
What's in It for Me?

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I humbly pray that the same spirit which has attended the other speakers this morning will continue as I address you.

Many years ago I was in a professional association with two older, more experienced men. We had been friends for many years and found it mutually beneficial to help one another. One day, one associate sought our help on a complex matter. As soon as the issue had been explained, the first thing the other associate said was, "What's in it for me?" When his old friend responded so selfishly, I saw the look of pain and disappointment on the face of the one who had invited our help. The relationship between the two was never quite the same after that. Our self-serving friend did not prosper, as his selfishness soon eclipsed his considerable gifts, talents, and qualities. Unfortunately, one of the curses of the world today is encapsulated in this selfish response, "What's in it for me?"

During my professional career, I helped the heirs of a noble couple settle their estate. The estate was not large, but it was the fruit of many years of hard work and sacrifice. Their children were all decent, God-fearing people who had been taught to live the saving principles of the Savior. But when it came to dividing up the property, a dispute developed about who should get what. Even though there was nothing of great value to fight about, feelings of selfishness and greed caused a rift among some of the family members that never healed and continued into the next generation. How tragic that the legacy offered by these wonderful parents turned out to be so destructive of family unity and love among their children. I learned from this that selfishness and greed bring bitterness and contention; on the other hand sacrifice and giving bring peace and contentment.

In the Grand Council in Heaven, when the great plan of salvation for God's children was presented, Jesus responded, "Here am I, send me," ¹ and "Father, thy will be done, and the glory be thine forever." ² And thus He became our Savior. In contrast, Satan, who had been highly regarded as "a son of the morning," ³ countered that he would come and "redeem all mankind, that one soul shall not be lost." ⁴ Satan had two conditions: the first was the denial of agency, and the second, that he would have the honor. In other words, something had to be in it for him. And thus he became the father of lies and selfishness.

Taking up one's cross and following the Savior means overcoming selfishness; it is a commitment to serve others. Selfishness is one of the baser human traits, which must be subdued and overcome. We torture our souls when we focus on getting rather than giving. Often the first word that many little children learn to say is *mine*.

They have to be taught the joy of sharing. Surely, one of the great schoolmasters for overcoming selfishness is parenthood. Mothers go into the valley of the shadow of death to bring forth children. Parents work hard and give up so much to shelter, feed, clothe, protect, and educate their children.

I have learned that selfishness has more to do with how we feel about our possessions than how much we have. The poet Wordsworth said, “The world is too much with us; late and soon, / Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers.” ⁵ A poor man can be selfish ⁶ and a rich man generous, but a person obsessed only with getting will have a hard time finding peace in this life.

Elder William R. Bradford once said: “Of all influences that cause men to choose wrong, selfishness is undoubtedly the strongest. Where there is selfishness, the Spirit of the Lord is absent. Talents go unshared, the needs of the poor unfulfilled, the weak unstrengthened, the ignorant untaught, and the lost unrecovered.” ⁷

I recently spoke with one of the most generous people I have ever known. I asked him to describe the feelings of fulfillment that have come because of his generosity. He spoke about the feeling of joy and happiness in one’s heart from sharing with others less fortunate. He stated that nothing is really his—it all comes from the Lord—we are only the custodians of what He has given us. As the Lord said to the Prophet Joseph Smith, “All these things are mine, and ye are my stewards.” ⁸

Sometimes it is easy for us to forget that “the earth is the Lord’s, and the fulness thereof.” ⁹ The Savior warned us, as recorded in the book of Luke: “Take heed, and beware of covetousness: for a man’s life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth.

“And he spake a parable unto them, saying, The ground of a certain rich man brought forth plentifully:

“And he thought within himself, saying, What shall I do, because I have no room where to bestow my fruits?

“And he said, This will I do: I will pull down my barns, and build greater; and there will I bestow all my fruits and my goods.

“And I will say to my soul, Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry.

“But God said unto him, Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee: then whose shall those things be, which thou hast provided?

“So is he that layeth up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God.” ¹⁰

Some years ago, Elder ElRay L. Christiansen told about one of his distant Scandinavian relatives who joined the Church. He was quite well-to-do and sold his lands and stock in Denmark to come to Utah with his family. For a while he did well as far as the Church and its activities were concerned, and he prospered financially. However, he became so caught up in his possessions that he forgot about his purpose in coming to America. The bishop visited him and implored him to become active as he used to be. The years passed and some of his brethren visited him and said: “Now, Lars, the Lord was good to you when you were in Denmark. He has been good to you since you have come here. . . . We think now, since you are growing a little older, that it would be well for you to spend some of your time in the interests of the Church. After all, you can’t take these things with you when you go.”

Jolted by this remark, the man replied, “Vell, den, I will not go.” ¹¹ But he did! And so will all of us!

It is so easy for some to become obsessed with what they possess and to lose eternal perspective. When Abraham went out of Egypt, his nephew Lot went with him to Bethel. Both Abraham and Lot had flocks and herds and tents, “and the land was not able to bear them, that they might dwell together: for their substance was great, so that they could not dwell together.” 12 After some friction between the herdmen of Abraham and Lot, Abraham made a proposal to Lot: “Let there be no strife, I pray thee, between me and thee, and between my herdmen and thy herdmen; for we be brethren.

“... If thou wilt take the left hand, then I will go to the right; or if thou depart to the right hand, then I will go to the left.” 13

Lot saw “what was in it for him” as he looked over the fruitful plain of Jordan and chose to take the land which was close to the worldly place of Sodom. 14 Abraham was content to take his flocks to live in the more barren land of Canaan, yet he accumulated even more wealth there.

Abraham, however, is remembered more as the grand patriarch of the Lord’s covenant people. One of the first references we have of the payment of tithing is when Abraham paid a tithe of all he owned to Melchizedek. 15 Abraham had the confidence of the Lord, who showed him the intelligences of the premortal world, the choosing of a Redeemer, and the Creation. 16 Abraham is also known for his willingness to sacrifice his son, Isaac. This tremendous act of faith is symbolic of the ultimate selfless act in all of history, when the Savior gave His life for all of us to atone for our sins.

Some years ago a young “Korean boy took his weekly allowance and bought newspapers with it. Then he and some friends sold these on the streets of Seoul, Korea, to raise money to help a fellow student who did not have sufficient funds to stay in school. This young man also gave part of his lunch to this boy each day so that he would not go hungry. Why did he do these things? Because he had been studying the story of the Good Samaritan 17 and didn’t just want to learn about the Good Samaritan but wanted to know what it felt like to be one by doing what a Good Samaritan would do. ... Only after careful questioning by his father about his activities” 18 did he admit, “But, Dad, every time I help my friend, I feel I’m becoming more like the Good Samaritan. Besides that, I want to help my classmates who aren’t as fortunate as I. It’s not that big of a thing I am doing. I read about it in my seminary manual and felt it was the thing I ought to do.” 19 The boy did not ask, “What’s in it for me?” before performing this kindness. In fact, he did it without any thought of recompense or recognition.

On September 11, 2001, the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York City were hit by terrorist-controlled airliners that caused both towers to collapse. Thousands of people were killed. Out of this tragedy have come hundreds of stories of courageous, unselfish acts. One very poignant and heroic account is the *Washington Post*’s story of retired army Colonel Cyril “Rick” Rescorla, who was working as vice president for corporate security of Morgan Stanley Dean Witter.

Rick was a very experienced ex-military combat leader. He was in his office when “the first plane struck the north tower at 8:48 A.M. ... He took a call from the 71st floor reporting the fireball in One World Trade Center, and he immediately ordered an evacuation of all 2,700 employees in Building Two,” as well as 1,000 more in Building Five. Using his bullhorn, he moved up the floors, working through a bottleneck on the 44th and going as high as the 72nd, helping to evacuate the people from each floor. One friend who saw Rick reassuring people in the 10th-floor stairwell told him, “Rick, you’ve got to get out, too.”

“As soon as I make sure everyone else is out,” he replied.

“He was not rattled at all. He was putting the lives of his colleagues ahead of his own.” He called headquarters to say he was going back up to search for stragglers.

His wife had watched the United Airlines jet go through his tower. “After a while, her phone rang. It was Rick.

“ ‘I don’t want you to cry,’ he said. ‘I have to evacuate my people now.’

“She kept sobbing.

“ ‘If something happens to me, I want you to know that you made my life.’

“The phone went dead.” Rick did not make it out.

“Morgan Stanley lost only six of its 2,700 employees in the south tower on Sept. 11, an isolated miracle amid the carnage. And company officials say Rescorla deserves most of the credit. He drew up the evacuation plan. He hustled his colleagues to safety. And then he apparently went back into the inferno to search for stragglers. He was the last man out of the south tower after the World Trade Center bombing in 1993, and no one seems to doubt that he would’ve been again last month if the skyscraper hadn’t collapsed on him first.”

Amid the great evil and carnage of September 11, 2001, Rick was not looking for what might be in it for him; instead he was unselfishly thinking about others and the danger they were in. Rick Rescorla was the “right man in the right place at the right time.” Rick, “a 62-year-old mountain of a man coolly [sacrificed] his life for others.”²⁰ As the Savior Himself said, “Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.”²¹

Most of us don’t demonstrate our unselfishness in such a dramatic way, but for each of us unselfishness can mean being the right person at the right time in the right place to render service. Almost every day brings opportunities to perform unselfish acts for others. Such acts are unlimited and can be as simple as a kind word, a helping hand, or a gracious smile.

The Savior reminds us, “He that findeth his life shall lose it: and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it.”²² One of life’s paradoxes is that a person who approaches everything with a what’s-in-it-for-me attitude may acquire money, property, and land, but in the end will lose the fulfillment and the happiness that a person enjoys who shares his talents and gifts generously with others.

I wish to testify that the greatest fulfilling service to be rendered by any of us is in the service of the Master. In the various pursuits of my life, none has been as rewarding or beneficial as responding to the calls for service in this Church. Each has been different. Each one has brought a separate blessing. The greatest fulfillment in life comes by rendering service to others, and not being obsessed with “what’s in it for me.” Of this I bear witness in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Gospel topics: generosity, greed, sacrifice, service