

Learning to Love Ourselves

A sermon preached by the Revd. Theodore S. Atkinson, pastor, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on February 23, 1986. Scripture Lessons: Leviticus 19:18; Romans 13:8-10; St. Mark 12:29-34.

Many of us now listening to my voice don't like ourselves. We're constantly putting ourselves down. We even encourage others to put us down. Here's a man who's out of work. He's lost his self-respect. He feels worthless. Here's a well educated woman who earns, on the average, nearly half as much as her male counterpart. She wonders if she's not as valuable as a man. Here's a little black girl. She notices that the flesh colored crayons are a different color than her own skin. She begins to wonder if there's something wrong with her color. Here's a single person who wonders if there's something wrong with her that she hasn't gotten married. Here's a woman who flagellates herself because her marriage failed. ~~Here's a Christian who listens to the exciting testimonies of drug addicts who have been dramatically converted to Christ. This Christian gets depressed because he's been raised in the church and can't remember a time he didn't trust in Jesus as his Lord and Savior. He feels that his testimony isn't worth as much as those people who are converted suddenly and dramatically.~~

I could go on and on. Probably all of us here this morning find many things in our lives that we don't like and can't love. We may fool others with our cockiness. We may put on an arrogant front. But, underneath, nearly all of us are all sorts of insecurities, fears, and unhappiness with ourselves; how we look, how smart we are, how much money we have, what kind of clothes we wear, how to act. There are so many things we don't like about ourselves.

Some people say that a *lack* of self-esteem is basic to human nature. The German Psychotherapist Groeger says that there's in human nature no

inborn self-love. Self love, he says, is either learned or non-existent. And then he makes a very bold assertion that the one who doesn't learn how to love their self isn't able to love others at all or very well. I believe that so many conflicts and problems that arise in a family, or at work, or in the church can be traced directly to a lack of self-esteem.

But some of you may be saying, "Is self-love really good? Is it Biblical? Doesn't Jesus tell us to deny ourselves and lose ourselves? How's that compatible with loving ourselves?" Maybe we're simply reading into the Christian faith a contemporary psychological fad which likes to talk about self-esteem and feeling "I'm O.K. You're O.K." So I need to define what I mean by self-love. By self-love I don't mean arrogance and pompousness. I don't mean selfishness. Truly selfish people not only have a hard time loving others, they seldom love themselves either. By self-love I mean a proper appreciation of who we are as human beings created in the image of God. By self love I mean a proper appreciation of our value, no matter who we are, in the sight of God.

Let's see what the Bible has to say about learning to love ourselves. We find the first command to love ourselves in Leviticus 19:18. The command is repeated throughout the Bible. Galatians 5:14 summarizes the "whole law" in one word, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Romans 13:9 gives it as the summation of "all the commandments". The command to love your neighbor is never given without the command to love yourself.

These verses don't say, "Love your neighbor *instead* of yourself". They say, "Love your neighbor *as* yourself." I came across a remarkable passage in a sermon preached a hundred years ago by Dr. John Duncan, a minister in the Free Church of Scotland. He was speaking on our text. He

said, "It is duty in me to love myself, for it is the measure of my duty I owe my neighbor, to love him as myself. In a certain sense, it may be, self-love may stand first-- for it is as myself that I am to love my neighbor."

You see, without self-love (in this positive sense) we end up loving neither God or neighbor. Some people have such little love and esteem for themselves that they commit suicide. It's the number one cause of death among teenagers. Why? Because so often teenagers get down on themselves. They begin to hate themselves because they aren't what they want to be or what their parents and friends want them to be. They get down on themselves and have a hard time living with themselves sometimes. But it's love for self, a proper, biblical love for self that motivates a man or woman to want to really live and be all one can be.

But how can we love ourselves as God wants us? This isn't an easy thing to do for those of us who are prone to think on our sins and who labor, even as Christians, under a heavy load of guilt and failure. But I'm convinced that God wants us to learn to love ourselves so that we can love our neighbors and love our world for Christ's sake. How can we be concerned about the oppression of people in Guatemala or El Salvador until we have a desire of our own to be free? How can we take a stand against apartheid in South Africa unless we have a love of freedom of association?

The first lesson we need to learn in order to love ourselves so that we can love others is that we're created in God's image. No matter how much of a mess we've made of our lives, we're created in the image of God. No matter how much we ~~have~~ failed in our own eyes, we still bear the image of God. Have you ever thought about the tremendous gifts that God has given you simply as a human being? Now I believe that we need to be

aware of the fact that one of the first requirements for church membership is a confession that we're sinners. We are reminded of that every Sunday in the corporate confession of sin. But sometimes we can spend so much time thinking about our sins and failures and faults that we fail to see all the gifts God has given us. I usually think of John Calvin as someone who had a really horrible view of human nature. But in one place he writes that humankind "is a rare example of God's power, goodness, and wisdom, and contains within itself enough miracles to occupy our minds, if only we aren't irked at paying attention to them." Have you ever paid attention to the good gifts that God has given you?

Try taking a piece of paper and pencil and listing all the things you like about yourself, all the good gifts that God has given you by creation. This will be difficult for a lot of us because we've been raised in an atmosphere where we're discouraged from listing good things about ourselves. But try it anyhow. List some things that you like about yourself.

You may have a strong will. You may have a wonderful imagination. You may be good with children. ^{you may be a hard worker.} You may have beautiful eyes or a kind smile. You may be a good dancer or really good at track or hockey. The list is endless because we're created in the image of God. What is it that you like about yourself? It may be your name, your curiosity, your athletic ability. This listing of your good qualities and gifts is an exercise that you might have to practice frequently before you begin to learn how to love yourself.

A second lesson in learning to love ourselves is discovering who we are as Christians, redeemed by Christ. I once heard of a man who lamented, "The first nine years of my life I was a Roman Catholic. Then I

became a Methodist. Next I joined a Baptist church. From there I moved in charismatic circles. And in every one of those scenes I heard pride condemned and I was made to feel that I was a sinner unless and until I started condemning myself." He goes on to say, "I started to hate myself. I lost all sense of self-esteem. Then I had an encounter with Christ. I was born again! And he didn't tell me how bad I was. I knew that and Christ knew I knew it! He just told me how great I was going to become as we walked on through life together!"

I think it's the Revd. Jesse Jackson who made up this little poem that expresses this lesson so well.

I may be young; I may be old,
But I am somebody,
For I am God's child.
I may be educated; I may be unlettered,
But I am somebody,
For I am God's child.
I may be black; I may be white,
But I am somebody,
For I am God's child.
I may be rich; I may be poor,
But I am somebody,
For I am God's child.
I may be fat; I may be thin,
But I am somebody,
For I am God's child.
I may be married; I may be divorced,
But I am somebody,
For I am God's child.
I may be a sinner; I may be a saint,
But I am somebody,
For Jesus is my Savior.
I am God's child!

A third step in learning how to love ourselves is to turn to Christ in prayer and invite him into every area of your heart. Now this should really be the first step if you're not already a Christian. But sometimes even Christians lock Christ outside their hearts.

Aren't there times that you, as a Christian, don't want Christ in your

heart because you look inside and see what a mess is in there. The dirty dishes are stacked high in the sink. Stinking garbage lies in the corners. Rats scurry to and fro in the cellar of your heart. The windows are dirty. Cob-webs hang from the ceiling. And a little voice whispers to you, "You're a rotten person. You're a dirty, no good person. You never were any good. You never will be any good. Look at what a mess you've made in here, in your heart."

And as you sink further into your self-loathing you hear a soft knocking at the door of your heart. You ignore it at first but it persists. The knocking comes from a nearly forgotten door. You gather up your courage and you ask warily, "Who's there?" A voice answers, "It's I. Don't be afraid. I'm your land-lord. I'm your life-lord. Let me in." And as you open the door, there stands the Lord of Life, the Light of the World, the Divine Lover, one ^{hand} ~~and~~ with the print of a nail raised to knock, the other carrying a lantern. On his head is a crown of thorns.

You ask the Lord, "Why are you here? What do you want of me? If you're here to collect the rent I have nothing to pay you. Certainly you don't want to come into my lousy heart, inhabited by doubts and fears and dark destructive voices. It's ugly in here. I have nothing of value to give you. Why have you come to me?"

The Lord replies with a hearty laugh, "Because I love you. It's my nature to love. I'll come to anyone who listens to the knock and opens the door. I'll come into your heart and loosen the hold of the darkness and fear and give you the strength to love yourself, and me, and your neighbor."

So the Lord enters the dark, foul-smelling room. He embraces you. He sits down at the dinner table. He gets bread and wine and prepares a feast. You laugh and talk. And Christ says, "I'm with you always, even until the

end of the world. Go out and treat others as I'm treating you." Then you look around your heart-home and it has been transformed. And the Lord says once again, "Thank you for letting me come into your life and give you meaning and value. Love yourself and others who need your love; as I have loved you." Amen.

Let us pray:
