

What Does It Mean to Love Your Neighbor as You Love Yourself?

For Such a Worm As I

In chapter eight I said Jesus' command (Luke 10:27) to love our neighbor as we love ourselves is widely misinterpreted today in terms of self-esteem. This appendix is the support for my statement, and presentation of a different interpretation.

According to the spirit of this age, the ultimate sin is no longer the failure to honor and thank God but the failure to esteem oneself. Self-abasement, not God-abasement, is the evil. And the cry of deliverance is not "O wretched man that I am, who will deliver me?" but "O worthy man that I am, would that I could only see it better!"

Today the first and greatest commandment is, "Thou shalt love thy self." The explanation for almost every interpersonal problem is thought to lie in someone's low self-esteem. Sermons, articles, and books have pushed this idea deep into the Christian mind. It is a rare congregation, for example, that does not stumble over the "vermicular theology" of Isaac Watts's great hymn "Alas! And Did My Savior Bleed." Hymnbooks even rewrite the line, "Would he devote that sacred head for such a worm as I?" We are too noble to be called worms, they say.

For many years the cult of self has been expanding phenomenally, and its professional members take every chance to put a mirror before us, and to tell us to like what we see.

What distresses me in all this is not only what I regard as an unbiblical shift of focus from God to man as the goal of redemption (see Ezekiel 36:22-32), but also the paucity of opposition to it. I am eager to prevent this book from being construed as just another voice in the chorus of those who pursue self-esteem as the remedy for all our dis eases. This is a book about God-esteem and grace-esteem, not self esteem. It is a book about the pursuit of joy, not self.

A Most Misused Text

Perhaps the biblical text most commonly used in spreading the message of self-esteem is, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18, Luke 10:27, Romans 13:9, Galatians 5:14, James 2:8). But this use almost always involves misinterpretation.

Even in Jesus' day this command was being misunderstood. Might there be a connection between the old misunderstanding and the new one? The ancient error hinged on the term "neighbor" and was exposed by Jesus in the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37). The modern error hinges on the term "as yourself."

In Luke 10:25, a lawyer has just asked Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life. According to Luke, the question is not sincere. The lawyer is not seeking eternal life; he is trying to test Jesus. Under the guise of a personal question he gives Jesus an academic quiz, hoping to entangle him in some heretical contradiction of the Old Testament.

And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?"

With a view to exposing the man's duplicity, Jesus turns the question back: "What is written in the Law? What do you read?"

The man answers, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself."

Jesus simply agrees: "You have answered right; do this, and you will live."

Enslaved to Saving Face

Now the lawyer is in trouble. It is evident to everybody that he already knew the answer to his question. His motive for asking it was not a sincere desire for information, but a desire to trap Jesus in his words. The lawyer's duplicity was exposed. Everyone can see now that he was insincere, hypocritical, guilty of the injustice of deceit. What will he do? Run away shamed like the apostle Peter and weep bitterly over his sin? Or will he-with ten million other human beings before and after him-seek to save face?

But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, [then comes the ancient error hinging on the term "neighbor"] "and who is my neighbor?"

At that threat to his reputation and self-regard, the sin of self-justification sprang up. The lawyer was deceived into thinking the problem was not his own proud unwillingness to repent and obey, but the ambiguity of the word "neighbor." The question, "Who is my neighbor?" was simply a face-saving device.

Behind the lawyer's question is such a serious misunderstanding of God's demand that Jesus will not answer it.

Often our misunderstanding of God's Word is due not to innocent intellectual slips or lack of information, but rather to a deep refusal to submit to God's demands. A person who intends to manage his own affairs, maintain his pride, and secure esteem and glory from his fellow human beings will twist the words of Jesus to support his own self-esteem. The evil of the human heart precedes and gives rise to many of our apparently intellectual misunderstandings of Scripture.

Another way of asking the lawyer's question would be, "Teacher, whom do I not have to love? Which groups in our society are exceptions to this commandment? Surely the Romans, oppressors of God's chosen people; and their despicable lackeys, the tax collectors; and those half-breed Samaritans-surely all these are not included in the term 'neighbor.' Tell me just who my neighbor is, Teacher, that as I examine various candidates for my love, I will be sure to choose him alone."

The Exposing Parable

Jesus will have nothing to do with answering outright-which was really impossible-that kind of question. Instead he tells a parable.

A man, probably a Jew, was traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped and beat him, and left him half dead on the side of the road.

Along came a priest, then a Levite. When they saw the man they went by on the other side. Then came a Samaritan, and when he saw the wounded man, he felt compassion for him. He went to him and treated his wounds, using his own oil and wine. Then he set him on his own beast, brought him to an inn, and took care

of him till the next day. He gave the innkeeper his own money to take care of the man and said he would stop by on his way back to make up the difference if it wasn't enough.

After telling the parable, Jesus puts a question back to the lawyer: "Which of these three does it seem to you became a neighbor to the one who fell among thieves?" The lawyer answers, "The one who showed mercy on him." Jesus responds, "Go and do likewise."

The point of Jesus' parable was to show that the lawyer's request for a definition of "neighbor" was simply a skirting of the real issue: the kind of person he himself was. The lawyer's problem was not to define the word "neighbor"; his problem-and the problem of every human being-was becoming the kind of person who, because of compassion, cannot pass by on the other side. No truly compassionate or merciful heart can stand idly by while the mind examines a suffering candidate to see if he fits the definition of neighbor.

If the lawyer had been submissive to the intention of God's command, he would have seen how irrelevant his question about his neighbor was. God's intention is to call into being a loving, compassionate, merciful person whose heart summons him irresistibly into action when there is suffering within his reach, a person who will interrupt his schedule, risk embarrassment, use up his oil and wine, and part with his money for the sake of a suffering stranger. Become that person, Jesus says, and you will inherit eternal life: Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.

This, then, is the way the command, "Love your neighbor as yourself," was misunderstood in Jesus' day and how Jesus responded to it.

The Modern Error

While the old error hinged on the word "neighbor," the modern one hinges on two assumptions about "as yourself." First, the words are assumed to be a command rather than a statement. That is, it is assumed that Jesus is calling people to love themselves so they can love others as they love themselves. Second, this self-love Jesus supposedly demands is assumed to be equivalent to self-esteem, self-acceptance, a positive self-image, or the like. The proponents of this interpretation put the two assumptions together like this: A person's first task in obedience to Jesus is to develop a high self-esteem so he can fulfill the second half of the command, to love others as he now loves himself.

Is this what Jesus meant? I think not. These two assumptions depend on each other, so let us look at them together to see if the text bears them out.

Grammatically it is impossible to construe the words "as yourself" as a command. When you supply the verb, the commandment reads simply, "You shall love your neighbor as you in fact already love yourself." Jesus is not calling for self-love; He assumes it already exists. As far as we know, Jesus never entertained the thought that there could be someone who didn't love himself. To use Paul's words in Ephesians 5:29, "No man ever hates his own flesh but nourishes and cherishes it."

If this is so, the self-love Jesus talks about is quite different from the self-esteem so often assumed to be his meaning. To show what Jesus means by self-love we can pose the following question: Is it not reasonable to assume that the two uses of "love" in the command "Love your neighbor as your love yourself" will have the same meaning? Jesus makes it plain what he means by the verb "love" in the first half. It means to interrupt your schedule and use up your oil, wine, and money to achieve what you think best for your neighbor. It means to have a heart disposed to seek another person's good (1 John 3:16).

Giving the word "love" the same meaning in the second part of the command, we get this: "You shall seek the good of your neighbor, just as you naturally seek your own good. Nourish and cherish your needy neighbor, just as you by nature nourish and cherish yourself."

Another way in which Jesus said essentially the same thing was, "Whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them." "Do so to them" corresponds to "Love your neighbor." "Whatever you wish that men would do to you" corresponds to "as you love yourself." Self-love is thus defined in the Golden Rule by our desire for others to do us good.

Self-love Not Commanded but Assumed

In sum, then, "Love your neighbor as yourself" does not command, but rather presupposes, self-love. All human beings love themselves. Furthermore, the self-love Jesus speaks of has nothing to do with the common notion of self-esteem. It does not mean having a good self-image or feeling especially happy with oneself. It means simply desiring and seeking one's own good.

And we should note that Jesus' point is not affected by the fact that most people have a distorted notion of what is good for them. A man may attempt to find his good in a bottle of brandy or in illicit sex or in a fast motorcycle. Nevertheless, all human beings desire and seek what they think, at least in the moment of choosing, will make them happiest.

A Very Radical Command

Only when one sees "self-love" in this light will the tremendous force of the command "Love your neighbor as yourself" be apparent. This is a very radical command. What I mean by "radical" is this: it exposes the root of our sinfulness and, by God's grace, severs it. The root of our sinfulness is the desire for our own happiness apart from God and apart from the happiness of others in God. All sin comes from a desire to be happy cut off from the glory of God and cut off from the good of others.

Another name for this root of sinfulness is pride. Pride is the presumption that we can be happy without depending on God as the source of our happiness and without caring if others find their happiness in God. Pride is the passion to be happy contaminated and corrupted by two things: 1) the unwillingness to see God as the only fountain of true and lasting joy, and 2) the unwillingness to see other people as designed by God to receive our joy in him. If you take the desire to be happy and strip away from it God as the fountain of your happiness, and people as the recipients of your happiness, what you have left is pride. Pride is the pursuit of happiness anywhere but in the glory of God and the good of other people.

Now Jesus says, "Love your neighbor as yourself." And with that commandment he cuts to the root of our sinfulness. How so?

The Longing to Diminish Pain and Increase Pleasure

Jesus says in effect: I start with your inborn, deep, defining human trait -- your love for yourself. This is a given. I don't command it; I assume it. All of you have a powerful instinct of self-preservation and self-fulfillment. You all want to be happy. You all want to live and to live with satisfaction. You want food for yourself. You want clothes for yourself. You want a place to live for yourself. You want protection from violence against yourself. You want meaningful or pleasant activity to fill your days. You want some friends to like you and spend some time with you. You want your life to count in some way. All this is self-love.

Self-love is the deep longing to diminish pain and to increase pleasure.

Everyone, without exception, has this human trait. This is what moves us to do this or that. Even suicide is pursued out of this principle of self-love. In the midst of a feeling of utter meaningless and hopelessness and numbness of depression the soul says: "It can't get any worse than this. So even if I don't know what I will gain through death, I do know what I will escape." And so suicide is an attempt to escape the intolerable. It is an act of self-love.

Now Jesus says, I start with this self-love. This is what I know about you. This is common to all people. You don't have to learn it. It comes with your humanity. My Father created it. In and of itself it is good. To hunger for food is not evil. To want to be warm in the winter is not evil. To want to be safe in a crisis is not evil. To want to be healthy during a plague is not evil. To want to be liked by others is not evil. To want your life to count in some significant way is not evil. This was a defining human trait before the fall of man into sin, and it is not evil in itself.

Make the Measure of Your Self-Seeking the Measure of Your Self-Giving

Whether it has become evil in your life will not be exposed as you hear and respond to Jesus' commandment. He commands, "As you love yourself, so love your neighbor." Which means: As you long for food when you are hungry, so long to feed your neighbor when he is hungry. As you long for nice clothes for yourself, so long for nice clothes for your neighbor. As you desire to have a comfortable place to live, so desire a comfortable place to live for your neighbor. As you seek to be safe and secure from calamity and violence, so seek comfort and security for your neighbor. As you seek friends for yourself, so be a friend to your neighbor. As you want your life to count and be significant, so desire that same significance for your neighbor. As you work to make good grades yourself, so work to help your neighbor make good grades. As you like to be welcomed into strange company, so welcome your neighbor into strange company. As you would that men would do to you, do so to them.

In other words make the measure of your self-seeking the measure of your self-giving. The word "as" is very radical: "Love your neighbor as yourself." "As!" It means: If you are energetic in pursuing your own happiness, be energetic in pursuing the happiness of your neighbor. If you are creative in pursuing your own happiness, be creative in pursuing the happiness of your neighbor. If you are persevering in pursuing your own happiness, be persevering in pursuing the happiness of your neighbor. In other words, Jesus is not just saying: seek for your neighbor the same things you seek for yourself, but seek them in the same way -- the same zeal and energy and creativity and perseverance. Make the measure of your own self-seeking the measure of your self-giving. Measure your pursuit of the happiness of others by the pursuit of your own. How do you pursue your own well-being? Pursue your neighbor's well-being that way too.

Loving Others Instead of Ourselves?

Now this is very threatening. Because we feel immediately that if we take Jesus seriously, we will not just have to love others "as we love ourselves," but we will have to love them "instead of loving ourselves." We fear that if I follow Jesus in this, and really devote myself to pursuing the happiness of others, then my own desire for happiness will always be preempted. The neighbor's claim on my time and energy and creativity will take over any time and energy and creativity I have for pursuing my own happiness. So the command to love my neighbor as I love myself really feels like a threat to my own self-love. How is this even possible? If there is born in us a natural desire for our own happiness, and if this is not in itself evil, but good, how can we give it up and begin only to seek the happiness of others at the expense of our own?

The First Commandment Saves the Second

I think that is exactly the threat that Jesus wants us to feel, until we realize that this -- exactly this -- is why the first commandment is the first commandment. It's the first commandment that makes the second commandment **doable** and takes away the threat that the second commandment is really suicide to our own happiness. The first commandment is, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind" (Luke 10:27). The first commandment is the basis of the second commandment. The second commandment is a visible expression of the first commandment. Which means this: Before you make your own self-seeking the measure of your self-giving, make God the focus of your self-seeking. This is the point of the first commandment.

"Love God with all your heart" means: Find in God a satisfaction so full that it fills up all your heart. "Love God with all your soul" means: Find in God a meaning so rich and so deep that it fills up all the aching corners of your soul. "Love God with all your strength" means: spare no strain or exertion to put yourself in a position to see the all-satisfying grace of God poured out on you and through you. "Love God with all your mind" means: Find in God the riches of knowledge and insight and wisdom that guide and satisfy all that the human mind was meant for.

In other words take all your self-love -- all your longing for joy and hope and love and security and fulfillment and significance -- take all that, and focus it on God, until he satisfies your heart and soul and mind. This is not a canceling out of self-love. This is a fulfillment of self-love. Self-love is the desire for life and satisfaction rather than frustration and death. God says, Come to me, and I will give you fullness of joy (Psalm 16:11). I will satisfy your heart and soul and strength and mind with my glory. This is the first and great commandment.

Love for God Becomes the Form of Our Love for Others

And with that great discovery -- that God is the never-ending fountain of our joy -- the way we love others is forever changed. Now when Jesus says, "Love your neighbor as yourself," we don't respond by saying, "Oh, this is threatening. This means my love for myself is made impossible by all the claims of my neighbor. I could never do this." In stead we say, "Oh, yes, I love myself. I have longings for joy and satisfaction and fulfillment and significance and security. But God has called me -- indeed he has commanded me -- to come to him first for all these things. He commands that my love for him be the form of my love for me. That all my longings for me I find in him. That is what my self-love is now. It is my love for God. They have become one. My quest for happiness is now nothing other than a quest for God. And he has been found."

What then is Jesus commanding in the second commandment -- that we love our neighbor as ourselves? He is commanding that our self-love, which has now discovered its fulfillment in God-love, be the measure and the content of our neighbor-love. Or, to put it another way, he is commanding that our inborn self-seeking, which has now been transposed into God-seeking, overflow and extend itself to our neighbor. So, for example:

If you are longing to see more of God's bounty and liberality through the supply of food and rent and clothing, then seek to show others the greatness of this divine bounty by the generosity you have found in him. Let the fulfillment of your own self-love in God-love overflow into neighbor love. Or better: seek that God, who is the fulfillment of your self-love overflow through you and become the fulfillment of your neighbor's self-love.

If you want to enjoy more of God's compassion through the consolations he gives you in sorrow, then

seek to show others more of God's compassion through the consolations you extend to them in sorrow.

If you long to savor more of God's wisdom through the counsel he gives in stressful relationships, then seek to extend more of God's wisdom to others in their stressful relationships.

If you delight in seeing God's goodness in relaxed times of leisure, then extend that goodness to others by helping them have leisure.

If you want to see more of God's saving grace powerfully manifested in your life, then stretch out that grace into the lives of others who need that saving grace.

If you enjoy the riches of God's personal friendship through thick and thin, then extend that friendship to the lonely through thick and thin.

Perplexities Will Always Remain

I don't mean that this answers all our questions about love, or that it takes away every kind of threat in loving our neighbor. There are many perplexities in the life of love. There are competing claims on our limited time. There are hard choices about what to give up and what to keep. There are different interpretations of what is good for another person. I don't mean here that all of that becomes simple.

What I do mean is this: loving God sustains us through all the joy and pain and perplexity and uncertainty of what loving our neighbor should be. When the sacrifice is great, we remember that his grace is sufficient. When the fork in the road is unmarked, we remember that his grace is sufficient. When we are distracted by the world and our hearts give way temporarily to selfishness, we remember that God alone can satisfy, and we repent and love his grace the more.

A World of Expanding Joy in God

It is a very radical command. It cuts to the root of sin, called pride. Remember, this root of pride that gives rise to all other sins, is the passion to be happy contaminated and corrupted by two things: 1) the unwillingness to see God as the only fountain of true and lasting joy, and 2) the unwillingness to see other people as designed by God to receive our joy in him. But that is exactly the contamination and corruption that Jesus counteracts in these two commandments.

In the first commandment he focuses the passion to be happy firmly on God and God alone. In the second commandment he opens a whole world of expanding joy in God and says: people, human beings, everywhere you find them are designed to receive your joy in God. Love them the way you love yourself. Show them, give them -- through every practical means available -- what you have found for yourself in God.

To sum up, the ancient misunderstanding of the command, "Love your neighbor as yourself" was the lawyer's attempt to restrict the meaning of "neighbor" to a certain group and thus to raise a question he hoped would conceal the real problem-his failure to be the person the commandment was calling him to be, one whose compassionate heart would never allow him to pass by on the other side of the road.

It seems to me there is but a hair's difference between the self justification that gave rise to the lawyer's error and the craving for self esteem that nourishes the more modern error. Just how intimately the two errors are related I will leave for you to ponder.