

THE FINE ART OF LOVING YOURSELF PROPERLY

INTRODUCTION: Last week I spoke in passing about "loving yourself" in connection with emotional barriers to spiritual growth. Jesus did say, in Mk. 12:31, that we are to love our neighbor as we love ourselves (also Mt. 22:39 and Lk. 10:27). Today I would like to expand on that thought and talk some more on "The Fine Art of Loving Yourself Properly."

I. First, let me say that there are several IMPROPER ways of loving yourself.

A. A proud egocentric self love is improper.

This is a mark of pride. It says "I am better than other people" or perhaps even "I am like God."

B. A narcissistic love. Legend of Narcissus—A youth of Gr. mythology who pined away because he fell in love with his own reflection in the water of a pool; as punishment he was transformed by the gods into a narcissus flower. From this was coined the noun, "Narcissism," meaning "overevaluation of one's own attributes or achievements."

This is the attitude which says, "I am better than anyone else in my family or group or peers; whoever gets me for a spouse, or employer, or teacher, or church member or officer, or neighbor is really lucky."

C. A self-centered self love. This may be a type of self love which has a little room for others, but almost all of the interest and concern is warped in the direction of one's own welfare and needs; it is not a balanced love at all. This is not a proper Christian self love.

II. What is implied in loving ourselves properly?

(Many of these ideas owed to Cecil Osborne)

A. To learn self-acceptance.

We may tend to reject ourselves if we did not feel unconditional acceptance as small children.

We can work toward mature, adult self-acceptance by learning to accept divine forgiveness and then by forgiving ourselves. The only reason we reject ourselves is because we do not feel "acceptable."

Yet, God accepts us, and if God can accept us, we can certainly learn to accept and love ourselves.

He accepted even those who had absolutely failed in their lives. He takes us where he finds us without condemnation.

Perhaps the first step toward self-acceptance is to say, "I have difficulty in accepting myself, but I know God accepts me, and since he accepts and loves me, I will accept and love myself."

B. To learn to accept others and LOVE THEM UNCONDITIONALLY.

Frank Laubach has pointed out that "it is easier to love God than it is to love people."

We might add that it is much easier to love people CONDITIONALLY, than it is to love them UNCONDITIONALLY.

Soren Kierkegaard wrote "To love oneself in the right way, and to love one's neighbor, are at the bottom one and the same" (Works of Love, Trans. by David Swenson, New York: Harper & Row, 1962).

And Joseph Liebman said almost the same thing: "He who hates himself, who does not have a proper regard for his own capacities can have no respect for others....Love for oneself is the foundation of...personal peace of mind" (Peace of Mind, New York, Simon & Schuster, 1955).

It is easy to love God, because he is always so good, kind, gracious, and loving. But people can be irritating, bad-mannered, bad-tempered, frustrating, unfair, contemptible, and mean. It's not easy to love all of our neighbors. It takes lots of discipline, doesn't it? And the closer you get to God, the more mature you get in your spiritual life, the more you come to hate the wrong and sin that crucified our Savior.

How to hate wrong, yet feel love and tolerance for one who does wrong is a problem every Christian must face.

Yet, we must learn to love others UNCONDITIONALLY. IT CAN BE LEARNED.

It is commanded in the Scriptures. "Love your neighbor."

Anything which is commanded in the Scriptures can be LEARNED and PERFORMED.

Otherwise it would be an unfair command. To obey this command requires discipline.

Try the "Act As If" approach. Consciously ACT toward others AS you would act if they had no negative characteristics which would cause to act otherwise. Accept them AS THEY ARE and ACT TOWARD THEM AS YOU WOULD TREAT THEM IF YOU WERE PUTTING NO CONDITIONS ON YOUR LOVE OR BEHAVIOR.

Some parents teach their children a role model of conditional love—if you are obedient and do what mother & dad tell you to do and are a good child, and if you work hard and make good grades in school, we will love and reward you. The children of such parents learn quickly that love is associated with meeting certain conditions, and they never see the model of God's unconditional kind of love demonstrated before them in the family. No wonder these children grow up finding it very difficult to understand God's unconditional love and unmerited grace as we know it in the gospel of Jesus Christ. We need to honor the concept of loving others just for the reason of the person they are, not "bartering" our love only for those who "deserve" it. Understand?

Husbands and wives could make a beginning toward a happier marriage and home atmosphere if they would only express as much tact and courtesy toward each other and toward the children as they normally use with strangers whom they probably will never see again! Of course, they all should go beyond this first step and consciously try to demonstrate an unselfish active concern for the well-being of every other member of their extended family

and for all others they know and work with.

St. John of the Cross, who had some long glimpses into God's spiritual and heavenly truths, and recorded many of these glimpses in his devotional writings, has written: "When the evening of life comes, you will be judged on LOVE." And we could add a footnote explaining that this really means loving God with all our heart, soul, and mind, and loving others, and loving ourselves properly; only in this can we properly know God, who IS LOVE.

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