

# As you love yourself

*Stephen Cobb*

Consider the commandment to *love your neighbor as yourself*.<sup>1</sup> Jesus called it the second greatest commandment, and his audience didn't disagree with him. Far from it, in Mark, the teacher of the law heartily agrees and notes that along with loving God, this commandment is greater than all of the burnt offerings and sacrifices. In Galatians, Paul explains that the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this command. And in Luke, the expert in the law connected it with inheriting eternal life. And Jesus did not disagree.

This commandment is plucked out of the diverse and sundry laws in Leviticus 19 and given such great import by the people of Christ's day. It serves as a reminder that some people had a deep understanding of what was important.

The commandment is simply stated, "Love your neighbor". And the command uses something we know how to do as an example, "as you love yourself". The underlying assumption is that the hearer would know how to love themselves and would thereby understand how to love others.

In the four times it is mentioned in the New Testament, nobody questions the "as you love yourself" portion of the passage. Rather, the question is, "Who is my neighbor"? And we are blessed with a multitude of passages describing how to treat your neighbor, and the various ways in which love towards your neighbor is expressed. For example, of the ten commandments, six of them are dedicated to how to treat your neighbor.

At the last supper Jesus explains,

*Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends (John 15:12)*

And in the Sermon on the Mount, we get that most difficult command,

*Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. (Matt 5:44)*

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 22:39, Mark 12:31, Luke 10:27, Galatians 5:14

And the list could go on. Loving your neighbor is a message repeated many times and in many ways. The command is so pervasive that if we *have love one for one another*, we would be known as Christ's disciples.<sup>2</sup>

In contrast to these numerous instructions and examples of what loving your neighbor looks like, consider the sparsity of scriptures that directly discuss what loving *yourself* looks like.

Do any passages readily come to mind about what it looks like to love yourself? The Bible is relatively silent on the issue of how to treat that person closest to you, that person you spend the entirety of your life with – yourself.

This is one of the great problems with trying to understand ancient writings like those that are contained in the bible; the writers don't spend much time explaining things that everybody in their audience already knows. And this command assumes that everybody knows how to love themselves. Consider how Paul describes love,

*Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs...*  
(1 Cor 13:4-5)

Love is patient. And the scriptures have several examples of patience with others, from our being patient with one another in love,<sup>3</sup> to God's patience with Israel in the book of Hosea. In contrast, is there any discussion in the scriptures about a person being patient with themselves and their patience being praised? None springs to mind.

Love is kind. And the scriptures are replete with what kindness looks like outwardly, from the story of Ruth and Boaz, to the story of the woman who washed Jesus's feet with her hair and tears. However, are there any examples of somebody engaging in the practice of being kind to themselves and such kindness being presented in a good light?

Love keeps no record of wrongs. And there are several prominent teachings with the idea of forgiving others. We even have the Lord's prayer which says,

*Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us. (Luke 11:4)*

The Lord's prayer assumes the flow of forgiveness is from one person to another person; or from God to each of us. In contrast, are there any examples where somebody declares that they

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<sup>2</sup> John 13:35

<sup>3</sup> Ephesians 4:2

wrestled with their past actions, and resolved to forgive themselves and move past it? I can't think of any.

## Misunderstanding Scripture

The problem with an underlying assumption that we love ourselves is that it may not be as true today as it was in the scriptures were penned. Just as the Jews may have missed the point of several parts of the scriptures in Christ's day, we also may have gone in a self-destructive direction in our zeal to make the scriptures central to our lives.

Take for example the ideas of humility, self judgment, and self love. Humility is a core value to being a Christian, but what happens if we take it too far? Self judgment is something Paul asks us to consider when we take the bread and the wine, but in our avoidance of puffing ourselves up by judging ourselves positively, do we err in the opposite direction and unfairly knock ourselves down? And in our avoidance of being self absorbed, can we fail to love ourselves, and often when we most need it?

In the 1930s Dr. Carl Jung observed a behavior among Christians as he writes:

*That I feed the hungry, that I forgive an insult, that I love my enemy in the name of Christ—all these are undoubtedly great virtues. What I do unto the least of my brethren, that I do unto Christ. But what if I should discover that the least amongst them all, the poorest of all the beggars, the most impudent of all the offenders, the very enemy himself – that these are within me, and that I myself stand in need of the alms of my own kindness – that I myself am the enemy who must be loved – what then?<sup>4</sup>*

Does this question by Dr. Jung resonate? What if I myself am the enemy who must be loved – what then? Dr. Jung continues:

*As a rule, the Christian's attitude is then reversed; there is no longer any question of love or long-suffering; we say to the brother within us "Raca", and condemn and rage against ourselves. We hide it from the world; we refuse to admit ever having met this least among the lowly in ourselves. Had it been God himself who drew near to us in this despicable form, we should have denied him a thousand times before a single cock had crowed.*

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<sup>4</sup> Carl Jung, Modern Man In Search of a Soul, 1933

Dr. Jung was writing to encourage doctors to accept their patients as they are, so their patients could do the same, because as he saw it, individual Christians as a rule exhibited a problem with accepting themselves.

He was writing in the 1930s, which is far removed from us in time, so I would normally be inclined to dismiss his observation. However I've been that person. I've behaved that very same way as I came to grips with my failures and shortcomings. The question resonated with me.

What is the basis for this behavior, and in particular among Christians?

When we see the idea of self judgment in the scriptures, it is most often presented where the person judging themselves was being hypocritical. For example in the sermon on the Mount, Jesus poses the question:

*Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? (Matt 7:3)*

The Christian patients described by Dr. Jung have seemingly taken the advice of Christ to heart, but they have erred in the opposite direction. The desired outcome of Christ's instruction is that a person be able to see clearly. But seeing a plank *that doesn't exist* or seeing a plank when it is *only a speck* is being just as blind as the hypocrite. Both are problems that prevent us from seeing clearly.

In the love passage of 1 Corinthians 13, what do we do with the phrase *love is not self seeking*, or as the ESV has it, *love does not insist on its own way*? Does it teach that love doesn't want to improve ourselves or take care of ourselves? Consider the words preceding it, that love *does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking*. When looked at in the context of 1 Corinthians, the ecclesia and its members were boasting over who they were baptized by, boasting over which apostle they followed, engaging in mud-slinging lawsuits, and who had greater gifts of the spirit.

Throughout the letter, Paul is addressing brothers and sisters who were elevating themselves at the expense of others. Paul isn't saying you shouldn't seek things for yourself. Rather he's addressing a very serious concern in the ecclesia, that brothers and sisters are tearing others down in an effort to build themselves up. I submit that Paul is not teaching that it is wrong to seek to improve your situation, but rather that we should not do it at the expense of others.

Where does the behavior of self rejection come from? Can it be argued that is an expression of humility, and perhaps the rationale behind this behavior is seeking to be humble? The virtue of humility is one of the fruits of the spirit, and trying to be humble would indeed be a noble pursuit.

But when we think of humility, do we think of a person that judges and rejects others because they have some fault? Of course not. Which begs the question: Is somebody who judges and rejects themselves over some fault indeed being humble?

Consider Paul's exposition on humility and the mind of Christ,

*Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves. (Phil 2:3)*

Paul's instruction is not that you do something negative – to not love yourself – but rather it is a positive teaching about how to treat others. The self is not neglected, but rather the other is considered and built up. Like the second greatest commandment, this is teaching about expanding beyond yourself.

Further, if you have the good fortune to find yourself in a group of people who obey this command, then others will be thinking of you and help to build you up. What a wonderful situation to be in, but think of what humility looks like when others value you? Is humility expressed in the rejection of that kindness? No! Just as humility isn't expressed by rejecting the kindness of others, it also isn't expressed in the rejection of kindness to yourself.

Whatever the cause is for the behavior of self rejection, we aren't commanded to do it and it doesn't fit within the virtue of humility.

Curiously in the next verse, the translators appear to struggle with whose interests you should look after. The NIV states,

*... not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others (Phil 2:4)*

Whereas the ESV states,

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

If you compare across the various translations, the NIV appears to be the outlier here. The majority of translations promote the idea of taking care of your own interests and *also* helping

with the interests of others. This idea fits hand in glove with the command to *love your neighbor as you love yourself*.

Another passage that springs readily to mind about loving yourself is in Timothy, *People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good...* (2Tim 3:2-3)

In the passage Paul is marking out the characteristics of a group of people that will come into the church. “Lovers of themselves” is first characteristic on the list. If this passage is a warning to us about loving ourselves, then it would seem that loving yourself is something you would want to stay very far away from – and the Christians described by Dr. Jung seem to have taken the idea to heart and stayed very far from it.

However, the people described by Paul have additional characteristics beyond “lovers of themselves”. They are also described as being “without love”, they are boastful, proud, abusive. Their love goes nowhere beyond themselves, except of course to money.

This sort of self-love is unhealthy and is far from the healthy situation described in the great commandment, *Love your neighbor as yourself*. There is a place between the one extreme described by Dr. Jung and the other extreme described by Paul. Here is where we reach the ideal presented in the second greatest commandment, where a person *loves both their neighbor and themselves*, rather than just one or the other.

## Societal Differences

One way we can go wrong in understanding the scriptures is by not understanding the worldview of the initial recipients and how they perceived their place in society. Dr. David DeSilva, in his book *Honor, Patronage, Kinship and Purity* describes how a person in the 1st Century Roman world established their value in society. He says,

*The focus of ancient people on honor and dishonor or shame means that they were particularly oriented toward the approval and disapproval of others. This orientation meant that individuals were likely to strive to embody the qualities and to perform the behaviors that the group held to be honorable.<sup>5</sup>*

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<sup>5</sup> David Desilva, *Honor Patronage, Kinship, and Purity*

In the language of cultural anthropology, the culture DeSilva describes is an *Honor-Shame culture*.<sup>6</sup> Like most Honor-Shame cultures, in the Roman culture of the 1st century, Honor was the currency sought after, and Shame was avoided. Honor was granted based on societal values such as wealth, education, rhetorical skill, family, and patronage. It was a public claim to value and the claim was acknowledged by others. Shame was the loss of that honor.

This is distinctly different from the culture I am immersed in. I am from America and in my youth I enjoyed the works of Ayn Rand. For those unfamiliar with her, she was an American writer and philosopher who immigrated to the United States from Russia after the Communist revolution. Her works often portrayed the conflict between totalitarian collectivism and the virtue of the individual. She championed objectivity and the rights of the smallest of minorities: the individual. I suspect my 1st Century brethren would think my worldview is as alien to them as theirs is to me.

The sort of culture I am immersed in is described as a *Guilt-Innocence* culture. These types of cultures approach law, business, family, and social etiquette very differently. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks succinctly highlights the difference between these cultures,

*In shame cultures, what matters is the judgment of others. Acting morally means conforming to public roles, rules, and expectations. You do what other people expect you to do. You follow society's conventions...*

*In guilt cultures what matters is not what other people think but what the voice of conscience tells you. Living morally means acting in accordance with internalised moral imperatives: "You shall" and "You shall not." What matters is what you know to be right and wrong.*

*People in shame cultures are other-directed... People in guilt cultures are inner-directed.*

*They care about what they know about themselves in moments of absolute honesty.<sup>7</sup>*

In the world of Peter and Paul, perceptions of self worth primarily came from how others perceived them. Their value was established externally. The 1st century Roman audience would

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<sup>6</sup> The term was popularized by Ruth Benedict in her work "The Chrysanthemum and the Sword" (1946), based on her study of Japanese culture for the US War Department during World War II.

<sup>7</sup> Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, The Power of Shame

place far less emphasis on how they judged themselves. As long as they thought they were doing the right thing in the eyes of others or of God's, they would feel accepted.

In our world, we have more of an internal focus. Our societal aphorisms are to ignore what other people think and to find your own way. Which means that our judgment of ourselves and acceptance of ourselves takes on much greater importance.

Consider Peter's question:

*Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me?*

*(Matt 18:21, NIV)*

Notice that the introspective question of forgiving himself isn't important to him. His perspective is about how other people view him and how he views other people, not about how he views himself. It would be an oxymoron to Peter to ask about how many times he should forgive himself.

In our culture, to not be forgiven by somebody else, while hurtful, does not carry that same gravity. How *we view ourselves* carries significantly more weight for us than it did for Peter.

This dynamic also impacts how we view God's forgiveness. In the Honor-Shame society of 1st Century Rome, being forgiven and accepted by an external agent such as God would naturally eclipse any problems you may have with yourself. If your patron, or society, or god forgave you and accepted you, then you were declared righteous.

However, for those of us in the west, the first judge on the scene of any of our perceived transgressions or faults is us. We live in a world where our cultural reinforcement is about judging ourselves and comparing ourselves. The idea of being forgiven or accepted by somebody external to us, while important, sits in competition to the idea of how we judge and accept ourselves.

And our internal judge knows everything about us. The judge knows all of our sins, failures, and imperfections – even those that nobody else knows about. That judge lives within our skin and is with us every moment of our lives. And to make matters worse, that judge isn't even a fair judge. We have an inherent negativity bias, where we tend to give more weight to the negative.

All this may lead to us experiencing God's forgiveness as something distant and abstract, while our own self judgment is something that is very close, very tangible, and felt deeply. And so, even though God has forgiven us, his forgiveness may not feel as tangible and real to us as our



own condemnation. And that may leave us in doubt about God's forgiveness, or feel as if his forgiveness is incomplete somehow.

## Reframing Scripture

How would Christ or the New Testament authors communicate God's love for us if the scriptures were written to us in our time and place? How would he bring the point home to us? What would Paul say to us on the topic of being loving towards ourselves? Would he say, don't be kind to yourself? Don't be patient with yourself? Or by all means keep a record of your wrongs and never forget them? Of course not. I don't think we should understand the scriptures in a way that destroys Paul's beautiful message of what love is. I don't think he would change much at all.

And consider Peter's question about forgiving his neighbor. If Peter's question was rephrased to be inwardly focused, to something like, "Lord, how many times should I forgive myself?" Would Christ's answer change? I think the answer to this new question would remain the same. I think Jesus would respond with, *I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.*

And when we consider the command, *Love your neighbor as yourself*, how would it be written to Christians who have love for their neighbor but struggle with loving themselves? The intended outcome of the command, *love your neighbor as you love yourself* is that you love both your neighbor *and* yourself. Would the desired outcome of the command change based on the recipient? I don't believe so, but the *wording* of the command may change to achieve the same outcome. It may be rephrased as, *Love yourself as you love your neighbor.*

If you are loving to your neighbor, then you should also be loving to yourself. As the original command used one to teach you how to do the other, I submit that the same logic applies. You are to use your love and acceptance of others to teach you how to love and accept yourself.

God loves both *you and your neighbor*. He considers you both worthy of love. I submit that God wants you to be like him, and love both you and your neighbor as well.

## Conclusion

If you find that life has left you metaphorically beaten and robbed on the side of the road, like the man was in the parable of the Good Samaritan, what then? You can be the Priest to yourself. You can be the Levite to yourself. Or you can be the Samaritan to yourself. I submit that

being the Priest or the Levite to yourself isn't different from being the Priest or the Levite to others. God is not glorified and honored by using religion as an excuse to not love somebody, even if that is our own self. God was honored through the actions of the neighborly Samaritan, who thought the beaten and robbed man had intrinsic value.

So if you have ever struggled with being unloving to yourself – as I have – I encourage you to consider what the scriptures would say if they were written to us in our culture of self-judgement and condemnation. Our question may be from a different perspective, but I believe the answer will remain the same.

Love is patient. So be patient with yourself.

Love is kind. So be kind to yourself.

Love keeps no record of wrongs. So let past mistakes be in the past.

We are made in God's image and we are worthy of love. Even our own.