

## Who Loves Me?

According to ancient Greek mythology, Narcissus was the son of the river god, Cethissus. He was strikingly handsome, but he was incapable of love. Not that he could not be loved because there was a woman who fell desperately in love with him. She was enamoured by him; she pined away for him; she did everything she could to get him to love her back, but there was no response. In fact, she tried so hard and loved him so much that she began to disappear until the only thing that was left of her was her voice. Her name was Echo.

In addition, another god of the Greek pantheon, Nemesis, decided that it was time to punish Narcissus for his cold-heartedness and for what he had done to Echo. So Nemesis enticed him to come to a fountain for a drink. Narcissus came to the fountain where there was still water with a clear reflection. When he bent over to take a drink, he fell in love for the first time in his entire life - with himself. He was so enthralled with how very good looking he was that he was transfixed to the spot and he could not move. And so the other gods of the pantheon decided that they would punish him by transforming him forever into a flower by the side of that fountain, and it is from there that we get the name of the flower Narcissus.

But that is not the only word that this story brought into our vocabulary. For we also got from it the word narcissism. That is to be in love with yourself, although it really is not love at all.

There are some people who are self-centered. They are self-absorbed. They are totally selfish. All of life and everybody around them and everything else that goes on centers upon them and what they want and what they are doing. They do not love anybody else and they really do not love themselves either because that is not what love is and that is not what love does.

Jesus says, “ ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”

Jesus assumed self-love. At the very least he assumed that is just the way we humans are or at the very most he was actually teaching that self-love is a good thing. Oh, to be sure Jesus was not inviting us to be self-centered or selfish. In fact, to be so full of ourselves that we do not have interest in anybody else is

about as far from the central message of Jesus Christ as could possibly be imagined.

Well then, what does it mean? What does it mean for me to love me?

All true love begins with God. God is love. God is the first and the greatest lover. We could never know what love is if it were not for God. We would never be able to think it up or invent it by ourselves. And the only reason we are capable of loving is because we are created in the likeness, in the image, of God. That does not mean physical appearance with ears and eyes and nose and mouth. It means that we are like God in the way we think, in the way we feel, in the way we make our choices. It means that the likeness of God is crafted into us.

Several years ago, we were shopping for a new car and Charleen and I went to a local Toyota dealership to check out a Camry. It was then, and I think it is now, the best selling car in the United States. The salesman graciously offered for us to take a ride. So we drove the car for a number of miles, brought it back, and then went through the standard conversation.

“Do you like it?”

“What do I have to do in order to help you take this home and put it in your garage tonight?”

And I said, “Well, we’re going to shop around and look at several other cars and make some comparisons.” That was my way of getting out of there.

Then he said something that just totally took me by surprise. He said, “I think that is a really good idea. In fact, I’d like to suggest an-

other car for you to go see.”

I said, “O.K., what is it?”

He said, “A Lexus.”

Now I really did not know what he was saying at first and he did not explain it. But I figured it out. The Lexus and the Camry are both made by the same company and there are a lot of similarities in design, in mechanics, in craftsmanship and all of those things. I also think he sensed I was not in the price range of a Lexus and that if I went and drove a Lexus I would really like it, but I would be able to afford the Camry and I would buy the Camry. Which eventually we did. We got a Camry. (I will confess to you that there are moments driving along when I think ‘Lexus.’ It looks

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like a Lexus. It feels like a Lexus. It sort of is a Lexus because it is in the image, in the likeness, of a Lexus.

Just as we are in the image and the likeness of God. We are crafted to be like him. You can see God in us. Kind of the way we are put together. The way we are made. The way we are meant to be. Oh, it's true that we are banged up, that we have damage to our model, but you can still feel and see the image of God in every one of our souls and in every one of our lives. When we love ourselves, it is not that we are so foolish as to think that we are of our own design and invention. It is that we are like God, and what we should do is love ourselves because we look like God. We take the likeness and the image of God in us and just as God loves us because we are his children, we should love ourselves and love God because we are like the Father. We are like Him. We look like Him.

Jesus said that the first and greatest commandment is to love the Lord your God with your heart, soul and mind. Loving God enables us to love ourselves because it causes us to love that which God loves. God loves us.

Romans 13:10 explains that love does no harm. To love ourselves means that we do not harm ourselves. That is what love is all about. You know that it is unloving to ever seek to damage or to destroy anyone or anything.

Romans 12:9 explains that "love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good." True love seeks to do what is good for whoever is loved.

You know we all see people who do themselves harm. That is a terribly unloving thing to do. And yet we do that to ourselves. I see it. I do it. We are to love ourselves, and yet we do ourselves physical harm. We cause ourselves physical harm with the inappropriate use of drugs, with tobacco, with alcohol and with lack of sleep and other injuries that we do to our bodies.

Researchers say that 100 years ago Americans typically slept nine hours a night. Fifty years ago it was eight hours a night. Now it is less than seven hours a night. They say that, collectively, we are so busy and so fatigued that it is impacting businesses across the nation because by mid-afternoon people are sleepy and they are making judgment errors. It is now increasingly estimated that there are more fatal automobile crashes because of sleepiness than because of intoxication.

If we saw a parent abusing a child by depriving that child of sleep or introducing into that child's diet things that would damage that child's body, we would probably call the authorities and we would certainly name it child abuse. Yet, we do the same things to our-

selves that we consider to be abusive behavior by others.

But it is not just physically, it is other ways as well. I Corinthians 6:19 asks the question, "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God and your body."

That means physically, but that also means in the relationships that our bodies and lives have with other bodies and with other lives. I'm convinced that those who are engaged in extramarital affairs invariably do harm. They do harm always to the souls and lives of those who are engaged in the affair and tragically also do harm to others that are the innocent victims of someone else's behavior.

But there are all kinds of relationships that do us in. We get into business partnerships that damage us. We get into alliances and hang out with people that are not good for us and drag us down. If we saw a friend behave that way, we would intervene and say, "You just can't continue in that relationship." However, we are reluctant to intervene for ourselves. If we truly loved ourselves, then we would take our own advice.

But it is not just physically and it is not just relationally. It is also spiritually. For spiritual neglect is another expression of self-harm. Just as we mistreat our bodies and relationships, many times we mistreat our souls and our minds. Just as we recognize that the introduction of toxic chemicals into our bodies will do physical damage, we need to recognize that the introduction of toxic thoughts will do damage to our souls. We need to be extraordinarily careful not to allow in evil images and profane words and ungodly thoughts. Those who love themselves take care of their souls just as much as they take care of their bodies and their relationships.

So love yourself as God loves you. Love yourself enough to do yourself no harm, to dump the sins or the bad habits, to treat yourself no longer in an unloving way. Instead, decide to change. Oh, it may be difficult. It can be very difficult. It can take a lot of time, but it is still the loving thing to do.

Lovers not only do not do harm, but lovers also do what is right. That is to say that there is more to love than avoiding evil. Love also seeks to do what is good. The Bible says that we should never tire of doing what is right. We need to see a distinction. "This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: Anyone who does not do what is right is not a child of God." (I John 3:10)

Every single one of us makes thousands of deci-

sions every day. Decisions are the stitches that hold together the fabric of life. Because there are so many decisions, we turn many of them into habits or routine. In other words, we have decided that we will always decide the same way. Other times we make the decision on an ongoing and a moment-by-moment basis. Those who love themselves in both habits and in new decisions choose to do what is right. That is the premise upon which we operate. It is a hard thing, however, when you are surrounded by people who stitch their own lives together and stick you with the needle of doing that which is unjust and evil and wrong. It is hard to be different in the context of pressures to misbehave.

Maybe you have seen the new CBS television show called *The District*. In the story the chief of police in Newark, New Jersey, where crime rate has dropped in half, is offered a job to become the chief of police in Washington, D.C. with the highest crime rate in the country and significant corruption throughout the Washington, D.C. Police Department. What he first sees deeply troubles him; there are shootings on the streets, there are violent crimes, and worst of all, people who should expect the protection of the police find it to be uneven and many of the police officers are themselves engaged in crime and are corrupt. So he decides that the way to change the district and the way to change the police department is to build up around him a group of officers and leaders who are not corrupt and who will do what is right.

In the first episode he is looking for those who, surrounded by corruption and evil, still make right choices. One of those to whom he is drawn is a young African-American Marine veteran. He senses that he is different. He brings him into his office as chief of police and interviews him. In the course of the interview he asks him if he will do what is right when everybody else in his unit or his precinct or around him is doing what is wrong.

That young officer replies, "Sir, I am a born-again Christian who has accepted Jesus Christ as my personal Savior and Lord and, therefore, I will do what is right." That is not my line, that's CBS! They are the ones who come up with this kind of stuff, you know.

Exactly what self-love, exactly what other love, is like. To do what is right. To do what is right independent of what is being done by others. If we really care for ourselves, we will make the correct decisions: the correct decisions about how we feel and how we

spend our time, what we do with our money, how we treat other people, and whether or not we keep our promises. We will make all those decisions on the basis of what is right, and not on the basis of what is convenient, nor easy, nor what someone else wants us to do. We will do what is right. Will that be easy? I promise that it will not be easy.

Around our house Charleen frequently quotes the words of I Peter 3:6. By frequently I do not mean daily. I mean more like hourly she quotes it. I Peter 3:6 says, "Do what is right and do not give way to fear." Those who love themselves; those who love God do what is right and they do not give way to fear.

I'll tell you what the result is. Those who do right grow in self-respect. Those who do what is right feel good about themselves. Those who do what is right are the kind of self-lovers whom Jesus had in mind.

What does it mean to love ourselves? It means all of this: it means to acknowledge the image of God in us and to honor that image in us, to do ourselves no harm, to do what is right, to treat ourselves right. It is the loving thing to do.

I'll tell you that there is a challenge here, and I know that there is a risk in even talking about this because there are some people who will say, "Love myself! Hey, that is great! You know I've always wanted to be happy and so that is the goal of my life, to make myself happy." In fact, I would say that is a fairly pervasive concept in our culture. That happiness is somehow the supreme value. There are those who say, "Yes, I will simply pursue my self-interests and I will do what I think is good and fun and happy for me." But that is absolutely contrary to everything that Jesus and the Bible and Christianity are trying to communicate.

I will tell you that there are others who are at the far other extreme who say that they are simply not worth loving and who say, "Love myself? I don't even like myself. Look in the mirror? I look in the mirror and I want to say, 'I hate you. I hate the way you look. I hate the way you think. I hate the way you treat yourself. I just hate everything about you. I wish I were someone else.'"

I tell you that both are sinful and unchristian approaches. Both deny the image of God, both do themselves harm, and both fail to do what is right. So please, be neither. Understand that there is a far better way, and that is to love ourselves as God loves us. In this the Bible is very clear. That God is love. That God demonstrates his own love for us in this, that while we

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were still sinners Christ died for us. That Jesus said, "Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends..." That "when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy." Because of his love for us, he saved us.

What is going to happen if things go terribly wrong? What if awful, bad things happen? Might we then, somehow, lose this love of God? Absolutely not! "For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

God loves us. God loves us the way a parent loves children. God loves us passionately and fully. God loves us enough to forgive us even if we don't love ourselves enough to self-forgive. God loves us enough to give us good when there is no doubt we do not deserve it. God loves us enough to discipline us when we would far rather that he leave us alone. God does whatever he needs to do to make us the way that we were meant to be.

So let us love ourselves the way God loves us. See yourself through God's eyes. Love yourself enough to get rid of the bad stuff and to get on with the good stuff. Love yourself enough to never give up. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: "Love your neighbor as yourself."

So here is the question for today. If you really did love yourself the way God loves you, what would be different? What would change? How would you live and love yourself differently if you loved like God?

Then do it. Do it. Love you as much and in the same way as God loves you.

A month before my sixth birthday our family moved from one town to the next and from one old house to another. It was a grand old suburban home: three stories high with an attic, a full basement, a detached garage, some gardens, and plenty of space for a little boy to explore.

One of my first explorations took me to the far back corner of the yard where there was a grape arbor. I had in my young life never seen a grape arbor before. I'm not sure I have ever touched one since. I anxiously awaited the next season when those sweet and succulent grapes would be available and I'd be able to just go out in the backyard and pick them and eat them.

Finally the day arrived. I stood as tall as I could

on my tippy toes, pulled down a cluster of grapes and with anxious anticipation plucked the first of those grapes and popped them into my mouth. It was one of the worst tastes I have ever experienced. It was - - - - - just spit that out. I learned young that anybody who says grapes are grapes has no idea of what they are talking about. Some people have a totally different idea of what is a grape than what somebody else does.

Likewise, those who say love is love often have a broad span of definition of what they think love is really like. That is why we turn to near the end of the Bible in Galatians 5 where there is a clear contrast in taste that is described between the bad stuff and the good stuff, between those who really don't love themselves and those who really do love themselves.

Here is what it looks like for those who don't love themselves. "The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft." Then an interesting list that apparently is put on the same level with witchcraft, idolatry and sexual immorality; it is "hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies and the like." That is what God would spit out of his mouth and what those who love themselves would kick out of their lives.

Here is what it looks like for those who do love themselves. "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control."

Hear it one more time. God loves you. You love God. Love yourself the way God loves you.

Our loving Heavenly Father, how we thank you that we are created in your likeness, and in your likeness we have this capacity for the wonder and beauty of love. But help us to get it right. Help us to love you passionately and fully with all of our hearts, souls and minds. And help us to love ourselves just the way you love us. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen

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