

**Youth Culture Lesson**  
**Finding Teachable Moments in Culture**  
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**Mixed Messages**

Are Students More Concerned about Helping Themselves than Others?

By Paul Asay

**What Happened**

Who do you care about more, yourself or others? According to a study by Harvard's Graduate School of Education, most middle and high school students primarily are concerned with helping themselves.

Polling more than 10,000 students, researchers found that only one-fifth of respondents said helping others was their No. 1 priority. The other 80 percent felt personal achievement and happiness were the most important things in life—and some thought it was far more important than caring for other people.

There's a certain irony in these results, according to *The Atlantic*. The more youth care about other people, the happier they tend to be. Conversely, the less empathetic the child, the less happy and less successful he or she is.

The results dismayed study author Richard Weissbourd. "We were especially surprised and troubled to find how many youth value aspects of achievement over caring and fairness," he wrote. However, kids aren't becoming more selfish on their own. According to the study, they're being *taught* by parents to be more concerned with themselves.

Moms and dads don't mean to send this sort of message. In fact, almost all parents—96 percent—say they want to raise ethical kids who care deeply for other people. Yet when the study asked youth themselves what sort of messages their parents were sending, 80 percent said their parents were "more concerned about achievement or happiness than caring for others."

Also in the survey, students were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the following statement: "My parents are prouder if I get good grades in my class than if I'm a caring community member in class and school." Three times more teens agreed than disagreed.

"We were...surprised by what seems to be a clear gap between what parents say they're prioritizing and the messages youth are picking up day to day," said Weissbourd. "We need to take a hard look at the messages we're sending to children about success versus concern for others and think about how we can send different messages."

**Talk About It**

Some of this is understandable. When you're in middle and high school, you're starting to think about college and life after school. You're thinking about scholarships and the future. Parents, while they expect their offspring to care for their friends and classmates, they might spend more actual time talking—or nagging—you about grades. After all, they're looking toward your future, too.

However, with that in mind, do you think your parents are more concerned with your achievements than whether you care for others? How do they indicate their priorities?

What do the other adults in your life—teachers, coaches, youth leaders—seem to prioritize? Do some encourage you to excel and do well? Do others push you to help others and be a good citizen? Are some able to do both?

What are your priorities? At this time in your life, are you more focused on doing well in school or sports? Is it a bigger priority for you to care for others? Where does happiness rank? What makes you happier, personal achievement or helping others?

### **What the Bible Says**

As you might expect, the Bible places a high priority on helping others, but it doesn't ignore the importance of working hard and excelling in your life. Often, the two come together.

“Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men” (Col. 3:23).

“But as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all earnestness, and in our love for you—see that you excel in this act of grace also” (2 Cor. 8:7).

“Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others” (Phil. 2:4).

“Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing” (1 Thess. 5:11).

“And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up. So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith” (Gal. 6:9-10).

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