

# Notes for the Ones Called-Out to Meet

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## The Difference Between Godly Self-Love and an Unhealthy Self-focus

by Dan Trygg

"...one of the scribes... asked, 'What commandment is the foremost of all?' Jesus answered, 'The foremost is, "Hear O Israel; the Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.'" The second is this, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."'" Mark 12:28-31  
"He who loves his life loses it; and he who hates his life in this world shall keep it to life eternal." John 12:25

### Historical Distortions in Theology

There has been an incredible amount of distortion in historic Christian theology in both the theoretical meaning of these verses, and in the practical application of what they are teaching. This has largely been due to the influence of Greek thought, especially forms of asceticism, which have unknowingly influenced the common thought patterns of people immersed in the cultural environment of their times. **The Greeks thought that the material world was evil.** The body itself was evil and animalistic. **They thought that the spirit was the highest good, but it was trapped in our material bodies. Some thought that bodily desires were unimportant.** To them, indulging physical desires was irrelevant. **Often (in fact, usually), that meant that the fulfillment of lusts and physical desires was acceptable,** and was even included as part of their pursuit of *eros*, the orgasmic escape of the spirit from the confines of the flesh. **Others (a minority) sought to disregard the bodily desires through harsh disciplines and ascetic practices.**

**These Greek world views crept into Christendom with new converts.** We see both forms popping up in second century gnostic cults, which were rejected by the true Church. **Unfortunately, the ascetic view was more acceptable to many Christians, and it was heightened due to a romanticization of martyrdom and suffering** that grew out of an emotional reaction to the tragedy of persecution. **This was more fully developed under the monastic movement started by the desert fathers in the fourth century. These two components combined to produce extreme and warped views linking suffering and spirituality.** The development of the teachings of penance (suffering some form of hardship in order to "pay" for one's sins), combined with the notion of purgatory (an after-death stopover where a person suffered torment for a period of time in order to "pay" for sins not covered by acts of penance, or offset by good deeds, or other "indulgences" made available by the church), reinforced and supported the link between self-denial (self-affliction) and spiritual depth. **Popular movements or religious "fads" promoting this kind of thinking led to various expressions of self-affliction of some physical pain,** ranging from enduring minor self-discomforts and hardships (e.g., fastings, or wearing irritating camel hair shirts) to more extreme forms (e.g., kneeling on pebbles). From there, it moved at times even to self-mutilation, self-degradation and "self" hatred (e.g., flagellation, castration).

**When the Protestant Reformation first began, some of these forms of self-hatred may have abated, but a similar attitude was still carried over** in some of the theological "spinnings" coming from the pens of the reformers. **The evil and hopelessness portrayed of the human heart in the emphasis on "total depravity" tended to foster a similar sense of self-rejection.** These theoretical emphases provide some of the bases for bits and pieces of popular theology which are unknowingly embraced and re-promoted time and time again, but which often lead in a very different direction than what God ever intended. For example, the whole question of self-love brings up a volley of voices from the past which make it difficult to hear clearly what the NT is teaching. Unfortunately, its message is further obscured by our lack of awareness of the significance of some of the words used in the original language. We "miss" some important distinctions which, had we perceived them, would greatly help us to clarify what is there.

**Are we to love ourselves? Yes and no.** The confusion comes from our lack of precision in asking that question. To go back to the Greek terminology, are we to *agapē* ourselves? Unequivocally, yes. Are we to *phileō* ourselves? That requires some qualification. There is clearly danger in *this* kind of self-love, if not kept in balance.

### The Basis For Healthy Self-love.

**The foundation for being able to love our selves in a healthy, God-honoring way is to see that our value and worth have been given to us by virtue of what God has made us to be.** Look at the message of I John 5:1, "Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God; and whoever loves the Father loves the child born of Him." **We are children of God, therefore we are to be loved.** I am a child of God, therefore, if I choose to value God enough to esteem and prefer what *He* chooses to esteem and prefers, I *must* love (esteem, prefer, value) *myself*. **How much am I to love myself?** If God chose to value and prefer me enough to send His Son to live and die on my behalf, am I to treat myself as *less valuable*? ...am I to think of myself as *of no account*? ...as of *little price*? Oh, no! A thousand times, "No!"

**Let me come at this from a different angle.** Way back in the beginning, God created humankind in His image, to bear and express His likeness. **As warped and distorted as that may have become as a result of sin,** in Genesis 9:6, **we still find God declaring that our worth and value remains beyond price,** so much so that if any other animal or person should destroy a human life, his or her life should be immediately forfeited. To strike at one in the image of God is the first capital offense recorded in the Bible. Now, to Romans 5:6-11, if God chose to value and prefer us enough to send Jesus to die for us while we were resistant to Him, ...while that image of God was distorted and fractured..., how much *more* are we esteemed by Him now that we have responded to His grace, and literally have been made new? **Shall we not love, protect, and value what it is that He has wrought within us?** Satan is the great dehumanizer, the defacer of our image-bearing dignity. **God is Himself the Creator, Protector and Defender of our human dignity.**

It is interesting that the second commandment, "**You shall love your neighbor as yourself**", is stated **eight times in the New Testament.** In addition, on two occasions (Eph. 5:28,33) husbands are encouraged to love their wives *as* themselves. **The obvious underlying assumption is that we would, should, and do love ourselves,** or else these commandments are totally meaningless.

### **The Danger of Unhealthy Self-love**

**Obviously, there is a problem with self-love. Everyone recognizes a universal tendency toward selfishness.** We start out being self-focused for survival. Learning to be able to share with and to give to others is a process of growth. It is interesting, however, that the language of the New Testament reveals that this is not at all the same as the healthy self-love (agapē) we just talked about above. This is actually based on an entirely different kind of love, phileos. **Phileos is a devotion based upon emotion, ...especially wanting what is pleasant and enjoyable. Agapē is a devotion based upon the will, a choosing to prefer what is best for oneself,** according to the will of God. This distinction is the key to beginning to understand Jesus' words from John 12:25, "He who loves his life loses it; and he who hates his life in this world shall keep it to life eternal." There are several translational choices which color this verse. First, the word, "loves", is a form of phileō, hence, "He who is fond of, or wants what is pleasant for". Second, the word, "life", is the Greek word, psuchē, which means "soul, or self". Third, the word, "loses" can also mean "to ruin, spoil, bring to nothing, or destroy". Fourth, the word, "hate", means to "prefer-less, to not be single-mindedly devoted to". Fifth, the word, "keep", means to "preserve safe, to care for, to properly maintain, to protect from impairment, to take care not to violate (or allow to be violated)". Finally, the last portion, "to eternal life" would be better translated "unto, with a view to, towards, or into life of the coming age (the Kingdom of God) present here". Begin to play around with these different combinations and an entirely new picture emerges. Here is an attempt at paraphrasing, "**The one wanting only what is pleasant for his/her self, spoils his/her self, and brings his/her self to nothing. The one preferring his/her self less (i.e., than God's will, than agapē for self), will preserve unimpaired his/her self for Kingdom-life here and to come.**"

The message is that phileō love is interested in what feels good, and will not make the unpleasant choices to grow, will tend to take the path of least resistance, will want what is immediate and pleasant. **The one willing to put that aside in order to trust God, to follow Jesus, will choose to prefer God, and God's plan for self (self-agapē) over personal comfort. As a result, they will mature, preserve themselves from the debilitating attacks and temptations of this world system,** properly maintain themselves, and keep themselves safe to be dedicated for the quality of life which comes from God through the Holy Spirit, a life dedicated to doing the work of the Kingdom out from the inner power of the Kingdom, at the command and discretion of the King.

### **Loving Self As God Intended**

**Does this mean that I am never to enjoy my self?** Not at all! As we have seen when speaking of the four Greek words for love within marriage, there is a healthy balance which is guided and maintained by the perspective of agapē. There is a place for erotic passion, for enjoyable interchange, for family loyalty, all within the confines and balance of a love that chooses to devote itself to the highest good for the other. The same is true for healthy self-love. **There is a place for self-fondness, self-enjoyment, self-pleasure under the overarching devotion of the will to serve God and to accomplish what is the highest good for self (i.e., God's will).** The verbal form in John 12:25 suggests someone who is ongoingly, continually living life from the self-pleasure mode. This will produce shortsightedness, and leads to self-ruin. **If we walk in the esteem of God for us, we will begin to see what He sees, appreciate what He appreciates, and we will rejoice to see His purposes accomplished in us.** His will is good, well pleasing and mature (Rom. 12:2). **There is a greater joy to be found in healthy self-love** (I Pet. 1:3-8; cf. II Cor. 8:1-5).