

Sermon – Love: Body & Soul Care
Sunday November 13, 2011

We're near the end of our current sermon series with only a few more messages to go. We've been studying the virtues in 2 Peter 1 and exploring what it might look like to live them out in the different spheres of our life.

We've studied eight virtues so far. And now we've come to the final virtue, the "crown virtue" - love. The theme of love is central through the whole Bible.

Love is "the greatest commandment".

Jesus said: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.'^[a] ³⁸ This is the first and greatest commandment. ³⁹ And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'^[b] ⁴⁰ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.'" (Matthew 22:37-40)

Love is also the "the distinguishing feature of a Christ-follower."

As I have loved you, so you must love one another. ³⁵ By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." (John 13:34-35)

Love is also the "the essential qualifier" that makes our faith mean anything.

and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. (1 Corinthians 13:1-4)

Last Sunday, Pastor Kevin reminded us that love isn't only the greatest virtue, it's the "glue" that holds all the rest of them together. Without love, all the other virtues wouldn't be what they should be. We were also reminded that love isn't just an emotion or a feeling. It's a commitment we choose to make when we make sacrifices for the sake of others.

Today we're going to continue our study on the virtue of love. And I know this sounds odd, but the area I want to focus on this morning is ME. What does it mean to love myself? Last week, Pastor Kevin quoted Janet Jackson who sang, "What have you done for me lately?" That was awesome - I'm a huge Janet Jackson fan.

But this morning, to quote Whitney Houston, "learning to love yourself is the greatest love of all". Now I don't think that loving oneself is the "greatest" love of

all. But I wonder, is there something about learning to love ourself, as God loves us that is healthy and actually biblical? I would submit to you that there is.

Just as a side note, along this hip-hop R&B theme, Kevin and I have decided Pastor Andrew that next Sunday you're going to preach a message to tie all this together. The message will be inspired by the late theologian Heavy D and the Boyz entitled, "Now that we've found love what are we gonna do with it?"

Earlier, we looked at the passage where Jesus commanded: 'Love God and love your neighbor as yourself.' Question: in this passage, who is Jesus telling us to love? Obviously he's saying to love God. He's also saying to love your neighbour. But is there anyone else? Yourself. Love your neighbour as yourself. Jesus is presupposing that we're loving ourselves.

This isn't something we often talk about. In fact, when I was preparing for this message, none of the commentaries I looked at even mentioned loving ourselves. And so I understand that we have a lot of misgivings when it comes to loving ourselves.

Just to be clear, loving yourself isn't about being prideful or narcissistic. It's not about arranging your whole world around you. **Loving yourself is about accurately assessing yourself as having worth. Because you were made in the image of God.**

Part of what it means to be made in the image of God is that how we think about and treat ourselves as God's image-bearers actually reflects on the God whose image we bear. And so part of loving God actually includes loving yourself. You were made in God's image so you're loving God when you're loving yourself.

A lot of times Christians take on this attitude of "false humility." I'm so worthless, I'm a huge sinner. And we think we're glorifying God when we do that. Remember, God doesn't make trash. He's made you to represent him in this world. And our God is a God of beautify and glory and majesty.

Yes a lot of stuff we do is pretty worthless and ugly. And yes, God wants to clean all that up, but you are an image-bearer of God so don't beat yourself up.

Instead, appreciate and celebrate the fact that you're made in the image of God. God made you and fashioned you. The psalmist celebrates this in Psalm 139.

For you created my inmost being;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.

¹⁴ I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;

Henri Nouwen is considered one of the great spiritual writers of his generation. He was once asked, What do you think is the greatest enemy of our spiritual life? Many wondered which of the "Big 3" it would be: success, popularity or power.

Instead, Nouwen replied, the greatest danger to the spiritual life is self-rejection.

"We live in a world filled with voices that shout: 'You are no good, you are ugly; you are worthless; you are despicable, you are nobody – unless you can demonstrate the opposite'. These voices are so loud and so persistent that it's easy to believe them. That's the great trap."

In fact, self-rejection is central to all the other temptations we face. Because when we hear those voices that call us worthless and unlovable and begin to believe them. Guess what? Things like success, popularity and power have a greater way of seducing us and tempting us.

Often, when we think of people who struggle with self-rejection, we typically think of people with low self-esteem or who are insecure. But have you ever considered that arrogant people suffer from the other side of self-rejection? Arrogance is just another way of dealing with our feelings of worthlessness.

In the movie Shrek, Lord Farquaad is the comically short and ruthless ruler of the huge castle Duloc. When Shrek first sees this towering castle, he quite humourously yet insightfully quips, "Do you think he's maybe compensating for something?"

You might inflate yourself with arrogance, or you could be deflate yourself with self-esteem. Either way, when you're experiencing self-rejection, you're out of touch with reality because you're disconnected from the truth that you were made in the image of God.

These messages of self-rejection, interestingly enough can be quite deeply ingrained in us. Probably many of us might not even be aware of them or even how deep the roots go.

Last year, our family was dealing with quite a number of challenges – the potential loss of Joanne's job, some people in our family dealing with health issues. And so Joanne emailed a bunch of friends asking for prayer. And the response was

overwhelming. Her inbox was flooded with messages of encouragement. People were thinking of us and praying for us.

I remember Jo saying, Why don't you email your friends too and tell them what's going on. And I was like, it's not really the same for guys. Then she made the argument about inviting friends along in our spiritual journey and I made some counter-argument. We went back and forth and in the end because I'm the spiritual leader in my family I sent out the email to some close friends. I shared some of the challenges we were going through, talked about how they could pray for us, I asked how we could pray for them too.

I got no responses. The email probably just didn't get sent right? so I checked my sent box and it did go through. But no responses. I know I can get pretty disappointed when friends don't respond – so yeah, this was pretty discouraging.

A few months later, I was getting ordained here at Cornerstone. Joanne sent out an email to a bunch of her friends. And a bunch of them sent me their well-wishes and people wanted to come celebrate with me. And then Joanne asks me, Did you email your friends yet? And I was like, remember what happened last time. And we went back and forth again. And because I'm the spiritual leader of my family I emailed my closest friends again. Again, no response.

Now at this point, my disappointment was... pretty high. I was discouraged, I was angry. I'd go around thinking, people will just disappoint you – why even bother caring. And Joanne was like, Aren't you the Small Groups Pastor at our church?

For awhile, I struggled with discouragement. And one day out of the blue, a memory came to mind. I remembered being a small and awkward Chinese kid in grade school. I didn't speak a word of English. I remember being the only kid eating some weird Chinese hot meal out of a thermos while other kids ate sandwiches. I remember struggling with awkwardness, shyness and being different. And during those years, I remember hearing the voices telling me, "You're a nobody. You're unlovable. You're all alone."

Another memory came to mind. I remember my mom talking about my grandmother – my dad's mom, and why everybody loved her, why she had so many friends. She said my grandmother used to go all out for people, caring for them, being a friend.

That day I remember making the decision to be the best friend I could be. Deep down, I was thinking, I will never be a nobody again, I will never be alone again.

Throughout university, I had lots of friends. Many people might even consider me their best friend – I was valued, I was appreciated.

And all these memories came back to me when I was struggling with my disappointment last year. The feelings I had as a child. This “being a friend” strategy I had developed growing up. And now as I was thinking about my situation with my closest friends, I realized that what was hurting me most – behind the lack of response - was that I could hear those same voices I heard as a child, “you’re a nobody. You’re unlovable. You’re all alone.”

If I were to think about the situation, I’d probably say, you know what? These friends have always been there for me. I know our friendship means as much to them as it does to me. Guys aren’t always into the mushy encouraging emails like girls are; maybe they just don’t know what to say. Or probably like me, they’re busy with their own lives too and somehow forgot to respond. But instead, there was a dark side in me that was saying “That’s not true. You’re forgotten, rejected, abandoned.”

Have you ever noticed how unique our suffering is to our personality? None of us suffer in exactly the same way. The way I’m broken says something about my journey. And the way you’re broken says something about your journey.

What situations trigger your deepest hurt? Is it when someone rejects you or criticizes you? Is it when you failed to get that job or close that deal? Is it when you compare yourself with others and feel like you don’t measure up? What’s that about?

But when it comes to what is universally true about you and me, one thing that we all share is that we all need to be loved, to be affirmed, to be celebrated. In fact, when these needs aren’t met, the human personality has an extraordinary way of coping.

In the 1960s, a psychoanalyst by the name of Donald Winnicott developed this idea of the *false self*. He observed something very interesting in children who didn’t experience love, nurture and care growing up. What he noticed was that to deal with the pain of feeling unloved, rejected and abandoned, their psyche developed this defense mechanism. He called this defense mechanism the false self.

The false self creates a false reality that protects a child and helps them find meaning. It does this by suppressing their feelings and emotions to mask the hurt and pain. It creates a compulsive desire to present a perfect image to the world. An

image that will cause others to admire them, to love them. It looks for outside experiences to give them a sense of meaning.

The truth is, all of us to some extent have created a false self, we've created these false realities to protect us from the pain of feeling unwanted, unloved, worthless. Maybe it was an experience where a parent said something or did something to you growing up. Maybe it was something they didn't say or didn't do when you needed them most. Maybe it was an embarrassing moment, maybe there was a tragic loss in your life.

Because in those moments, you heard those voices saying, "You are weak, unwanted, worthless, unloved, alone."

What does a human being do with that? How does a child cope with that pain?

Thomas Merton once said, "Every one of us is shadowed by an illusory person: a false self."

For some people here, years ago, you created an identity of performance. You set high standards of achievement for yourself and others and thrive on accomplishments and achievements. Maybe your performance is a way of proving your worth to someone who criticized you or didn't believe in you.

For others, maybe you're preoccupied with acceptance and approval. You have a desperate need to please others and make people happy. You're obsessed with living up to people's expectations and to disappoint them would just kill you.

Maybe some of you have created an identity around your kids, or around your looks or around your possessions.

And as long as you can keep up this game, you feel like you'll be okay. But this game's been taking a toll on you. You feel worn-out and drained trying. You wonder sometimes, how much more you have in you. You've been tested in life and you've hit some rock bottom moments.

These were times when some crisis challenged your false reality and threatened your false self. When you failed to meet your own standard or goal; when someone criticized you or failed to acknowledge you; when your family situation didn't work out the way you imagined. And in these moments, it felt like your whole world was crashing down on you.

And in the back of your mind, you're always dreading the thought: What would happen if people really knew what I was doing? If they knew the real me - the me with all my weaknesses and fears, with all my doubts and insecurities, with all my secrets and darkness. What if I didn't have my achievements and possessions? Would they still accept me? Would they still love me? Because your greatest fear is that the real you would be exposed only to be rejected again.

Church – many of us have been listening to these voices far too long. And all this time, there's been One who's seen everything you've been through, One who knows all about your games and illusions, One who looks at your soul and sees both the dark and the light. One who's been longing for you to hear *his* voice say to you:

I have called you by name, from the very beginning of time. You are mine and I am yours. You are my Beloved, on you my favour rests. I have molded you in the depths of the earth and knitted you together in your mother's womb. I have carved you in the palms of my hands and hidden you in the shadow of my embrace. I look at you with infinite tenderness and care for you with a care more intimate than that of a mother for a child. I have counted every hair on your head and guided you at every step. Wherever you go, I go with you, and wherever you rest, I keep watch. I will give you food that will satisfy all your hunger and drink that will quench all your thirst. I will not hide my face from you. You belong to me. Nothing will ever separate us.

Far too many of us have defined ourselves by external things - our possessions, our talents, our reputation, our kids... The truth is, no matter how much we do, no matter how much we possess, these things will never bring the peace our souls have been longing for since we were that little child.

It's because your ultimate worth and mine isn't found in these things. It's found in God's love for you and God's love for me. You are a child of God, you were made in His image. You have unsurpassable worth because God paid the ultimate price for you, his Son Jesus so that you could be his Beloved. Let this truth become the most important thing in your life today and the day after that and the day after that.

Accept God's acceptance of you. Loving yourself isn't about trying to make yourself feel good. It's not about seeing the good things instead of the bad. It's about accepting God's acceptance of you. It's about recognizing that your primary identity isn't in what you do or what you have. It's in who you belong to. So define yourself radically as one beloved by God.

Thomas Merton once asked, “Who am I?” To that question, he responded, “I am one loved by Christ.” You are loved by Christ. I am loved by Christ. We learn to love ourselves when we assess that we have worth because we were made in God’s image. We have unsurpassable worth because Jesus died for us. And so we can love ourselves when we agree with God that I am one loved by Christ. I am one loved by Christ. Say that out loud. Do you believe that this morning?

Accepting ourselves as Jesus accepts us means that we also need to accept our weakness, our brokenness and our sinfulness. Ironically, these are all things our false self wants to hide from others, from ourselves and even from God.

Brennan Manning, a Christian writer and speaker knows the highs. He’s led spiritual retreats, he’s written highly acclaimed books, and he’s been in high demand as a conference speaker. But he also knows the lows. He struggled with alcoholism, he lived on the streets estranged from friends and family.

Listen to his words about the power of embracing our false self.

“Hatred of the impostor is actually self-hatred. The impostor and I constitute one person. Contempt for the false self gives vent to hostility, which manifests itself as general irritability – an irritation at the same faults in others that we have in ourselves. Self-hatred always results in some form of self-destructive behaviour.”

How do we deal with our false self? We embrace it. We acknowledge our brokenness, we give ourselves grace, and we show compassion to ourselves. We accept God’s acceptance of us and love ourselves.

In a moment, I want to read to you a letter Brennan Manning wrote. He actually addressed this letter to himself or at least his false self during a retreat he was in. I’m going to ask you to close your eyes and ask you to prayerfully listen to these words. Listen for where the Spirit might be prompting and moving in your heart. Where you feel like you relate to these words or when you sense the Spirit is convicting you of something, I want to encourage you to open up your soul to God and cry out to Him from the deepest places.

[Read excerpt from Manning]

Lord Jesus,

We thank you for your love, for your gentleness and for your kindness to us. To all of us, to the parts we try to fix up and clean. But perhaps more especially to the parts of us that are hidden in shame and fear.

You say in your Word:

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest for your soul.

We thank you that we can come to you Jesus to find grace and help.

We thank you that we can come to you just as we are. And so we come now. We come with our fears, with our anger, with our pain, with our depression, with our cynicism. We come to you bringing our whole self – we bring our desires, our hopes and our dreams, we bring to you our wounds, even our false self. And we believe in faith that you will meet us where we are, love us as we are and that your love will heal us and make us whole again.

Give us peace in the knowledge of your truth. You say your truth will set us free and we confess today that we need to be set free from all the ways we try to find life apart from you. We can't do it on our own, we need you. We bring our own "Pee-wee" to you and ask you to show it, to show us your grace and forgiveness. Shine the light of your love into these dark and hidden places. Give us the courage to go there with you and learn to extend the same love and forgiveness to ourselves that you have already extended to us.

Holy Spirit, would you soften hearts, lead us in all truth and reveal the Father's love to us now.

In Jesus name,

Amen