Are you self-centered? Most would say, “No.” But perhaps more of us have a selfish attitude problem than we care to admit. Here are five signs I may have an out-of-place attitude. See if you can relate to any of these:

1. **I habitually look at things mostly from the standpoint of how they affect me.** Whether they admit it to themselves or not, self-centered people aren’t really that concerned about how other people are affected by a circumstance, as long as it works out for them. For someone with an out-of-bounds ego, it is extremely difficult to follow the Scriptural admonition to “look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others” (Philippians 2:3-4).

2. **I find myself frequently being offended and hurt by other people.** Since self-centered people see themselves as the center of their universe, they interpret what other people say and do mostly in light of how it impacts them. That often causes them to be offended by unintended slights. For example, the fact that an acquaintance who passes them by without speaking may be distracted by their own thoughts may not occur to a self-centered person. They receive it as that person intentionally ignoring them.

3. **I frequently mistrust and dislike people.** Because self-centered individuals usually evaluate others based on the effect that person’s actions have on themselves, they will often be distressed by other people’s lack of consideration toward them. People who neglect or refuse to pay them proper attention obviously cannot be trusted, and are not worthy of being liked or respected.

4. **I am often surprised and dismayed by negative reactions of others to things I say or do.** A self-centered attitude keeps us so focused in on ourselves, that we totally miss how the things we say and do, or just the attitudes we display, affect other people.

Many times when a husband or wife walks out of a marriage, the other spouse is shocked and devastated. They didn’t see it coming. Their self-centeredness kept them from being aware of the other person’s pain.

5. **Most of my thoughts and conversation have to do with what’s going wrong in my life.** Self-centered people are, of course, absorbed with self. Since they are at the center of their universe, and other people are there basically to serve their needs and desires, they naturally complain when the rest of the world isn’t doing its proper job for them.

Today, Paul tells us to have an attitude adjustment. He says, “your attitude should be the same as that of Jesus Christ.” Now, we can’t just say: “OK, I’ll have his attitude.” Paul knew this. Instead, he leads us to it by showing us what Jesus’ attitude was.

I. Jesus cared for us first

First of all, we’ll want to find out what Jesus’ attitude was. In order to do that, we will have to put ourselves in Jesus’ shoes. Today’s text said that he “was in very nature God,” (6) and that he was equal with God. That translates into meaning that Jesus had all of the power in
the world. He could have established a great kingdom on earth. He could have had legions of
angels available at his beckon call. But what did Jesus do? Jesus “did not consider equality with
God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness” (6-7). Another way of translating this would be, “he did not
consider equality with God as a prize to be displayed.” In ancient days, when a king would win
a victory over a neighboring enemy, he would return to town with all of the booty that they had
stolen from that town. He would put it on display in an arrogant manner showing the people
what a glorious victory he had achieved. Jesus did not do that with his power. He didn’t display
it in an arrogant manner. He could have appeared as a powerful ruler, but instead, he just acted
like your run-of-the-mill ordinary man.

This is clearly seen in the way that Jesus entered into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. He
could have ridden in on the wings of angels. He could have come in a thunderstorm with the fire
of the Lord behind him, or on a war horse. But instead Jesus rode in on a donkey—no light
show—nothing special. And then instead of establishing a great kingdom, Jesus died on a cross.
The question is, “Why?” Why didn’t Jesus use his power? Why did Jesus have the
attitude that said, “I’m not going to flex my muscles?” The chief priests and elders even said
they would believe in him if he came down from the cross. They kept taunting him. They
couldn’t understand. If he is who he says he is, why doesn’t he come down? They figured that if
he really had the power to come down, he would have. So why didn’t he?

Paul gives us the reason in 2 Corinthians 8:9: “You know the grace of our Lord Jesus
Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his
poverty might become rich.” It was only God’s grace, Jesus’ undeserved love for us sinners,
which wanted to see us become rich—that made him give up everything he had for us. Jesus
became poor. He didn’t use his power and went to the cross because he wanted to see us inherit
heaven. Jesus’ attitude was “I don’t care how much I have to give up for myself. I’m even
willing to die on a cross so my created people will go to heaven.” The attitude of Jesus was a
deep concern, not for himself, but for mankind.

II. We want to care for me first

A while back I received a flyer in the mail for a home business. It said in colorful letters
“Unlock the power of YOU.” It showed pictures of happy people—people driving cars, flying
airplanes, graduating from college. The idea was that if you unlock your potential, then you can
achieve whatever you want. You hear the same idea on TV, at the movies, and in business. It’s
all over the place. Unlock the power of YOU. Reach your full potential. Be all that you can be.

Psychologists are saying that our western culture is narcissistic. We are concerned with
ourselves, our happiness, our needs being met. This me-first attitude has had a devastating effect
in a couple of areas I wish to focus on. The first is marriage.

When people today are looking for a spouse, do you know what the number one criteria
is that they are looking for? “Someone who won’t change me.” They look at marriage as a
consumer agreement, similar to the relationship they have with their grocery store. “I’ll shop at
this grocery store, but if I find a better deal somewhere else, I’ll go there.” This is how many
approach relationships. I’ll be with this person as long as they meet my needs, but if they stop,
I'll stop and look for a better deal somewhere else.” Marriage was meant to be a life-long covenant, a contract between two people. This provides the security God intended for spouse as well as children. “But he loves me, pastor.” But he doesn’t love you enough to give up his independence for you. He doesn’t love you enough to commit himself unconditionally to you. That is the sad reality in many cases.

The majority of divorces in this country are what psychologists call “low conflict” divorces. That means there are no huge fights, no domestic abuse, couples simply say they “fall out of love” and that their spouse is “no longer meeting their needs.” That view of marriage is extremely self-centered and individualistic. People who get divorced for these reasons don’t understand that marriage is much more than getting your personal needs met. God created marriage to be a life-long commitment that involves self-sacrifice, forbearing with one another in love, and putting your spouse’s needs above your own.

The church has also been crippled by self-centeredness. When most people wake up on Sunday morning the question is, “What do I want to do?” When “What do I want” determines what I do with my time, as well as what is right and wrong, there is no room for God or others. Even life-long church-goers can easily slip into self-centeredness by letting our life with God become nothing more than culture, nothing more than routine.

III. A me first attitude only leads to destruction

What is the result of this turn toward self-centeredness? Loneliness. According to polls people today are lonelier than we have ever been. Relationships are shallow and stay that way or end. The church and Bible is considered irrelevant, a dinosaur or a bygone era, with little or no bearing on my life. I determine right and wrong. I determine what is best for me. Is it any wonder that we are so lonely with attitudes like this?

What would have happened if Jesus had had this attitude? What if Jesus had bought into the idea that he should “Be all that he could be?” What if Jesus had ridden into town on the wings of angels? If Jesus showed his power and came down from the cross, many people would have believed in him. He would still be alive to this day. He would have a great following today—maybe the whole world would follow his every word. All doctrinal questions would be answered. There wouldn’t be twenty thousand denominations. He would have a great following most likely. After all, who wouldn’t want to follow such a powerful speaker who could heal people and do miracles? But what good would that do? He would have gotten all of the glory that he deserves. But everyone would still be on their way to hell, since God’s punishment would not have been taken care of.

That is why Jesus went to the cross. That’s why Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey. Jesus went to die for that attitude. We can thank God that our selfish attitudes have even been covered by the blood of Christ. We can thank God that Jesus did not have our attitude. He didn’t demand “equal rights.” He didn’t demand that he use all of his powers. He unselfishly put his abilities and powers on the shelf for a time as he went to the cross. He did it all for us so that we would look perfect in God’s sight.
IV. Jesus’ attitude works the best

That’s the attitude that God wants us to have. Just prior to today’s text, Paul explained it very simply (Philippians 2:4): “Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.” Jesus was concerned with one thing. It wasn’t how much power he used or how many talents he showed off to other people. It wasn’t as if he didn’t use his talents. He used them. But whenever he did he had one purpose—to build other people’s faith. If it didn’t serve that purpose he didn’t use his talents. That’s the lesson that Paul wants us to learn. Follow Jesus’ attitude. Maybe you aren’t reaching your full potential in what you are doing. Maybe you have the ability to make a lot more money. Maybe you have the talents to become a great politician or a movie star. But if it is better for your family that you stay home, then look to their interests first. The attitude of Jesus is willing to sacrifice what I want or I can do for the good of others.

The beauty of it is that it all works out in the end. Jesus didn’t deserve to be crucified. He deserved to be glorified. He wasn’t worried about that. He was just worried about our happiness. But look at what happened in the end. “God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (9-11). Jesus deserved exaltation and he got it. He is now using his power in ways that we can’t even comprehend. He didn’t make full use of it for a while, but now he is. On Palm Sunday, even though he rode in on a donkey the children praised him anyway. Jesus deserves that same praise right now. He doesn’t get it. People use his name as a curse word instead of using it as a name above all names. But God will take care of that. On Judgment Day, every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, whether they want to or not. God will see to that.

That’s what we need to remember. We can’t worry about “reaching our full potential” or “being all that we can be.” That’s not the attitude that God wants. Just have the attitude: “If what I’m doing is helping others, then I’m happy with that.”

A few years ago at the Seattle Special Olympics, nine contestants, all physically or mentally disabled, assembled at the starting line for the 100-yard dash. At the gun they all started out, not exactly in a dash, but with the relish to run the race to the finish and win. All, that is, except one boy who stumbled on the asphalt, tumbled over a couple of times, and began to cry. The other eight heard the boy cry. They slowed down and paused. Then they all turned around and went back. Every one of them. One girl with Down’s syndrome bent down and kissed him and said, “This will make it better.” Then all nine linked arms and walked together to the finish line.

Our culture says to be truly happy in life yourself and your needs in the center. We are discovering that this only leads to selfishness and ultimately loneliness. God has a better way. Look at what Jesus does for you this week. Put him in the center. Put the needs of others next. Put your own needs last. God will take care of you! Life isn’t all about how much we use our abilities or how much we develop ourselves. It’s about how we help others grow in faith and love. Jesus chose not to use his abilities, so we could have eternal salvation. No matter how many abilities you have, never be selfish about them. Be willing to use them, or not to use them,
to help others come to faith in Christ and stay in that faith. Have the same generous attitude of Jesus. Amen.