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Presentation Transcript
Narcissism #20070906
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The title of this presentation is *Narcissism*.

Good afternoon everyone. Good to see all of you.

A family came into my office some time ago at the clinic where I work, and the man and woman had both been married previously, and each of them brought children to the new marriage. It was a blended family. They were having some problems they needed help with. They were both very religious people, but two different churches. She had a teenage son. The man and his stepson had actually been in a physical altercation over what the father called, "Boundary issues." And he had a daughter who was eleven, and she and her stepmother weren't getting along at all. Then they had a child that was their's together that was two years old.

The situation between the mother and the stepdaughter was pretty intense, too. She'd actually accused her stepmother of abusing her physically. The police had been involved, and child protective services and all that. For a while the child was out of the home, living with his sister. So it was a pretty complex situation.

His ex-wife found out about the situation with her daughter and the stepmother, and so she was really afraid for her daughter, and she was beginning to resist the parenting agreement that they'd both agreed on during their divorce. So I suggested that we all get together and talk about that. During that meeting, she told the man, that had been her husband before, that she left him for one reason because in the end, he always got his way. One way or another, he would find a way to get what he wanted. He would steam-roll her, or he would manipulate her or whatever. So that was kind of a red flag for me.

And then, over the course of the sessions I had with this family, I learned that he was seeing a psychiatrist and was on several really powerful psychotropic drugs. And he told me he had been diagnosed with bipolar disorder and that he tended to be more depressive than he did manic. And he also told me he had a sister who was afflicted with bipolar disorder and that his father had it as well. In my dealing with his mother, it was obvious

that she was very controlling and manipulative, too. And it probably wouldn't come as a surprise to anybody that this man and his wife were having marital problems as well. And so, as a part of their family, I offered to work with them to help them learn to communicate better. And they gratefully accepted.

Well, the first thing that I wanted to do was to teach them how to talk to each other in such a way that they didn't put the other one on the defensive. And to do that you have to take out all the judgments, all the accusations. You have to, pretty much, stop saying, "You," and start saying, "I." I asked them to pick an issue that they could talk about that was *not* a hot button issue, but something that they disagreed about.

We were working on that and, when it was his first turn to talk, he said he thought his wife was lying about her motives regarding something that she had done. In my translating that to her – to show him how to talk to his wife – I said, "I'm not sure what you expected me to do in that situation, and there must have been some reason why you said this when it seems to me the opposite was what was going on." Instead of accusing her, I tried to get underneath what she said to what she wanted. And when I did that, he interrupted me, and told me that he didn't agree with my approach. He believed in "*conflict resolution*, where you get right down to it." That was his direct quote. Conflict resolution is a way of talking to people that *doesn't* arouse offensiveness. So we *were* using conflict resolution technique, but *his* idea of conflict resolution was to just *blast* the other person. Just to make sure I got his point, he reconfirmed his belief that his wife was a chronic liar. That was the term he used to describe her while she sat there on the couch beside him. She may have been. I don't know. But accusing her of it isn't any way to help her drop her defenses and be able to hear what he has to say. So I asked him to bear with me. And he agreed.

We were starting to come to the point in the therapy where all the getting acquainted is done, and all the understanding of the problems is over with, and all the dancing around is over, and now we're getting to the part of the therapy where "the rubber meets the road," and where people are going to have to start changing if they want to see any improvement.

Thirty minutes before that "rubber meets the road" session, he called me and told me that they weren't coming any longer. I brought up the case in supervision the next day. My supervisor made a very interesting observation. He said, "Well, he may be bipolar, but that has nothing to do with why he dropped therapy." (I'll just take time out here before I go on with what he said. Bipolar disorder is a genetically based major mental illness. What my boss was telling is that this bipolar thing – with the manic and the depressive phases – *isn't* what caused him to do that.) He said, "This guy is also narcissistic." And that's a personality trait. He went on to explain a little bit about how that fit in with what had happened, and he said, "People who are that way generally think that they're smarter than everybody else, that they know more than other people, and, because they think that way about themselves, it's just a very small step to also believe that they should get their way, because they know better than other people. And so he always thinks that he should have his way. He turned off one woman, and now he's in the process of alienating

another one. And when you get close to his imperfections, he can't stand it, because he can't allow himself to see himself as anything less than great. So he fired you."

I bring it up because it really was a little bit on the subtle side at first – the way he came on. Narcissism is very hard to treat because people who have that problem are usually blind to it and they believe they know better than the therapist. So they're really very resistant, usually, to therapy.

What is narcissism exactly? When is pride just a normal thing and when is it a very serious issue? Does the Bible refer to this at all? What does it say about it? If a person is narcissistic, can they overcome it? And if you live with a narcissistic mate, could it be dangerous even for you? What can be done about it? We're going to talk about some of those things today.

To begin with narcissism – it's kind of a funny sounding word, isn't it? – comes from a character in Greek mythology. Narcissus, a handsome youth in the tale, didn't think that any of his female suitors were worthy of his great beauty. And, when the gods condemned him for it, his punishment was to look at his reflection in a pool. Of course, he loves doing that. And he stares at himself lovingly for so long that, eventually, he simply just withers away and dies. So that's where the term comes from. Freud was the first to use the Greek story to describe a personality trait.

What definition can we put to it? The literature says that narcissism is a personality trait where a person has a much higher regard for and love for themselves than they do for others.

Now most of us have a problem loving other people as much as we love ourselves. That's what the scripture tells us. But we're talking about something that's a quantum leap ahead of where most people normally are. It helps to think of it as a continuum. On one end you may encounter people who have, what we could call, just a personality style of being self-centered. And they're generally psychologically healthy, but it may be hard to be around them, because they are sometimes arrogant, sometimes proud, sometimes shrewd, sometimes confident, sometimes self-centered, and, quite frequently, determined to be at the top. But most of those people do not have an unrealistic image of their skills and worth and are not dependent on praise to sustain a healthy self-esteem.

My boss commented, after I told everybody that I'd been fired, that he was glad that I didn't always need constant reinforcement – positive reinforcement. And I said, "Yeah, that would make me a narcissist, too, wouldn't it?" You know, most of us can take the disappointments of life in stride most of the time, because we have a healthy sense of ourselves. One failure doesn't mean disaster for us.

And these people that are just sort of on the mild end of the continuum, they're sometimes unpleasant to be around or overbearing. Sometimes that's true socially, or professionally, or just in interpersonal encounters. But usually they aren't really mentally ill. It doesn't cause a problem. They *are* employable. And they can function in life. If you

ever saw the movie *Jerry McGuire*.... (I realize no one here has seen that movie, but...oh, you did? Oh good.) Well, you might, after you see that movie, recognize that every athlete in the world is narcissistic, but not to the point of having a personality disorder – just have a personality style. You think about the Cuba Gooding character – he won an Oscar for the performance – and before they would go walk the floor at these big events, where the agents would bring their athletes to make connections with all the different sponsors and one thing and another, Jerry would stand beside him and say, “You are the *man!* You are the most impactful wide receiver in the game today! Unstoppable force on and off the field! You are blah, blah, blah, blah.” And Cuba Gooding would go...you know, he wanted more pumping up. Right? (Wasn't his name Tibbs? I can't remember the character's name. Anyway...I'm going to have to watch it tonight, just to make sure.) That's kind of an example of a narcissistic personality style. And all the athletes in that movie were kind of like that. And I think there are some careers where it, kind of, is helpful to be that way – not in your *personal* life – but in your career. That's one end of the spectrum.

And then at the *other* end of that continuum – and we run into people like this a lot less frequently – who are really, genuinely, mentally ill with this issue – the narcissistic personality type. And that's a person who is persistently unable to establish a realistic, stable self-image and is, therefore, creating an overdependence on others to regulate the way they feel about themselves. And this very much affects – the unrealistic self-image – affects how people with this disorder behave and interact with other people.

So, here are some of the signs and symptoms of narcissistic personality disorder: a grandiose sense of one's own abilities or achievements – you know, *way* out of proportion to what they've actually accomplished; fantasies about having exceptional power, attractiveness or success; a sense of belonging to an exclusive group of people who truly understand each other; a need for constant praise; expectations of special treatment – in other words, that entitlement schema that some people have, where they just think that, because they're so much better than others, they deserve a lot better than other people. They also tend to exploit other people, because they feel better than.... They also have a lack of empathy for others, because it's all about them. You know, Toby Keith wrote a song about “just once in awhile I wanta talk about me.” That's kind of a narcissist singing about a narcissist, I think. And then there's also the envy of other people, or a belief that you are the subject of other people's envy – you know, they all want to be like me. And then haughty or arrogant behaviors. Those are some of the things that are listed in the literature about that kind of personality. And all this to the extent that it causes a lot of problems in their personal life – in their marriage, and job, with their kids – things like that.

They sometimes come across as conceited or snobbish. They, a lot of times, will monopolize the conversation – not because they're really excited about something, but just because they think they have the right to – that what they have to say is more interesting, more important than what other people would say. They may belittle or look down on people they perceive as inferior, which is almost everyone else, except for a little select group of people that they are close to. When they don't receive the special

treatment to which they feel entitled, they can become impatient, angry, or even abusive sometimes. People with narcissistic personality disorder tend to seek out individuals whom they perceive as equal to their own self-image, or to whom they attribute the same special talents and qualities they see in themselves.

And they also, quite frequently, insist on having the best of everything – you know, car, athletic clubs, social circles – because they deserve it. And they're personal relationships and interactions are driven by the need for admiration and praise. And I'm thinking of Cuba Gooding there in the lobby of the hotel when I think of that. He did that so well.

People with narcissistic personality disorder value others primarily according to how well those individuals *affirm* their unrealistic self-image. This limited value of others usually means that people with the disorder aren't interested in, or aren't capable of perceiving, the feelings or needs of other people, because they're all wrapped up in themselves – self-centered.

They may take advantage of other people to make themselves look as good as they imagine. We're starting to think about people that are in prison. A lot of those people are very, very self-centered. They just use other people to get what they want. If somebody criticizes an individual's contribution to a project at work, for example, a lot of times they'll see that as a direct, frontal assault on them personally, because that's how they pump themselves up – by their accomplishments. They'll experience shame and humiliation, or sadness, and then rage, or disdain, or extreme defensive behaviors.

I was talking to a young woman once, trying to understand a relationship between two teenagers, and she told me that the girl probably did a lot of listening to the boy, while he did a lot of boasting and talking about his goals, plans, intelligence, capabilities, etc. And she pointed out that the girl was probably kind of like a worshipful groupie to this guy. That kind of fed the fragile self-esteem of the boy, which always had to be propped up with a lot of self-centered talk. And she pointed out that it's quite probable that the only way the relationship can exist is if she maintains that worshipful pose with him. And I know that this boy had been on a number of Internet forums, where he had alienated everybody with his demeaning, mean-minded put-downs, and arrogant talk. That was the only way that they could relate.

Now, at the extreme end of this continuum – and not everybody with this disorder is like this – but men, especially, can be really cunning and cruel. And they know just what to say and how to find enabling women. And they know just what to say to win them over. Once married to them, they know how to hold them in a web of manipulation and ill treatment. These people often have affairs and are very abusive. They don't think that there's any problem with them having an affair or being unfaithful, because whatever they want is what they should have. They don't care about the feelings of other people.

Okay, so what are the causes of this personality trait? What causes people to become this way. The book says that the exact cause of narcissistic personality disorder is unknown. And what that means is, it's never just one thing. That's always the way it is in life, isn't

it? There's always more than one factor that comes to bear on any problem. Researchers have identified childhood developmental factors and parenting as probably the primary things that affect it.

- An oversensitive temperament on the part of a child.... You know, some kids are just more sensitive than other people.
- Overindulgence and over evaluation by parents.
- One of things they also found was when a kid is valued by parents as a means to regulate their own self-esteem – the proud father at the Little League game, whose whole image of himself is riding on what his kid can accomplish. Kids get a lopsided view of their own worth when things like that happen.
- Excessive admiration that is never balanced with realistic feedback. The term *spoiled brat* comes to mind there. Essentially, narcissistic people are either spoiled brats or abused children – and sometimes, some of both.
- Unpredictable or unreliable care giving from parents is associated with that. So it has to do with attachment issues as well.
- Severe emotional abuse in childhood can provide that really weak self-esteem, and the narcissism is a compensation for that.
- Being praised for perceived exceptional looks or talents by adults. Remember when you were little, how things adults said got blown out of proportion in your own mind? I think I was five or six when this happened, but I remember her sitting at her desk finishing balancing the checkbook, and she made the off-hand comment, “We’re going to have to watch our Ps and Qs this month. We’re kind of down to the wire.” Well, I somehow manufactured that into we were going to be kicked out into the street and not have anything to eat. I didn’t understand the perspective. I just picked up that my mother was a little worried and I took it somewhere it didn’t need to go. Kids can do that in a positive way about things that are said about their appearance and stuff like that.
- Learning manipulative behavior from parents can be a part of that, because they tend to be really manipulative.
- People with narcissistic personality disorder, a lot of times, have other psychological impairments – like the man I was mentioning was also bipolar.
- They can also have suicidal thoughts.
- Impaired interpersonal and family relationships.
- Chronic feelings of being unwell or unhappy.
- Emotionally abusive behaviors.

There's also times in our life when it's just natural to be a little bit more self-centered than other times. Kids, if parents divorce, think it's their fault. “It's all about me. I'm the problem.” That's a negative way.

Teenagers, when they're having trouble in school, can think that they're the only ones that can't get their homework done – another way to be self-centered.

I had a family in my office not too long ago, and the boy had volunteered to referee some sporting events to help out. The way it worked was, if your team is involved in this league, then your team has to provide a certain number of referees to referee other teams' games. So he volunteered to do some. But toward the end of the season, he didn't want to do it anymore. He was going to quit. So his dad sat there – Dad was really a nice guy – and he gave one of the best speeches I have ever heard on being responsible. He talked about how, “When you want me to be there, I'm always there for you, and you need to learn how to do this.” So the boy sat there and listened to his dad give this really great speech, and after listening to it, he said, “I don't care. I'm tired of it. I'm going to quit.” (“It's all about me and what I want. It doesn't matter that this guy is going to get left high and dry after I promised him I'd do it. I just don't want to do it anymore.”) So his mother was sitting there ready to strangle him, so after that session she called me about something else, and I referred her back to that incident. And I said, “He's just acting like a fifteen-year-old boy acts sometimes.” And they'd already been told that by one of his teachers. They said, “He just acting like a fifteen-year-old boy.” Some of them it doesn't hit until they're eighteen or nineteen, and some it's thirteen, but somewhere in there, it's going to happen. I told her, “He's going to grow out of it. And he's going to become just like his dad. He's going to become a really responsible person, just like his father, because that's the example he's seen all of his life. He's just trying this irresponsible thing on, and he's going to find out he doesn't really like it.”

Now, let's talk about narcissism and the Bible. Let's go to 2 Timothy 3. I read you a list of narcissistic traits a minute ago. I want you to see how many of them you can find here. 2 Timothy 3:1 – Paul said to Timothy:

2 Tim. 3:1 – *But mark this, there will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money – you know, thinking that they need to have the best stuff, right? – boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with them. They are the kind who worm their way into homes and gain control over weakwilled women, who are loaded down with sins and are swayed by all kinds of evil desires.*

I mean, that's a pretty clear picture of narcissistic personality, isn't it? So it's not new! It's been around a long time.

Let's look at some examples of narcissism in the Bible. The first one I always think of is Saul. Saul was told by God to slay all of the Amalekites and all of their animals – have nothing to do with them – kill them all. They were child sacrificers. And they were the ones that would always, when they were in wilderness, attack from behind and wipe out the elderly and the children – the ones that couldn't keep up. They were a very treacherous, cruel people. And Saul kept the animals. And he kept Agag alive. You know the famous speech that Samuel gave him. When he asked him if he'd done as God said, and he said, “Yes,” “Well, what's this bleating of sheep that I hear in my ears?” Because all the animals hadn't been killed yet. Well, then later, because of his disobedience – you

know, he thought he knew best, right? – made some excuse. But later...you can get away with that with people. You can manipulate people, but you can't manipulate God. So God said, "Well, because you've done this, I'm going to replace you as king." And so then he became depressed and had manic episodes. Remember, one minute he was so depressed that David had to play his harp to lift his spirits – he's all down – and the next minute, he's trying to pin him to the wall with a spear. So, very a much a picture of the narcissistic personality with, probably, some bipolar thrown in there. I believe it references demon involvement, too, in that case.

The next one is in Esther, the 6th chapter, verse 4. I'm very sorry, but at this point I'm going to have to reference another movie. There's a movie out now – it didn't make into the theaters, I don't think – but it's called *One Night with the King*, and it's an account of Esther and Purim. Pretty historically accurate, I think. I just watched that the other day, and it reminded me of Haman, who is the narcissistic character. The king said, in verse 4 of Esther 6:

Esther 6:4 – *“Who is in the court?” Now, Haman had just entered the outer court of the palace to speak to the king about hanging Mordecai on the gallows he had erected for him. And his attendants answered, “Haman is standing out in the court.” “Bring him in,” the king ordered. And when Haman entered, the king asked him, “What should be done for the man the king delights to honor?” Now, here's the big clue. Now Haman thought to himself, “Who is there that the king would rather honor than me?” I mean, it's just a natural! You know, it's a no brainer! I'm the guy! So he answered the king, “For the man the king delights to honor, have them bring a royal robe the king has worn, and a horse the king has ridden – one with a royal crest placed on its head – and then, let the robe and the horse be entrusted to one of the king's most noble princes....” Notice that it wasn't money wanted, but it was praise and fame, adulation, worship. “Then, let the robe and the horse be entrusted to one of the king's most noble princes, and let them robe the man the king delights to honor and lead him on the horse through the city streets, proclaiming before him, ‘This is what is done for the man the king delights to honor!’” “Go at once,” the king commanded Haman, “get the robe and the horse and do just as you've suggested to Mordecai, the Jew, who sits at the king's gate. And do not neglect anything have recommended.”*

And then the last example I wanted to quote is in 3 John 1:9. This is a very important thing to understand. John said here – and this is way late in church history, right? – one of the last books written in the New Testament era. John said:

3 Jn. :9 – *I wrote to the church, Diotrophes, who loves to be first, will have nothing to do with us. So here you have some guy that won't even accept an apostle, who sat at the feet of Jesus Christ Himself, and was one of the twelve. So if I come, I will call attention to what he is doing – gossiping maliciously about us. Not satisfied with that, he refuses to welcome the brothers. He also stops those who want to do so, and puts them out of the church. He was disfellowshipping people from his congregation that had anything to do with John. And the reason, it says – the ways it's put in the King James – he loved the preeminence. So he's a very self-centered, narcissistic person.*

The reason I mention this example is because we seem to be afflicted in this same way in the Church of God today. We've been told that love is the greatest value of all, and yet, there are people who will tear whole congregations apart over doctrinal issues. And what is it about doctrine? Well, some people just *love* to be *right* – or thought of as right. It's a power thing. It's a control thing. They want to manipulate other people so they can be strong. And when they do that, love just goes out the window. The scripture labels that as spiritual immaturity.

So we see, once again – and we have seen this over and over again in this series – that mental health issues delay spiritual development. That's why it's so important to understand mental health issues and how they affect us spiritually.

Okay, what else does the Bible say. Well, let's go to Proverbs 11, verse 2. This is the other end of the continuum – or it can be.

Prov. 11:2 – *When pride comes, then comes shame. But with the lowly is wisdom.* It's never good to be proud – to think more highly of ourselves than we ought.

Another one is in Proverbs 9:7. Just some good common sense here. How do you deal with narcissistic people?

Prov. 9:7 – *Whoever corrects a mocker invites insult. Whoever rebukes a wicked man incurs abuse. Do not rebuke a mocker or he will hate you. Rebuke a wise man and he will love you.* Somebody who has a healthy sense of self can accept correction a lot more easily than someone who is extremely fragile.

So the Bible calls people that are narcissistic *mockers* – *scorners*, I believe the word is in the King James.

The last point I wanted to make about the Bible and narcissism is found in Isaiah 66:2. Turn with me there. Why is narcissism so dangerous, spiritually, for us? God says in Isaiah 66:2:

Isa. 66:2 – *“Has not My hand made all of these things?”* He just got done saying that He created everything. *“And so they came into being,” declares the LORD. “But this one thing I esteem.”* Here's something that really gets my attention. *“He who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at My word.”* Diotrophes didn't tremble at God's word, did he? The narcissistic man is sick right at the very point of the beginning of spirituality – and that's believing that *God* knows more than we do. Narcissistic people believe that *they* know best.

That narcissistic man who called his wife a liar? He was a very religious person. And yet he wasn't living any of his religion. I explained to him – and I only did this in therapy

because I knew that he would understand what I was saying – that the apostle Paul told us that we were not only to speak the truth, but we were to speak it *in love*. But he values his own opinions over the Bible, so it's more important to say it like he wants to say it than it is to be loving about it in his presentation.

Let's talk about overcoming narcissism right now. How do we treat it? It's very hard to treat. As I explained before, most narcissists don't see any need to be treated. They think they're fine – better than fine – better than everybody else. So why would they need to be treated. The only time they *do* go for treatment is usually when it's so bad that they've lost so much they can't maintain themselves anymore. To be treated they do need the help of others, and that's a blind spot for them. But sometimes the problems they generate for themselves cause everything to crumble and sometimes you can get them to see the need for that.

But what we do with them...really, all the literature says the only real treatment for it is psychotherapy. Drugs don't stop you from being self-centered. It's a personality thing. It's not a biological brain thing. Therapy does help. And what we try to do is help them restructure the way they think – and usually that means presenting the evidence before them – that they need to think less of themselves – and also, to piece together the story of their childhood and how that affected them, so they can come to see what that's done to them. You know, "I'm this way, because....and it's because of X problem, and I need to be more realistic." That's kind of how we think about it.

I was thinking about that and the cure in the Bible is essentially the same thing. You know, God telling us, "Get real and be humble." That's what you have to do. We need to restructure our own personality.

If you *live* with a narcissistic person, that's another issue. You know, there's a reason why people are attracted to a narcissistic person. And that has to do with another type of personality trait. And therapy is good for that, too.

We were watching a show just the other day, where this guy had, at times, locked his wife in the basement and told their kids that she was acting crazy, so she needed to be locked up. And she lived with him for eleven years, telling herself that he was going to change. And he'd run around on her. And he'd lied about finances. He'd just treated her terribly. And she stayed with him for eleven years. What's wrong with this picture? He wasn't good to the kids either. And she sat there and tolerated all of that eleven years. Well, there was something in her that caused her to need to believe that he would change. And *that* is *her* problem. And that's probably a presentation for another day, isn't it, because we've run out of our time.

That's a bit about narcissism, which is increasing, just like Paul said it was going to. It's becoming increasingly more common and it's seriously affecting the mental and spiritual health of our society.