

You, Your Neighbor, God, and Love

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Matthew 22:37-40
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Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

Why didn't Jesus just say, "Love your neighbor"? Why did he say love your neighbor *as yourself*?

If you've studied codependency, you have probably come across the belief that if you don't love yourself, your attempts to love others are often based on your own need to feel better about yourself and to feel more accepted. Can you really give the gift of love to others when you are in such need of them loving you?

What does "love your neighbor as yourself" mean to you now, and what has it meant to you before?

When I first became a Christian in 1970, "love your neighbor as yourself" meant to me something like "treat others as well as you treat yourself." But over the years, as I have been healed of self-hatred, I have come to believe that you cannot love your neighbor unless you love yourself.

I was born a happy child full of love and light into a family full of turmoil, to a mother who was worn out by illness, depression, and conflict with my father and trying to care for three other daughters. My main memory of my mother is her hand held out in the stop position, trying to convey to me that she could not play...she could not meet my needs. She died after complications from surgery when I was two years old.

I did what many children do after tragedy. I blamed myself. I felt that my needs and something terrible in me must have driven her away.

My family did not talk about feelings or see the need for any kind of counseling (that was only for "crazy people" who had to go to those mental hospitals). So I have no awareness of anyone other than my paternal grandmother having any idea that I might be suffering as a result of my mother's death. The grandmother we called Noonie moved in with us—in spite of my father's protests that he did not need any help—right after my Mom's death and stayed until my Dad remarried when I was four.

I feel that I owe my mental and emotional stability to Noonie's loving presence. I have fond memories of her rocking me and frequently telling me that I was smart. I had a break from my deep fear that something bad in me had killed my mother while Noonie lived with us.

But this belief came back even more strongly after she moved out and my stepmother moved in. No one explained to me why Noonie had to leave, and once again no one tried to understand my feelings. All I knew was she was gone and it must have been my fault.

My bright light and love turned initially to rage, and later to deep and profound depression. During my raging years, I can remember hitting a kid in the head with a brick, chasing other kids with a hammer in my hand, and beating up every boy in my third-grade class. It is amazing to me that no one read my behavior as a cry for help.

Instead of getting me help, my family members told me things like: "You shouldn't be upset"; "You should just let it go"; "You shouldn't be so sensitive." My family basically communicated to me that my feelings were the problem, instead of trying to get help for the deep pain, confusion, and grief that I carried.

So over the years I became convinced that if I were ever going to be happy and not kill another loved one, I had to change the need and the feelings in me that had driven my mother and grandmother away. These same feelings and needs also seemed to be a constant source of irritation for my living loved ones.

The older I got, the more I spent every waking hour trying to change myself through a very harsh form of self-criticism. It was as if I were constantly divided in two. One part of me was going through the motions of life, while the other part of me watched, analyzed, and criticized that part.

I was so depressed and full of despair by the age of 19 that, if I had not had such a powerful born-again Christian experience at that time, I feel sure I would have ended my own life within a year. My early negative beliefs about needing emotional help were so ingrained that it took me eleven years after that experience to be open to receiving the help that I had needed since I was two years old.

One experience that stands out in my healing journey as a powerful example of the need to express feelings versus bury them happened at a Healing of Memory workshop I attended at a church in Cincinnati in the late 1980s. Participants were encouraged by the facilitators to remember a time in our childhoods that had been particularly painful. I had had about five years of good help through therapy by this time and felt safe enough that I finally let myself feel the pain and anger about losing my mother.

It was as if I really were that two-year-old little girl who felt so lost, hurt, and angry. At the same time I felt the presence of Jesus so strongly that it was as if He was standing right there. I finally gave voice to the rage I was feeling: "Why did you let my mother die!!!"

I heard Jesus immediately say to my heart: "It was not what I wanted, Judy." I instantly knew that was true, that Jesus had never wanted my mother to die and for all of us to suffer the way we did. As a result, I have never felt angry at Jesus or God again regarding my mother's death, and this stands out as one of the big healing events of my life.

So, I hope that my healing journey encourages you to get whatever help you may need and find a way to give voice to your feelings and needs, so that you can experience the freedom and peace of truly loving yourself.

How do you know whether you are loving others as yourself? These questions have been very helpful to me as indicators of how well I'm loving myself:

1. Are you wishing you were someone else, comparing yourself to others, using harsh categorical thinking?
2. How well do you receive compliments? Do you give yourself compliments?
3. When you are disappointed, do you blame yourself or others? Do you just assume that it's got to be someone's fault if you are feeling sad, upset, unsettled, frustrated, lonely, or angry?
4. Do you feel resentments like, "If they really cared, they would..." or "I do so much more than..."?
5. When you want or need someone to do something for you, do you try to make them do it, or do you present your want or need in a way that they can choose whether to do it for you or not?
6. Do you often take things personally that you realize later were not about you?
7. Do you often think that you are too sensitive, too uptight, and just need to let things go?
8. Do you try to avoid feelings such as frustration, anger, hurt, disappointment, loneliness, and sadness? Is being happy more important to you than being with your feelings? Can you tell a story of when you felt anger toward Jesus?
9. Do you ask yourself and others what you should feel?
10. Do you motivate yourself into doing things mostly with "shoulds" instead of being able to trust that what you want to do is what's best for you and others?
11. Do you make yourself do things that you don't want to do so that others will think you're an unselfish, good, or loving person; or so that you won't "beat yourself up" emotionally for not doing it?
12. Do you have to convince yourself that you deserve good things?
13. Do you do things that you know aren't good for you, such as overeating, overspending, under-exercising, overworking, overdrinking, being in relationships that don't meet your needs, watching many hours of TV?
14. Are you trying to change areas of your life by willpower alone, without asking for help, and failing over and over again? Is shame motivating you to try to prove that you can change yourself?
15. Do you know what it's like to be loved for who you are and not for what you can do? Have you had the experience of someone looking in your eyes and knowing that you are seen by them and loved by them? Can you trust that they will love you no matter whether you're feeling happy, sad, grateful, angry, resentful, generous, lost, lonely, empty, competent, despairing, or full of joy?

It seems that part of being an American is to try to change yourself through criticism and to never admit that you have needs. Because then you would be perceived as weak, and then you would be vulnerable and you would not be loved if you are weak. I believe that underneath all of these symptoms of us not loving ourselves well is the belief and the fear that we are not enough—that if people really knew us, they would not choose to love us or be with us.

Our feelings are God's gift to us, so that we can better know ourselves, better understand our needs, and therefore have clearer ideas as to how to meet them and help ourselves to have the kind of

lives we were born to have. Many resources are available to help. I have found my work with Nonviolent Communication to be particularly helpful as a practical way to help people know what they feel, to use their feelings to know what they need, and then to take steps to meet their needs.

***Just as we cannot love our neighbor unless we love ourselves,
we cannot love ourselves without our neighbor's help.***

Allow yourself to feel the brokenness of your failures and ask for help, ask for mercy, ask for grace. And then follow the ideas that come to you as to how to get help. Just as we cannot love our neighbor unless we love ourselves, we cannot love ourselves without our neighbor's help. And then as you love yourself, you can follow your feelings. And when you want to give a gift of love, it will truly be a gift—not a desperate cry to have your own needs met.

My hope is that all of us will be so comfortable with ourselves that we will reply as God did when Moses asked God's name. When asked who we are, we also will say:

"I am who I am!"

Amen.