

The Bible and Self-Love

Are Christians Commanded to Love *Self*?

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by

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Introduction

How would you summarise the Christian life? Jesus did it with these memorable words:

'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets.

(Matthew 22:37-39)

The mathematics of Christian living are easy: you only have to be able to count to two. However, in our generation a third command has been added to Jesus' instruction to love God and love others. It is the command to love self. Promoters of the new Christian maths claim that Jesus said we must love ourselves before we can love others. In other words, love for self has become the *de facto* first command of the Christian life.

Not surprisingly, then, for many Christians self-love and self-esteem have become the one-pill-cures-all solution for every spiritual and emotional problem. James Dobson, a prominent author and radio presenter, has said, "If I could write a prescription for the women of the world it would provide them with a healthy dose of self-esteem and personal worth...I have no doubt this is their greatest need."¹

Is self-esteem or self-love our greatest need? Are the voices calling us to love ourselves chanting a biblical refrain? Is the new Christian maths valid: three divine requirements rather than two?

The History of Self-love

The history of a doctrine—in this case the self-love doctrine—is often an instructive study. Before the 1950s there was no Christian literature promoting self-love. A trickle in the fifties turned into a stream in the sixties and a deluge in the seventies. The history of Christian publishing shows that self-love swept from oblivion to prominence in two decades. If absent from Christianity for two thousand years, where did this novel doctrine come from?

Although new to Christianity, self-love isn't new. The father of self-love theory was an American philosopher and psychologist named William James (1842-1910). He wrote of two kinds of self-love, one called "self-feelings" (warm affection toward self), and the other called "self-preservation" (our natural tendency to avoid unnecessary discomfort, pain, or suffering).

In the 1900s William James' self-feelings met and married a philosophy called existentialism. Existentialists like Jean Paul Sartre taught that each person defines his own truth, reality, and good.

¹ James Dobson, *What Wives Wish Their Husbands Knew About Women* (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1975), p. 35.

Naturally, if you and your experience are the only reality, loving self is a logical thing. Sartre said it this way: "Hell is other people." In other words, heaven is *self*—self-determination, self-pleasure, self-love.

This philosophical justification for self-preoccupation joined hands easily with the science of the day: evolution. If man is the highest being on the ladder extending from the primordial ooze up to the celestial heights of godhood, then naturally we should love ourselves. We are, after all, the best thing around.

In the middle of the 1900s these ideas came together in the speculations of a psychologist named Eric Fromm. Fromm theorised that self-love is the basic necessity of human existence. His conclusions weren't based on rigorous scientific studies of human behaviour; they were philosophical speculations.

In fact, as amazing as it may seem, research has never proven that self-love is important to living a stable, successful life. Thomas Scheff of the University of California writes, "Thousands of studies have been done on self-esteem since World War II, but the results have been inconclusive."² Studies show that while sometimes people who act badly have a low view of self, sometimes they have a very high view of self. Prisoners on death row often score in the highest percentile on self-love tests.

In spite of the lack of evidence supporting Eric Fromm's speculations, Carl Rogers (another deity in the psychological pantheon) organised Fromm's self-love speculations into a practical system of psychology. His views turned on the axis of man's goodness. Rogers said that all men are inherently good and wise, and can find their own best way if they learn to accept and love themselves. We can safely assume Rogers did not derive his view of man from God-inspired books such as Romans (men are inherently good?) and Proverbs (men are inherently wise?).

From the world into the church

Although self-love had never been taught in the church, the theories of Rogers, Fromm (and others like Maslow and Adler) were imported into the church by Christians who had studied psychology at secular universities. The result was a wave of books in the 1970s, flooding the church with a novel doctrine: self love is the key to loving God and others.

Self-love took the church by storm. Virtually all emotional, spiritual, and moral problems were redefined in terms of a person's low self-esteem or insufficient self-worth. For example, in the 1970s James Dobson wrote this about the degeneration of modern society:

² As quoted in Martin and Deidre Bobgan, *Prophets of Psychoheresy II* (Santa Barbara, California: Eastgate Publishers, 1990), p. 124.

Thus, whenever the keys to self-esteem are seemingly out of reach for a large percentage of the people, as in twentieth-century America, then widespread "mental illness," neuroticism, hatred, alcoholism, drug abuse, violence, and social disorder will certainly occur."³

That is a major redefinition of society's problems: social chaos doesn't stem from a flagrant disregard for God's glory, but from a lack of self-love.

This shift from a God-centred view of our rotten behaviour to a man-centred one was just the beginning. Robert Schuller is another pillar of fire leading the church out of the wilderness of her supposed ignorance about man's problems. In 1982 Schuller, an American televangelist, published a book entitled, *Self-Esteem: The New Reformation*. A wealthy supporter paid to have a copy of the book sent free-of-charge to virtually every pastor in the United States. Schuller suggested that the church needs a reformation of the same hurricane strength as the Protestant Reformation of the 1500s. This time, however, rather than the battle cry being *sola scriptura* or salvation by faith alone, the slogan is, "We must love ourselves." In fact, Schuller says that all theology should be revised in light of the self-love doctrine.

Here are a few samples of how Schuller rewrites theology with the pen of self-love. Sin is no longer rebellion against a holy God. It is "any act or thought that robs myself or another human being of his or her self-esteem."⁴ Hell, says Robert Schuller, is "the loss of pride that naturally follows from separation from God...A person is in hell when he has lost his self-esteem."⁵

Rather than forgiveness to rescue us from God's wrath, Schuller says, "Self-esteem, then, or 'pride in being human' is the single greatest need facing the human race today." He adds, "What we need is a theology of salvation that begins and ends with recognition of every person's hunger for glory."⁶ This is indeed a self-love reformation; in fact, *revolution* would be more accurate.

God has, without apology, been removed from the bull's-eye of theology and replaced by man. Schuller makes no effort to hide his God-centred to man-centred shift: "The 'Dignity of the Person' will be the new theological benchmark...The cross sanctifies the ego trip."⁷

In the new maths of Christian living, two commands have become three have become one. Concern for God and neighbour has disappeared in a cloud of self-affection. Is this novel doctrine of self-love biblical?

³ James Dobson, *Hide and Seek*, rev. ed. (Old Tappan, New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1979), p. 12-13.

⁴ Robert Schuller, *Self-esteem: The New Reformation* (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1982), pp. 14-15.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 75. Schuller is one of the founding fathers of the church growth movement. For example, Bill Hybels of Willow Creek has often acknowledged his reliance on Schuller's model of church growth. Schuller's method is simple: make people feel good about themselves each Sunday; fill them with warm, affectionate feelings toward self, and your church will grow.

Problem 1: Source

There are at least nine problems with the self-love doctrine. The first problem with the notion that self-love is the key to victorious Christian living is evident from the history of the doctrine. Its *source* is the polluted well of worldly wisdom. Self-love, self-esteem, and self-worth didn't come into Christianity from the Bible. They were borrowed from worldly psychology with its corrupt backgrounds: evolution, existentialism, and the belief that man is inherently good and wise. God is not silent about constructing your theology from such a source.

See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ.

(Colossians 2:8)

The self-love doctrine's worldly *source* condemns it from the start: it is not from, about, or according to Jesus Christ. It is from the ever-changing traditions of men, the philosophical speculations of the world, and has nothing to do with Christ. Any teaching that is not from, about, or according to Christ has no business being taught in *Christianity*.

Problem 2: Definitions

Some claim that self-love was in the Bible all along; preachers, commentators, and counsellors just missed it for two millennia.

And the second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as *yourself*.'

(Matthew 22:39, emphasis added)

There are two possible definitions of the word *self-love*. One is self-preservation; the other is self-affection or self-feelings. Which did Jesus mean? Self-love advocates assume that Jesus meant love for others is based on feelings of self-affection, self-worth, or warm friendliness toward self. But assumption is a bad way to interpret the Bible. Can we do better than that? We can.

First, Jesus was quoting an Old Testament passage, Leviticus 19:18. What Leviticus 19 referred to will help us determine what Jesus was referring to, self-affection or self-preservation. It's a lengthy section, but read it carefully.

Now when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very corners of your field, nor shall you gather the gleanings of your harvest...you shall leave them for the needy and for the stranger. I am the Lord your God. You shall not steal, nor deal falsely, nor lie to one another. You shall not swear falsely by My name, so as to profane the name of your God; I am the Lord. You shall not oppress your neighbor, nor rob him. The wages

of a hired man are not to remain with you all night until morning. You shall not curse a deaf man, nor place a stumbling block before the blind, but you shall revere your God; I am the Lord. You shall do no injustice in judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor nor defer to the great, but you are to judge your neighbor fairly. You shall not go about as a slanderer among your people, and you are not to act against the life of your neighbor; I am the Lord. You shall not hate your fellow countryman in your heart; you may surely reprove your neighbor, but shall not incur sin because of him. You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the sons of your people, *but you shall love your neighbor as yourself*; I am the Lord.

(Leviticus 19:9-18, emphasis added)

God summed up this list of commands with the words, "Love your neighbour as yourself." What did that love entail? Providing for the hungry. Not cheating, stealing, or lying in business. It included not lying in court, not oppressing, robbing, or cheating your worker of his wages. One was not to take cruel advantage of the weak or handicapped or show partiality in judgement. Loving one's neighbour meant not slandering, murdering, hating, taking vengeance, or harbouring bitterness. The motive of all this other-focused behaviour was clear by repetition: God's glory, highlighted by the refrain, "I am the Lord."

In sum, "Love your neighbour as yourself," meant, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you," (Matt 7:12). The love of this text is action love, motivated by God's glory, not self-affection. The Old Testament passage Jesus quoted was about applying self-preserving instincts to someone besides yourself.

Of course, Matthew 22 wasn't the only place Jesus quoted Leviticus 19:18. In Luke 10, Jesus answered a law-expert's question about eternal life with the same, "Love God; love your neighbour as yourself" formula. Wishing to justify himself the man asked, "Who is my neighbour?"

In answer, Jesus proceeded to tell the story of the good Samaritan. Not only did Jesus' answer tell who your neighbour is, it also tells you what kind of love, "Love your neighbour as yourself," refers to. Loving your neighbour means you direct your time, wine, oil, and money toward helping someone in need. The weight of the text is action. The self-preserving good you would like done to you if you were beaten and left for dead, do for others. Self-affection and feelings of self-worth are conspicuously absent.

So, both the Old Testament source and Jesus' use of the same quotation in Luke tell us that the love of "Love your neighbour as yourself" was a self-preservation love, not self-affection. Also important is the fact that the Greek word for love in both Matthew 22:39 and Luke 10:27 is the word *agapao*. Its New Testament uses make it a word of action and choice.

The problem with the self-love doctrine's interpretation of Matthew 22:39 is a matter of *definitions*. Nothing suggests that the love of self Jesus spoke of was warm affection for self.

Everything suggests Jesus was referring to people's instinct to act in a self-preserving manner. That instinct is a schoolmaster teaching you how to care for others.

Problem 3: Silence

In spite of the outrageous claims that self-esteem or self-love is the greatest need of man, the Bible is strikingly *silent* on this issue. The Bible assumes that you act in a self-preserving manner, and encourages you to act similarly toward your neighbour, but no text encourages Christians to foster feelings of affection toward self. This is indeed a strange silence if self-love is man's greatest need.

Problem 4: Instruction

Although it never encourages self-affection, the Bible is certainly not silent about the topic of self. In fact, all its instructions about self annihilate the idea of self-love.

If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me.

(Matthew 16:24)

Jesus said that becoming a Christian was making a conscious commitment to deny or disassociate from self. His followers must put to death self's goals, desires, and agendas. There is no place for self-love in the command, "Deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow Me." A self-enthralled Christianity is not a Jesus-taught Christianity.

A second passage that throttles self-love doctrine is 2 Timothy 3:1-4. Self-love is not man's greatest need; it is his greatest scourge.

But realize this, that in the last days difficult times will come. *For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, revilers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, unloving, irreconcilable, malicious gossips, without self-control, brutal, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God...*

(emphasis added)

Why will the last days be a time of moral tumult? Because men will be "lovers of self." Self-affection is the sewer pipe down which the filth of this passage flows.

The word for love here was different than the word Jesus used in Matthew 22:39. The word here was *phileo*. While *agapao* suggested action, *phileo* referred to affection, friendship, and warm feelings. *Phileo* is the New Testament word that most accurately describes the self-affection of today's self-love.

Far from teaching that poor self-image, low self-esteem, or a lack of self-love causes bad behaviour and societal devastation, 2 Timothy 3:1-4 teaches the opposite. The moral collapse of the last days comes precisely because men will be warmly affectionate toward themselves. In other words, self-love advocates are offering as the solution what God condemns as the cause. I've always been struck by the similarity between Paul's words in 2 Timothy 3:1-4 and James Dobson's which I quoted earlier:

Paul:

For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, revilers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, unloving, irreconcilable, malicious gossips, without self-control, brutal, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God.

(2 Timothy 3:4-6)

Dobson:

Thus, whenever the keys to self-esteem are seemingly out of reach for a large percentage of the people, as in twentieth-century America, then widespread "mental illness," neuroticism, hatred, alcoholism, drug abuse, violence, and social disorder will certainly occur."⁸

There are no real differences between these two statements except the *cause* of social degeneration. Alcoholism and drug abuse are an out-of-control love of pleasure. Social disorder equals (at least in part) "disobedient to parents." Ungrateful, irreconcilable, treacherous, good-hating people who lack self-control are inevitably classified as mentally ill. The "social disorder" Dobson sees in today's western society is the moral melee Paul prophesied. Psychology's culprit is a lack of self-affection. God says just the opposite. Both cannot be right.

Problem 5: Worship

The fifth problem with self-love is a problem of *worship*. Human beings are worshipping creatures, but because of sin we have a bad habit of worshipping the wrong thing. We tend to worship the creature, rather than the Creator.

Professing to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man...For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator.

(Romans 1:22-23, 25)

This is exactly the problem with self-love: it is creature worship. Naturally self-love proponents advance arguments to defend the adoration of the creature. They are quick to point out that

⁸ *Hide and Seek*, rev. ed., p. 12-13.

human beings are made in the image of God. This is certainly correct. But does the Bible anywhere teach that God's image in you is a reason to focus on *yourself*?

This logic rewrites Psalm 139 from "I praise *Thee* for I am fearfully and wonderfully made," to "I praise *Me* for I am fearfully and wonderfully made." You might think this an exaggeration, but consider the following statement from Robert Schuller: "[Self-love is] the divine awareness of personal dignity. It is what the Greeks called reverence for the self. It is an abiding faith in yourself. It is a sincere belief in yourself." ° Reverence, faith, and belief are transferred from God to self. That's creature worship.

The same Creator-creature inversion is true of the argument that says we are to wallow in self-worth because Jesus died for us. The idea that Christ died for sinners because they are valuable is not a biblical idea. In fact, Romans 3:12 specifically says sinners were "useless" or "worthless." Did God get value for money when He bought you with His Son's life? The fact that Jesus died for you says nothing about you, but everything about God. No lesser payment than the life of His Son would satisfy His infinite justice.

Paul said of salvation in Romans 3:27, "Where is the boasting? It is excluded." Is it now included? Can we boast in our value, our worth, directing attention toward self because Christ died for us? This too is worshipping the creature rather than the Creator, the saved rather than the Saviour.

Problem 6: Comparing

Self-love, high self-esteem, and strong self-image are all built on *comparing*. "I can do something better than other people; therefore, I'm valuable and I like myself." This is a major strategy in James Dobson's self-esteem theory. If your child is bad at sports, you encourage him to take up piano so he can compare himself to the athletes and feel superior. Dobson calls it "compensating," and considers it your child's best weapon against inferiority (The very term "inferiority" implies comparing, doesn't it).

Comparing yourself to others so that you can feel superior to them has an excellent biblical model: the Pharisee in the Temple.

He also told this parable to some people who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt: Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself: 'God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.' But the tax collector, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but

° Robert Schuller, *Self-Love: Dynamic Force of Success* (New York: Hawthorne Books, Inc., 1969), p. 32, as quoted in Paul Brownback, *The Danger of Self-Love* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1982), pp. 129-130.

was beating his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, the sinner!' I tell you, this man went to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted."

(Luke 18:9-14)

The Pharisee is an outstanding biblical model of self-love. How did he fertilise the garden of his self-regard? Compensating. Comparing. Such self-satisfied comparing is sin. Jesus said that those who compare themselves to God and find themselves unworthy are saved; those who compare themselves to men and have high self-esteem aren't.

Problem 7: Boasting

Self-affection and self-esteem are based not only on the sin of comparing, but also on the sin of *boasting*. It may not pass his lips, but to pump up his self-esteem, the self-lover must continually talk self-promoting thoughts to himself: "I'm wonderful. I'm handsome. I'm a great fellow." This positive self-talk is nothing more than secret boasting.

There is also an outstanding biblical example of this high self-esteem, strong self-image "self-talk": King Nebuchadnezzar. "The king reflected and said, 'Is this not Babylon the great, which I myself have built as a royal residence by the might of my power and for the glory of my majesty?'" (Daniel 4:30). Gazing over the mighty city of Babylon, with Frank Sinatra singing *I Did It My Way* in the background, Nebuchadnezzar enjoyed a little positive self-talk. He forgot that God was eavesdropping on his self-esteem filled conversation: "While the word was in the king's mouth, a voice came from heaven, saying, 'King Nebuchadnezzar, to you it is declared: sovereignty has been removed from you" (v. 31).

Let another praise you, and not your own mouth; a stranger, and not your own lips.

(Proverbs 27:2)

Self-love promoters openly instruct people to disobey this verse by encouraging mental boasting: "I can do this. I'm special. I believe in myself." In Jeremiah, God suggested a different option all together.

Thus says the Lord, "Let not a wise man boast of his wisdom, and let not the mighty man boast of his might, let not a rich man boast of his riches; but let him who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the Lord..."

(Jeremiah 9:23-24)

Problem 8: Men-fearing

Proverbs 29:25 says that "The fear of men brings a snare." As an example, consider the Jews who wouldn't admit they were followers of Jesus because they "loved the approval of men rather than the approval of God" (John 12:42-43). Men-fearing is spiritually deadly. Yet self-love advocates unwittingly promote a God-condemned lust for men's approval.

James Dobson writes, "Self-esteem is only generated by what we see reflected about ourselves in the eyes of other people."¹⁰ In other words, everyone around you is responsible to keep your self-esteem high. Self-lovers become praise junkies. They can't act well unless others are constantly feeding them a stream of "You're wonderful" comments. They respond with angry accusations—"You're not building me up!"—if you dare point out a sin or correct a fault.

If your peace, stability, and good behaviour are dependent on others, then you become a yo-yo bouncing on the end of their praise or lack of praise. You have become a slave to the sin of men-fearing, a worshipper kneeling before the idol of human approval. Men-fearing is a sin, not a strategy for getting through life.

Problem 9: Contradiction

In spite of Paul's warning against self-affection in 2 Timothy 3:2, we are being told that the best way to love others is to be warmly affectionate toward yourself: "If you become more self-focused, you'll be more concerned about God and others." That's a contradiction. Like all passionate loves, self-love becomes a consuming, exclusive love. It is a zero sum game. If you give fifty percent of your attention and affection to self, you have fifty percent left over for God and others. If you give seventy percent of your attention and affection to self, you have thirty percent left for God and others. If you give one hundred percent to yourself, how much is left for God and others?

As author Allan Bloom has said, "We are being told the healthy inner-directed person will really take care for others. To which I can only respond: If you can believe that, you can believe anything."¹¹

¹⁰ Dobson, *What Wives Wish*, p. 60.

¹¹ As quoted in *Prophets of Psychoheresy II*, p. 136.

Conclusion

Jesus said in Matthew 22:37-39, "Love God...Love your neighbour as yourself." There are two commands and one assumption in Jesus' words. The commands are to love God and your neighbour. The assumption is that you already instinctively act in a self-preserving manner. Jesus wants that instinct to be a schoolmaster that teaches you how to care for others.

For example, imagine I were walking in the veld on a blazing summer day and came across two glasses of water. One is cool, clear, and crystal pure; the other boiling, laced with chemicals, and a foul yellow colour. Which glass of water do you think I would drink? The cool, clear, pure glass. However, what if I were walking in the veld on that same blazing summer day *with my wife*? Which glass should I drink, and which should I give to her? My natural inclination to seek the best for myself is to be a schoolmaster teaching me how to care for my neighbour. She gets the nice glass. That's what it means to love your neighbour as yourself.

Jesus' statement doesn't mean that Christians are to foster warm, affectionate, feelings of self-regard. The biblical answer to the problem of self is far different than the world's. Self-esteem teachings encourage people to move from a miserable form of self-centeredness called a lack of self-love to a more pleasant form of self-centeredness called high self-esteem or self-love. In contrast, the Bible teaches that self-preoccupation is left behind in a pursuit of Jesus Christ. He and His death on the cross for our sins are all. We pursue God's glory, not self-glory. We repent from self-focus; we don't nurture it. We need to be forgiven for our self-preoccupation; we don't foster it.

In Christ, self is minimised, denied, joyfully abandoned, left for dead. Self-focus—positive or negative—is never the biblical answer. In Christ, we turn down the volume of self's demanding voice, and lose ourselves in loving God and neighbour.