

Introduction: Welcome to Engage 360 Denver Seminary's podcast. Join us as we explore the redemptive power of the Gospel and the life changing truth of scripture at work in our culture today,

Dr. Don Payne: Hello again, from Denver Seminary. This is Engage 360, I'm Don Payne. Glad you're with us again. If you think about objects that have shaped culture profoundly there is one object that occurs to me is right at the top of that list. And that object is the mirror. If you, I don't know when mirrors were invented, I have not done any study of the technological evolution of the mirror. I know, in some fashion they've been around for a long time and they have many beneficial uses all the way from helping us make sure our clothes are on correctly to maybe finding untoward objects in our teeth to helping us see things we can't see from the other side of something many beneficial uses. But if you think about the function of the mirror in our culture, you realize they are everywhere. And that I'm going to generalize here, that every one of us or most every one of us find ourselves fascinated with looking at ourselves in a mirror. Now that may be a gross generalization, but mirrors are everywhere and they shape us profoundly.

Even in 1979, Christopher Lash wrote a best seller called the culture of narcissism, which examined how American culture has been profoundly shaped. At least since the 1950s, by an almost pathological narcissism. Of course, we get that word narcissism from the ancient Greek myth of Narcissus who was enchanted by his own reflection, in a pool of water. Now, any redemptive engagement with the world really understand, really demands that we have an increasing understanding of our world and how it needs redemption. And if narcissism self-absorption in one way or another is such an intrinsic part of our culture, the water we swim in, we need to give a little bit of attention to that. I was recently reminded of, I guess, I don't know if it's a fable or a joke where an old fish swims up alongside two younger fish and says to them how's the water boys? And the two younger fish says, what's water? So, we're often not even aware of the culture that we inhabit and our role in it, how it's shaped us and how in fact it needs redemption. So with all that said, we're really privileged again, this week to be joined by our colleague, Dr. Ron Welch, who is associate Dean of our counseling division. And has given a lot of attention to this, Ron, to have you back.

Dr. Ron Welch: Glad to be with you. Thanks for asking me to spare some time with you.

Dr. Don Payne: I think last time, you and I chatted on the podcast. We talked a lot about baseball. I'm not, I don't remember what else we talked about, but I remember the baseball conversation.

Dr. Ron Welch: As long as the Dodgers are mentioned, I'm good.

Dr. Don Payne: Well, Ron has given, as I mentioned, a lot of attention to the subject of narcissism and, and probably can correct some misconceptions that float around about it and help us do a little bit of a deeper dive into it. Ron, first of all,

what really defines or characterizes narcissism at least from a clinical vantage point?

Dr. Ron Welch:

Well, initially you would think about terms like self absorption and self aggrandizement. You'd think about the idea of someone who thinks about nothing but themselves in the narcissist tradition, but in reality, most of narcissism is separated from what we call antisocial people. As you're aware, I spend a lot of time in the federal prison system, not as a inmate, but as a psychologist, not as a resident. But I did meet a lot of narcissistic, antisocial people. And I started realizing there's a big difference. Antisocial people really enjoy the pain they inflict on others. They're fine with other people getting hurt. And as some of the criminals I met in the prison system would say, if they didn't want to be a victim of a crime, they shouldn't have been there. It's outward projection that everything is everyone else's fault. And I can do whatever I want, and nobody really cares and should care because I get to get what I want.

So, then life becomes about as much power, sex, control, money, as you can get, narcissism is more a compensatory thing. And by that, I mean, rather than actually believing it, you're making up for not believing it. So let me give you an example. If you have a scared little boy that thinks they're not good enough at a sport, they're going to try to tell everybody how they are the starting pitcher on their baseball team when they haven't played in the last three games. If you're an anti-social kind of person, you're going to go out and be the person that beats the other team down, because that's how you prove your authority or your control. So one of the misconceptions in society about narcissism is that those people are significantly strong in self-esteem and love themselves, and think they're God's gift to everybody. In reality. Most of them are scared, just the opposite, anxious, worried and trying to make up for that by putting on a show for everyone else that creates the outward image of control.

Dr. Don Payne:

Well, I know that narcissism in whatever form, whatever expression has become the subject of quite a bit of research clinical research and even within ministry settings narcissism has become an object of inquiry because of how it seems to impact people in ministry settings. Why has this become such a focus of research?

Dr. Ron Welch:

Well, if you think about how churches operate, we have a CEO kind of mentality that's been applied to the church, right? So we have operating officers and we have financial chief officers, and we have people that are running administrative pastoral roles. Yeah, it's a business, right? And at least in larger churches and there are large numbers of staff members and large businesses and organizations they have to be interacted with. So decisions have to be made. And a lot of times they're made from the top down. And that creates a scenario where if someone is in a church, in a position of authority as a board chair or a executive Pastor, then it becomes very easy for them to be the person people look to, to make the decisions. And before you know, it, it's not God's church, it's Don's church. And so then narcissism and the desire to prove that you're really good at what you do, that God placed you in the right position. I've talked

with Pastors who even feel like they have to appear competent at all costs, because if they don't, they're letting the congregation down, they're not going to be the right role model. This is why pastors should get in trouble and end up in a variety of different experiences of sin. Won't talk to anybody about it and won't get help because they have to appear competent and.

Dr. Don Payne: Got to maintain the persona, the image.

Dr. Ron Welch: Yeah. The image, I mean, because they feel like that's what the congregation expects and that's what they're supposed to do, and that's what God expects. So then if you're also narcissistic and you need to do that, it's not that you want to control everyone or that you really feel that's what God may even want from you, but it's the only way, you know, to stay in control. And it scares the heck out of you to think about letting another team make a decision, because what if that decision is wrong and then it reflects poorly on you? Then other people will think you don't do your job.

Dr. Don Payne: Well, it is it also in some respect, a sort of a reinforcement of an image that leaders need to have of themselves, to go back to your previous comment, to kind of acquire what they want to be true of themselves?

Dr. Ron Welch: Well, you got an opening right there to go back to baseball. So I'm not going to pass it up, never as a coach. I mean, one of the things you want a pitcher to do when they go out there is you want them to know they're going to be successful. You want a batter to walk up to the plate. They may know they're going to strike out seven out of 10 times, but you want them to think this is the time they'll hit the home run. And it's all about picturing success. And that's true for a lot of people in ministry as well. They want to see what success looks like. They want to believe that, you know, the church, their planting is going to grow and everything's going to be great. And yet, on any given Saturday, they may be worried about Sunday and how many people are going to show up and not thinking it's going to go well. So then they've got to get back into the salesman mentality and think really positive things.

Dr. Don Payne: So our identity gets tied to that?

Dr. Ron Welch: Completely. Especially if everyone else around you is telling you, that's what they expect. And then you get into all the concepts that we'll talk about. I'm sure in a few minutes here related to how submission fits into that and headship and leadership and expectations. And suddenly it's really hard to get out of that merry-go-round that you find yourself on.

Dr. Don Payne: Well, how does that end up impacting people on the other end of a narcissistic leader?

Dr. Ron Welch: Well, full disclosure. If I want to talk about this, I have to talk about my own story to some degree and share a little bit about why I understand this topic so

well. I call myself a recovering narcissist. It's easier to describe it that way, but every day when I wake up, I have to fight the urge to make certain other people know that I'm okay. That I'm good enough. Even though I've had a lot of success in a lot of ways over my life, I've always questioned myself. And I've always wondered if there was never enough, never enough. And my wife would be the first one to tell you that the anxiety and the worry about failing about not succeeding is part of what defines me. And so I have to constantly be, if not perfect, at least striving for perfection, a lot of people have called me a type triple-A personality, because I tend to just keep trying to overachieve because maybe then I would feel that my family and my colleagues and my God are satisfied. But it's, it's never, you never, you never achieved that. So you're always trying to do the next thing. And that's, that's the life of a narcissist, it's intricately tied to anxiety because it's fear of not succeeding. And that's why I mentioned anti-social personality, because those folks aren't worried about anything. They're quite happy with whatever happens and they assume it'll go fine and they're not worried about anything.

Dr. Don Payne: Well, how does that then affect people who have to be around? Who have to be on the receiving end as it were of narcissists, how does it affect organizations? What does it do? What's the ripple effect of narcissism?

Dr. Ron Welch: It's so hard because everyone else sometimes is trying to protect you or trying to give you feedback that will make you feel good enough because they can sense. They see the outer image and they see how well you're trying to perform. And they often see people performing extremely well. You look at narcissists who are in church settings, and often they have huge congregations and the system is running great. And yet they're spending their evenings when they're by themselves, trying to figure out what else they can do to make it better. And so other people are never able to relax. They're always trying to prevent you from being anxious or worried. My wife will tell you that one of the hardest parts about 35 years with me is that she's always trying to think what might Ron think and how might he react and how could I maybe prevent that from being a bad thing. And that's not a fun way to live life. So I've learned with, with my professional roles, with personal roles, as a therapist, I've learned that I have to be incredibly aware of my tendency to need to be right.

And to need to have things go well because my mom, God bless her. She was a wonderful woman, but she, the glass was half empty and draining rapidly, right? I mean, she could see all the things that would go wrong around the corner. And I learned really well and sometimes was able to prevent some bad things, which was probably not good. And so a lot of times narcissists are trying to just avoid that bad thing. They're working as hard as they can to prevent a Sunday when only 40 people show up or they're trying to prevent that situation where a youth ministry doesn't thrive. And then they feel well, if I had only found the right person, maybe it would have, and I just need to keep checking on everything they're doing. So you'll find people around narcissists will always think that they're micromanaging or they're aware of everything. So I have to be very, very careful in my life to not micromanage, to trust people, to choose and

select people who are working with me that are gonna handle things well. And then when I get the urge to say, I should really check on that. It's kind of like in the prison system, I would always check the locks. Okay. So every now and then I have to say, you know what? I'm not going to check.

Dr. Don Payne: You use the spiritual discipline of not checking, not checking.

Dr. Ron Welch: Exactly. It is. It's a spiritual discipline because if I check, I'm not trusting God you're feeding the monster. I feeding the monster.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah. Now I'm no psychologist, obviously, but it sounds like that the anxiety that generates that narcissism or the anxiety, the fear that is the engine for all of that then gets kind of projected onto the ecologies, the relationships, the corporate or communal settings then that, that populate the world around a narcissist. So the big do they become anxious systems, they become anxious communities then?

Dr. Ron Welch: It depends on the level of awareness the individual has about their own limitations. Right. So if you're able to let people know, this is how I may end up being experienced, and you may see this, and here's what I'd like you to do. I'd like you to come talk to me and say, you know what you seem like you're pretty anxious and worried, and you're trying to control everything. And you can't do that because you told us not to let you do that. So knock it off. And if your team feels the permission to do that and start realizing, wow, so this Pastor is going to say, this is something I struggle with. Just like a Pastor might struggle with depression or anger is better off letting the flock know here's what I might do when I here's what sin looks like from me. Then the congregation can say, wow, in a meeting, I can tell the Pastor to knock it off.

Dr. Don Payne: That'd be cool. Yeah. And of course, we could extrapolate that out to leaders in a variety of settings. Absolutely.

Dr. Ron Welch: Absolutely. And you'll see that in politics, you'll see it in CEOs and business, the best CEOs are the ones who learn their own limitations, allow people around them to be the mirror for them because they can't, you use the analogy of a mirror. I'm my own worst mirror. A narcissist cannot see as much of themselves because they need other people to have their permission to say, you know what, here's the mirror and here's what you need.

Dr. Don Payne: So what a narcissist sees in the mirror is never the true picture. That's right. That's right. It's even if they're obsessed with it or absorbed in it, it's never the clear picture.

Dr. Ron Welch: If you've ever, we're worked with folks with eating disorders, they will draw a picture of their body image on the wall, what they think their body looks like. And then they'll stand up in the middle of it. And the body image will be totally different than everything they know to be true. And that research has

supported our understanding that our own image of ourselves is some of the worst self-assessment because we're just not good at seeing our own weaknesses and sin.

Dr. Don Payne: Let's talk about self-image because that's another very prominent conversation. And a really crucial concern is having, having a healthy self image. How does narcissism relate to the kind of, or differ from the kind of self-awareness that we would consider to be healthy and normal?

Dr. Ron Welch: It's really interesting because the research is pretty clear about how much consistency there is between those who are depressed and those who are narcissistic, because in a lot of cases, you would think narcissists, they're self-confident and they think they've got the world at their fingers. And in reality, it's a lot like a depressed person who is so scared or an anxious person. Who's so worried that they don't think things are going to go well, and they're pretty much waiting for the other shoe to drop. And that's kind of what it's like in terms of self image, there's a real lack of evidence-based truth. If that makes sense. You can have a really good day and a narcissist will look at that and say, yeah, but, and there's always this caveat of what could have been better. And so narcissistic people can't sit in and enjoy God's blessings. For instance, they would have to say, Hmm, I should have done something different. And the problem with that of course, is that it's like the quarterback, they get way too much credit for success and way too much blame for failure.

And a lot of what happens for narcissists is treatment and intervention. A lot of times, which is really hard, is looking at how little control they actually have and saying, you know, that, that great success you had with that sale in your business the other day, that really wasn't all about you. Anyway, there was a whole team of people involved. There was all sorts of luck. God's Providence was at work from the beginning. And you're not only gonna blame yourself too much for your failures. You're going to give yourself too much credit. And then when you can help someone take that away and say, I'm living in a broken world, that's unpredictable and things can go wrong. And I maybe can't prevent it in any way, shape or form. That's incredibly fearful, but it's true.

Dr. Don Payne: But it can be kind of liberating as well, if we can find our way into that spot. And that really opens we'll come back to this maybe in just a moment, but that really opens a sort of Gospel segue onto all of this, because it makes me think of the reality, the thickness of grace, and our capacity actually to live by grace, to receive what comes as a gift of God. And I've thought a lot about this theme of grace, and of course our English word, grace comes from the Latin word *gratia* from which we get other words like *gratuity* *gratuitous*. The French have a great word for that, *largesse*, just the bounty and the sort of openness of spirit that we theologically see coming from God are way undeserved, unmerited, unpredictable, unmanageable, incalculable. We just learn to receive that. And it strikes me that these anxious narcissistic tendencies we're talking about always work against grace, a life sustained by and receptive of grace. And that maybe studies in grace and doing you know, putting a drill into grace, maybe one of the

best antidotes and remedies for narcissism and the anxiety that generates that. I mean, is that fair?

Dr. Ron Welch: I agree. I agree completely. It's all about trust, right? And if you can't trust other people, you can't trust God, you have to be the solution. Then accepting grace becomes very difficult because it's sort of like, I got a gift and I didn't do anything about it. And I had nothing to do with it and no control over it. And I didn't earn it.

Dr. Don Payne: I'm just called to enjoy it, just to receive it and enjoy it.

Dr. Ron Welch: That's anathema to [inaudible].

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah. Which ironically, I mean, sadly, ironically can become a grace can become merely another theological word on paper, even that gets talked about a lot. But the reality of that, the substance of that is very, can be very remote, I suppose. Are there ways that narcissism maybe gets hidden or masked so that it's kind of difficult to detect. And then it goes on a dress and becomes even more toxic. So that happen?

Dr. Ron Welch: I think this is on a continuum from passive to aggressive and so aggressive narcissism, those folks who will show you in your face, what you need to know, so they'll be able to convince you that they're competent. That's pretty easy to see. It's not that hidden it's front door kind of stuff. I'm going to be so competent. You're going to see it. And I'm going to tell you about it. And sometimes it's even verbal where the person is going out of their way to tell you about their successes. But across the continuum, we get into passive aggressive and passive behaviors, things that our backdoor kind of entry places where someone will do things like try to control you by manipulating at a level you don't know about. Talking to other people to make certain that they vote a certain way in a meeting or saying something about another competitor who might be a threat to the narcissist and might make him or her look incompetent and making certain they cut that person down without that. So there's all these passive kind of behaviors that are passive aggressive at times, but they're not direct aggression.

Dr. Don Payne: But because they're trying to make things turn out the way I think they need to turn out to salvage my image of myself.

Dr. Ron Welch: It's still controlling. It's still manipulative. And it's still aimed at competing or, or finding a way to prove to others that you're competent and good at what you do, but it's not as direct and aggressive. And so I think those things are sometimes harder to see and be aware of, especially those who get really good at it because they're masters at hiding it and finding ways to not have to deal with the pushback that they would get if they were kind of aggressive in their narcissism.

Dr. Don Payne: What's on the other end of that spectrum.

Dr. Ron Welch: I see it as kind of passive on one end aggressive on the other end, passive aggressive in the middle. So it kind of goes across the board from the degree to which you are more than willing to take the risk that you're going to push directly back at the other person, even in a discussion. All the way to the passive side, where they may actually choose to just sit back and say, I guess I really am as helpless as I thought, maybe I'm not competent. I guess I should just give up. And then this is why I know it doesn't make sense, but a lot of narcissistic folks are depressed because at times they just give up. They're like, well, if I can't succeed at winning, then this is where I just leave the game and they'll do things like get sick or ill and leave a job. They'll quit the job before someone could find out they're not perfect. They'll find ways to self-sabotage and blow up an opportunity, even though they could have probably succeeded because it's easier to sabotage themselves, then wait for someone else to expose them. That's the whole scared little boy syndrome. It's also why people put on such an image because it prevents someone from finding out there there's a whole term called narcissistic injury in the literature, which is basically when a narcissist is exposed. Somebody shows them to be fallible and then they're overwhelmed by that. And it's it throws them into a tailspin that can lead to a lot of depression and sadness.

Dr. Don Payne: Well, it sounds like this this whole phenomenon of narcissism has a far deeper and more complex root system than might meet the naked eye which could be even more depressing. And you know, many of us could hear this and think wow, now I'm more soft than even I thought I was, you know, and am I a narcissist, which ways am I a narcissist that I didn't even know it. And maybe we are in a lot of ways who knows, but when we bring the Gospel back into the conversation in one respect that could feel even more indicting because now the Gospel shining the light into the depths and the nuances of how broken I am, which is true, but what would, how would you bring the Gospel into this as an encouragement to people who struggle with narcissism, even if they didn't know or name it as such?

Dr. Ron Welch: You know, a lot of this has to do with your understanding of words, like submission and headship and leadership, and trying to figure out what does God actually expect of people in their Christian walk. And I think the passages that have to do with humbleness, and the broken condition of man, the fact that you're not supposed to be God, and you're not supposed to be perfect. And we need a savior for a reason, help people understand that their bar that they set is so far above what God sets, that they forget that God's offering to come down to our world and redeem us and help us create an ability to want to be sanctified and want to move toward a place where we're closer to being like God. The desire to be good is awesome. God wants us to try to be godly, but he doesn't want us to be God. And so what we try to do is in my opinion, the Gospel provides an opportunity to say, yeah, there's a story that explains why you're broken. And it's not because you failed, or you're a bad human being. It's because you're human. And by definition of that, if you learn your weaknesses

and you learn the ways that you could be an example to others. And you could say, you know, what if I know this is a weakness and I wake up today saying my goal is to do as much as I can to be as much the way I think God would want me to be as possible.

Then you succeed already just by trying, and investing in being a godly man or woman. I think where we get into trouble is when we start seeing these terms like head of the household as having a bar that we have to meet. And if we don't, we've failed God as a husband and as a father and as a leader. If roles in leadership in a church or a seminary lead us to miss the fact that we have opportunities to have relationships that are, are awesome and God honoring and developmental and growing, and we miss the whole point, we're too busy trying to be perfect. Instead of saying, God, I'm here. Show me, what do you want me to do today? And I think that's where the Gospel allows us an opportunity to realize that this is not an overwhelming problem. This is just humanity. This is for narcissists, this is their cross to bear, but everybody has crosses to bear. Everybody needs to work on things that God wants them to improve on it. That's the Christian journey. Right?

Dr. Don Payne:

I would think that if we could own the darkness and the evil, that lurks at the core of all of this and realize that that's where and why grace is so absolutely essential that God meets us. As you mentioned a moment ago, God comes down and meets us even there. Touches us and grabs hold of us, even there unilaterally. Even, you know, even before we have the good sense or the willingness to reach out and receive that. You know, we're not trying to get ourselves as far as we can go and then grace, or make ourselves worthy of grace. As some folks will put. It meets us at the bottom. It carries us all the way and well, that is so counterintuitive, especially to you know, a productivity oriented culture like ours is to think that there is no way we can pull ourselves out of the mud of all this, but, you know, pick ourselves up by our own bootstraps, as the saying goes. But grace comes to us. So counter-intuitively that once we get our minds around that, it's so liberating.

Dr. Ron Welch:

If you can do that, you can also trust God, you stop relying on yourself to solve every problem. And that's where a lot of us get into trouble when we it's weird. You'll think of words like submission and you think it, it really is something about one person giving into another person's will, you know we've just kind of transmuted that word so much from the original meaning. But if we think about serving under each other, serving for each other, being servant leaders, then a lot of the narcissist problems go away because they don't have to try to fix everything in that day or prevent bad things from happening. They can just say, isn't it cool that I've got a God who cares about me and shows up and is here with me. And I can just kind of say, I'm going to do my best, but if I don't, God's got it.

Dr. Don Payne:

God's grace, God's grace undergirds.

Dr. Ron Welch: That makes it so wonderful. Doesn't it? And yet you can go through your day and miss all of that. And it's just, yeah. It's the message that the gospel offers to them.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah. Well, I didn't know that a conversation about narcissism was going to get us around a grace, but I'm glad it did. That's the place it belongs, Ron. Thanks.

Dr. Ron Welch: You're welcome.

Dr. Don Payne: We're always benefited by your insights, Dr. Ron Welch from our counseling division. Folks let me remind you that all of our podcast episodes are available in transcript form. If you would like to go back to one and revisit it in written form, you can find that on our website, just go to Denverseminary.edu, and look for the podcast link. You'll find all of our episodes linked there, and each one should have a icon there, which will allow you to download a full written transcript of the episode. I want to give a word of thanks and shout out to those in our communications department, Andrea Weyand and Rochelle Smith, who worked so diligently behind the scenes to make this happen. And as always Krista Ebert, who is our masterful soundboard engineer and editor to get these things whipped up and into shape for you to listen to, we'd love to hear from you. If you want to email us with comments or questions, you can do that at podcast@denverseminary.edu. And if you are listening on one of the popular podcast platforms, we would really love it. If you would take a moment to give us a rating or a review that is always really helpful to us. Until next time I'm Don Payne, this is Engage 360 hope you'll check back with us and pray for Denver Seminary. We always value your support of whatever kind and certainly your prayers for us in what God has called us to do. Take care.