writing, facing her failing eyesight, letters from someone in her past, the act of forgiveness, healing her relationship with her daughter, and gradual self-awareness, Sybil begins looking at her life differently. And at the end of her life, she reflects on the fullness she's living in when it comes to her relationships—fullness because of the choice she made to relinquish her self-centeredness.

I was so moved by this book. And it makes me wonder: How much more so might this be true in a Jesus-centered community?

5. Grace, Not Shame

Friends, this is not about shame. It's about grace and possibility. Because grace is more than abandoning a sense of entitlement; grace is about basking in the love that Jesus provides!

What if we showed up differently in spaces where we have previously been self-oriented? It's never too late to change the script. We can create and cultivate corrective experiences. We can make a different choice where previously we have chosen what serves us. We can show up differently and surprise the people around us!

Rather than double down in stubbornness, imagine what is possible.

And when we mess up, what about this? We catch ourselves, own it, repair, and change course? Imagine the possibility!

In these very early days, as we begin this season of Lent, what if you and I were to do some inventory, some reflection? Honestly ask yourself (or maybe ask the people close to you):

- Would other people say I often try to put them first?
- Would other people describe me as submissive? Or usually trying to get my way?
- Do the people around me—at home, at work, in my circles—feel loved by me?
- Do they feel safe with me, or on edge?
- Do they trust me? Do they believe I'm *for them*?
- Do they know I won't betray their confidence when they're out of the room?
- Do they experience ease, or judgment and harsh humor?
- Do people around me experience love when they are in my presence?

Others oriented love is the way of Jesus. We can study scripture and pray and gather on Sundays, and that is so beautiful, but if it doesn't translate into love—it's just a clanging gong. The whole point is love. That's why Jesus came and died, and this, friend, is what you and I are invited into.

And so, as we close, I wonder what step are you and I being invited to take to give up self-centeredness? What sense of entitlement do we need to relinquish?

Lately, I've noticed recently how often I and we like to talk about "the church." It goes something like this: "What does the church believe about...?" "Why doesn't the church do...?" "When can the church start doing such and such?"

And it all comes from a good and curious place. And what I've been reflecting on lately is that it's actually easier in many ways to talk about the church than it is to talk about our own personal relationship with Jesus and living lives of love.

Friends, when it comes to "the church," it's really just you and me. Us in this room with these people, each trying to personally follow Jesus together.

And so the only question for me these days is this: How are we doing at growing in love? That's it. Full stop. With God, with each other, with ourselves?

And in order to grow in love, what is weighing us down? What is getting in the way? What do we need to give up? Let's be honest. Sometimes dynamics of our self-absorption rob us of experiencing the love of Jesus in our relationships. Let's name that and do the work of releasing it. Why? **For the sake of love.**

First Corinthians 13:13 says, "Faith, hope, and love remain, these three, and the greatest of these is love."

I'm going to invite the band forward and in each of your locations we are going to respond as we are led through a spiritual practice (band plays softly)

Scott Erickson has an art piece called "Start with the First Step," inspired by a poem by David Whyte which reads:

Start with letting yourself be seen.

The very thing you grasp tightly to that makes you stand with fists to the world—

There is no other place that Love wants to meet you.

Start with the first step. The one you don't want to take.

So, let's take a moment to personally check in.

How are we doing in our journey to grow in love—with God, with each other, with ourselves?

In our journey, what is getting in the way? What do we need to give up?

Can we take that first step (individually and collectively) and release it?

Release it why? Because it's getting in the way of a life of love and mutuality where love flows and abounds, and where relationships can heal and grow and flourish.

Close your eyes and imagine for a moment, that your hands were clenched in a fist. Maybe put your hands in a fist if it is helpful. In which ways are you holding onto self-centeredness? Stubbornness? The need to be right? What are you holding onto that is getting in the way of living a life of love?

(Pause)

And then pause and imagine that you are letting go? If your hand is clenched in a fist, release it. And as you let go, you are opening your hands to love – let's do that together - open to receive and to give love – to live in the flow of love.

Love is the only thing that matters.

Faith, hope, and love remain... and the greatest of these is love.

Ideas for Conversation Starters:

How have you engaged in the season of lent in the past? Have you previously given something up?

Big Idea: Following Jesus means giving up *self-centredness* in place of an *others-orientation* in order to gain the life of love Jesus calls us to.

Main Teaching Point: To realize that following Jesus means making my life “not about me” and instead making my life about “others”.

What might Jesus be inviting you to give up this lent, give up for love?

Ephesians 4:1 – what does it mean to live a life worthy of our calling?

Ephesians 5:21 – what does it mean to mutually submit to one another out of reverence for Christ?

Philippians 2:3-8 – why are we called to humbly value others above ourselves and look to the interest of others?