

Our Part In The Sanctification Process (Part Two): Cultivating Love

Cultivating Mature Self-Love

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Please turn over to Matthew 22. We will turn to several related scriptures upon which I intend to weave a theme for this message. Most scriptural references will be taken either from the Lockman Foundation's *Amplified Bible* or the Lockman Foundation's *New American Standard Bible*, or *New American Standard Bible E-Prime*. All three of these versions are available in electronic format on the CGG website. This we recognize as the incident in which one of the Pharisees put our Lord to the test, asking,

Matthew 22:36-40 Teacher, which kind of commandment is great and important (the principal kind) in the Law? [Some commandments are light—which are heavy?] And He replied to him, You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind (intellect). This is the great (most important, principal) and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as [you do] yourself. These two commandments sum up and upon them depend all the Law and the Prophets.

Matthew 7:12 So then, whatever you desire that others would do to and for you, even so do also to and for them, for this is (sums up) the Law and the Prophets.

A parallel rendition of this thought is found in Luke 6:31, known popularly as the Golden Rule: “Do unto others as you want others to do to you.” The law code is summed up in Romans 13:8-10, “You shall love your neighbor as [you do] yourself.”

Let us turn to Philippians 2. As we go there, I want to read Ephesians 5:28 to you: “Even so husbands should love their wives as [being in a sense] their own bodies. He who loves his own wife loves himself.”

Philippians 2:3 Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others instead of himself. [No? That should have read, “better than themselves.”]

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

Valuing others above self is not the equivalent to despising self or denigrating self-esteem as Satan might want us to think.

Philippians 2:3 Do nothing from factional motives [through contentiousness, strife, selfishness, or for unworthy ends] or prompted by conceit and empty arrogance. Instead, in the true spirit of humility (lowliness of mind—which is in no way incompatible to healthy self-esteem) let each regard the others as better than and superior to himself [thinking more highly of one another than you do of yourselves].

The second part of the great law which Jesus answered the Pharisee was stated in Leviticus 19:17-18, “You shall not hate your brother in your heart; you may most certainly rebuke your neighbor but shall not incur sin because of him. You shall not take revenge nor bear any grudge against the sons of your people, but you shall love your neighbor (acquaintance, associate, companion) as yourself; I am the LORD.”

In the Sermon on the Mount, our Lord and Savior added a new revolutionary dimension which is totally impossible for ordinary garden variety carnal human nature to accomplish.

Matthew 5:43-48 “You have heard that it was said, ‘YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR (fellow man) and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love [that is, unselfishly seek the best or higher good for] your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may [show yourselves to] be the children of your Father who is in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on those who are evil and on those who are good, and makes the rain fall on the righteous [those who are morally upright] and the unrighteous [the unrepentant, those who oppose Him]. For if you love[only] those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do that? And if you greet only your brothers [wishing them God’s blessing and peace], what more [than others] are you doing? Do not even the Gentiles [who do not know the Lord] do that? You, therefore, will be perfect [growing into spiritual maturity both in mind and character, actively integrating godly values into your daily life], as your heavenly Father is perfect.

We have a series of formidable hurdles to master in our overcoming process. They are set out in a specific, expansive, sequential order:

- Loving our heavenly Father
- Loving ourselves
- Loving our family and our brethren as ourselves
- Loving our friends as ourselves
- Loving our neighbors as ourselves, as yes,
- Loving our enemies as God loves us

That is a daunting set of instructions. As we bear the fruit of love, we must realize that in its early developmental stages, it is for the most part inedible. As Don Hooser has stated in his series of sermons and articles on the fruit of the Spirit, “fruit is not desirable until it has grown to full size and ripened to sweet maturity.”

Likewise, a new disciple of Jesus Christ has immense potential, but he starts out with fruit that is small and “green,” or immature. If we are ever to bear ripe, luscious fruit, we must assist the Owner of the orchard with our own horticulture—our own fruit cultivation—day after day for the rest of our lives.

As I examined the six-tiered causeway emanating from the headwaters of God's love for us all the way downstream to the exceedingly difficult command to love our enemies, I thought of the extensive repairs made by the Ventura County Park Department these past three months, clearing debris and sediment from the six descending dams along the Calleguas Wash in Simi Valley. In order to cause the stream to run freely, the workers drilled a series of holes in each of the dams placing a row of conduits through the top of each dam. The stream now runs unimpeded and both the fish and waterfowl have abundant fresh water in which to swim.

The spiritual gift of love initiated from our heavenly Father similarly cannot be dammed up in one of these reservoirs but must be allowed to freely circulate.

Another metaphor we could use to describe these expansive reservoirs of love is a massive electrical grid covering an entire continent, whose generators or transformers are connected by a series of interties completing an elaborate regional or nationwide circuit. If one set of transformers is damaged or destroyed, brownouts or blackouts will threaten the rest of the vulnerable network. Back in 1956, my industrial arts teacher, Mr. Swenby, impressed upon the class that when we wire anything electrical, the connections must be 100 percent perfect or there will be a short circuit and a broken connection. If one part of the connection is loose, the whole system will go haywire.

My specific purpose today will be to explore a possible major faulty connection in the circuitry of love emanating from our heavenly Father through each of us, to our family members, friends, acquaintances, and our current enemies. Because we have been adequately warned about the dangers of narcissism, self-centeredness, selfishness, and pride, it is apparent that Satan has cleverly convinced us to go to the other extreme, avoiding mature godly self-love like leprosy or the bubonic plague.

As God's called-out ones, we realize that our heavenly Father initiated the spiritual circuitry of love. As the apostle John has revealed to us, "We love Him, because He first loved us (I John 4:19). If we fail to comprehend the magnitude of His affection toward us by His calling us individually, we cannot possibly reciprocate.

If only our nervous systems could marvel with David in Psalm 8:4, "What is man that You are mindful of him, and the son of [earthborn] man that You care for him?" or Psalm 139:14-15, "I will give thanks to You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; wonderful are Your works, and my soul knows it very well. My frame was not hidden from You, when I was made in secret, and skillfully wrought in the depths of the earth." David knew that God intended that we place high value on our own miraculous creation, understanding the necessity to cultivate mature self-love and become wise stewards of our gift of life.

God has intended that through His family structure we receive love and reciprocate this love back to our Creator and then to our fellow humans created in God's image. Sadly, Satan, through his increasing dominance over the 'progressive' cultural, educational, and political systems, has all but destroyed the sanctity of the family, and especially, the importance or dignity of the father.

This war on the family, and particularly the societal denigration of loving and responsible fatherhood, is not confined to one ethnicity, but has, through Satan's multiple strategies, polluted the entire offspring or gene pool of Jacob's family. Consequently, when many of us read Psalm 103:13, "As a father loves and pities his children, so the Lord loves and pities those who fear Him [with reverence, worship, and awe]," this comparison would draw a disappointing blank in too many circles.

I have never met any individuals who were totally happy about the relationship between them and their parents. Perhaps the father was strict, abusive, authoritarian, aloof, or indulgent, permissive, laissez faire, or absentee. In my own case, my father was overseas in France with the American Army in World War II. I did not see him until the age of two, and then was quite unwilling to share Mom with him. The emotional scars of that post-war rejection took nearly a lifetime on my father's part to go away. Yet, I would consider my emergent relationship with Dad as, for the most part, helpful to see my heavenly Father as a loving responsible Being.

Some in the church have told me horror stories of their family upbringing and their subsequent difficulty to relate to God as a loving Father. God knew when He called each one of us that we were damaged goods contaminated with carnal human nature inherited from our original mom and dad, Adam and Eve. I remember back in the fall of 1972 when our zone manager would occasionally deal with a dissatisfied customer. Irv would say: "Henry Ford never built a perfect car; God never made any perfect people; there's no reason to think that Basset ever made a perfect piece of furniture. If you want your money back, see customer service."

Last Wednesday at our monthly Diabetes Management meeting at the Simi Valley Senior Center, the presiding nurse, Linda Hampson, said: "We didn't choose our parents or our genetic combination. We can't undo the years of abuse which aggravated the high blood sugar levels. But we can—as responsible adults—take charge right now changing behaviors that can improve our lives—such as losing weight and increasing activity—diet and exercise."

In other words, we must, like the prodigal son, come back to our senses and re-establish connection with our parent(s)—or if need be, assume the role of a loving parent to ourselves. To love oneself maturely is the antithesis of self-centeredness, narcissism, or obsessive self-indulgence which leads to disease, heartbreak, and early death. To feel entitled and needy as a downtrodden, disadvantaged victim (as some of the infantile 'progressive' Millennials, demanding a cornucopia of free stuff) does not constitute self-love, but a deadly recipe for abject self-destruction and the epitome of self-hatred.

Again, the opposite of selfishness is not self-hatred, but self-love, namely loving yourself as a responsible, caring parent would (or should) love a growing child.

The man who baptized me exactly 53 years ago, Donald Plunkard, used to frequently say, "It is very dangerous to be in God's church with an inferiority complex." We cannot properly serve others when we feel emotionally needy ourselves. We cannot properly serve others if we think our brother in Christ was treated more generously with spiritual gifts than we have.

Before we can esteem others, we must learn to esteem ourselves.

Before we can love someone else, we must learn to love ourselves.

Before we can become parents, we must learn to parent ourselves.

Consider the caution uttered by the flight attendant before taking off. "In the event of an emergency and the oxygen masks are lowered, put it on yourself first before attempting to put it on accompanying child."

The late Dr. Clint Zimmerman used to warn couples in marriage counseling that neither of them should be emotionally needy, expecting their future spouse to take care of their unfulfilled infantile

needs or attention and compassion. No one should ever be emotionally needy when contemplating marriage. Someone with a plethora of low esteem, self-hate, and a deficit of affection, is going to make a dud lover.

Consider the chilling appraisal in Proverbs 30:23 about one of the four things which the world cannot bear up: “An unloved and repugnant woman when she is married.” The absence of mature self-love is undoubtedly a major contributory factor in 100 percent of divorces in and outside the church. One should habitually practice loving oneself as a responsible parent would before trying to love someone else.

As Roderick Meredith used to counsel young men before contemplating marriage, “Build your barn first.” Behave as a caring adult before taking on the responsibilities of marriage. Developing the mature fruit of love applies as much to nurturing the self as to nurturing others and will take equally as long to develop as love for our bitterest enemy. Let us go over to the love chapter in I Corinthians 13.

I Corinthians 13:11 When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; now that I have become a man, I am done with childish ways and have put them aside.

In all of us, the infantile needs of self-gratification and gorging the senses must be corrected and modified by a loving parent. That is why the command to honor our mother and father in the Decalogue links love to God and love to man. Paul, evidently through spiritual maturity, had learned to successfully parent his own previous impetuous nature—which all of us share. Notice here in I Corinthians 13 all the immature, selfish, childish behaviors Paul lists earlier in the chapter, especially in verses 4-5:

I Corinthians 13:4-5 Love endures long and is patient [Are we there yet?] and kind; love never is envious nor boils over with jealousy [sibling rivalry like the Smothers Brothers schtick, “Mom loved you better than me.”] Love is not boastful, does not display itself haughtily. [My bicycle is bigger than yours.] It is not conceited (arrogant and inflated with pride); it is not rude (unmannerly) and does not act unbecomingly. Love (God’s love in us) does not insist on its own rights or its own way, for it is not self-seeking; it is not touchy or fretful or resentful; it takes no account of the evil done to it [it pays no attention to a suffered wrong]. [Austin got more cookies than I did.]

In a nutshell, Paul suggests that mature love, including self-love, consists of not acting like a spoiled brat but a mature adult.

In the late 1960’s, Thomas Harris published a pop psychology book titled, *I’m OK, You’re OK*, a derivative of Eric Berne’s theory of transactional analysis. Both works anticipate the current self-parenting programs which emerged in the last decade and are still active today. These works posit that during our entire lifetime we are recipients of three kinds of communications: (1) authoritarian parental scripts, (2) vulnerable child scripts, and (3) emergent adult scripts, which encourage the helpless child to become responsible and independent, moving metaphorically from a pawn to an origin in the game of life.

When God calls us, giving us His earnest payment of the Holy Spirit, no matter what our backgrounds have been, God changes our spiritual DNA, enabling us to move out of hapless victimhood into a deeply loved, contributing member of His very Family.

Before we can develop mature self-love, we must establish a firm unbroken, unattenuated connection with our heavenly Father, who provides all the resources to make up the deficits we may have experienced in our upbringing. Psalm 10:14-15, 17-18 assures us: “But you, God, see the trouble of the afflicted; you consider their grief and take it in hand. The victims commit themselves to you; you are the helper of the fatherless. . . . You, LORD, hear the desire of the afflicted; you encourage them, and you listen to their cry. . . . defending the fatherless and the oppressed, so that mere earthly mortals will never again strike terror.”

As God provides us the tools to take over aspects of our own parenting, He, through His Word, teaches us:

1. To be good stewards of our health.
2. To be good stewards of our families, remembering that our children are “on loan from God.”
3. To be good stewards of our finances.
4. To be good stewards of the spiritual gifts He has entrusted to us using them to edify our brothers and sisters in Christ.
5. To learn to be patient and trust His continual providence.
6. To steer clear of risky and dangerous situations.
7. To select our friends and role models wisely.
8. To number our days, appreciating every one of them as a gift.
9. To bring anger, anxiety, and fear under control.
10. To develop our talents and skills so that we may serve others.
11. To learn that the highest pleasure comes from giving rather than getting a kind of altruistic hedonism.

To give an example of converting a childish, immature response to an adult response, out here in Southern California we find ourselves tied up in traffic knots because of the vehicular congestion. It is so much that every day our classical music station (KUSC) plays soothing music from 4:00 to 5:00 called the “Anti-Road Rage Hour.” Julie, over the years, has learned to cope with that stress, saying in a soothing adult voice, “All these drivers want to do is just get home.” Instantaneously, my mood changes from angst and hostility to pity and compassion.

Psalm 103:13 assures us: “As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him.” If we realize that we are (perhaps in the role of a surrogate parent) to have

this same compassion on ourselves, we can continue this love circuit to our fellow companions also made in God's image.