

## *Self — The Relationship That Lasts A Lifetime*

William Shakespeare wrote in the first act of Hamlet:

*This above all: to thine own self be true,  
And it must follow, as the night the day,  
Thou canst not then be false to any man.*

In other words, if a person has a right relationship with self, there will be a right relationship with others. In a way it is a strange thing to talk about your relationship with yourself, but it is extremely important. Even though it's hard to define, it's something that we all kind of intuitively know about because we all deal with it. We recognize that all other relationships can end or be broken off. You can outlive your parents, you can divorce a spouse, you can abandon your children or quit a job but you can't end the relationship with yourself. It is the relationship that lasts for a lifetime.

Let's talk about our self-relationships in terms of three questions. The first is the question, "Who am I?" What happens so often is that the answer to that question is shaped by other people for us. The world constantly tries to define us by external appearances or by specific events in our lives and that becomes our self-definition. There are those who say, you're old or young, black or white, male or female. You're from the south or the north or the east or the west. You're a teacher, or a doctor, or the janitor or the pastor or the police officer or the sales person. Even if they do not speak the words, there are those who think of you as the rich guy, the famous athlete, the celebrity musician, the politician, the mother of triplets or the president of the college.

You're the one who was raped, the person who went bankrupt, the divorcee whose husband beat you or the victim of incest. You're the kid whose parents didn't want you, the guy who was fired, the student who flunked out or the drunk driver who hit the high school kid. Others are always trying to give us a label and our lives can become

defined by an often inadequate categorization.

We're not the first to deal with this. Jesus dealt with the same problem. There were people who said to Jesus, "I know who you are. You are Moses come back from the dead." Or, "You're Elijah; you're Jeremiah." There were people who said to him, "You're John the Baptist. He had his head cut off by King Herod and you must be John the Baptist with his head put back on again." Or they said, "You're Beelzebub — the devil himself." Some called him the illegitimate son of a Roman soldier who had an affair with a young woman named Mary. They said that he tried to cover it up with his virgin birth stuff. There were some who said that he was a lunatic. The range of other people's identification of Jesus was from being a devil to being deity.

But how do we define ourselves? How do you answer the question? If you had to write a single paragraph of self-identification, what would it include? What would be the best answer that you could give of who you are?

It is who we define ourselves to be that then triggers the relationship that we have with ourselves. Unfortunately, there are a lot of inadequate answers that people give. There are some people who identify themselves as victims. Something clearly tragic, clearly heartbreaking happened ten or twenty years ago and that has become the defining event of their lives.

There are some people who define themselves by their possessions. They think that they are better than others because of their money, car, house or business. The opposite also happens where people define themselves by what they don't have. I'm the guy who doesn't own a house.

There are those who define themselves by their achievements, or titles such as Doctor, Colonel, President or Mrs. Some of us define

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ourselves in terms of our associations. In conversation we like to say who we know because it makes us seem to be more important as if the fame of others will rub off on us. Or we define ourselves in terms of the club or the union or the church to which we belong.

Traditionally men have most often defined themselves by their occupations. Women have more often defined themselves by their relationships, but the list is long and varied. Different people answer the “who am I?” question in many different ways. The problem with these common answers is that they are often faulty definitions.

Money can be lost, youth ages, other people can break off their relationship with us.

So is there a Christian answer? Is there a different answer to the “who am I?” question for someone who is committed to Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord? Indeed there is.

The best answer, the Christian answer, is “I am God’s child in God’s likeness.” When the Bible says that I’m created in the image of God, that gives me a new understanding of myself that lasts forever. It is an understanding of who I am that no one can take away. A mugger can beat me up until you can’t recognize me, but the image of God in me cannot be touched. Or I can lose all of the things that may seem to make me important or distinctive from other people, but when everyone of them is gone I am no less a child of God. When I walk down the street, I don’t have to think that I am young or that I’m old, that I’m educated or that I’m ignorant. All I need to know is that I look like God. I’m not God but I look like him because his image is in me.

Just as there is often a resemblance between a child and a parent, there is a resemblance between a Christian and God. You can see it; you can hear it; you can sense the imprint of God on our lives. It’s an indelible impression that lasts forever, that is better than anything else and of greater worth than all of the other things combined.

It’s difficult to communicate what this is all about but for those that get it, for those that can grasp what the Bible teaches when it talks about our being created in the image of God, it is life transforming. It revolutionizes the way we see ourselves, the way we live and that revolution carries over into all of the relationships of life that we have. A person who self-defines as a child of God can never have that taken away — not by robbery or rape or bankruptcy or failure. Being a child of God is better than anything else. There is no better self-definition than, “I am God’s child created in God’s image.”

*Love is committed caring that acts out in the other person’s best interest.*

Galatians 3: 26 and 28 says, “You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. . . . There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” That is who I am, a child of God.

The second question for a good self-relationship links to that. It is the question, “Who do I love?” But we have to understand what the Bible is talking about when it talks about love. Love is this powerful fuel that makes a relationship good and strong and growing.

We know that you can take a child who is struggling with some deficit and if you love that child, it is miraculous the difference that love can make. If a man and a woman deeply love each other, terrific problems and difficulties can drive them together instead of ripping them apart. In that case their love is more than fuel that drives them in each other’s direction, it is like glue that makes them inseparable. If there are people around us that are hurting, we know that if we love them our love can transform them. The most eloquent words about love are found in I Corinthians 13, “These three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.”

Now put that together with what Jesus said in Mark 12:30-31, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.

Love your neighbor as yourself.” That’s a strange thing to say. Does that mean then that we are to fall into a romantic passionate love with God and everybody on the block? Of course not. “Love” refers to doing what is right. Love is committed caring that acts out in the other person’s best interest.

If I love God with all of my mind and soul and body and strength that means I care so deeply for God that I will put everything I’ve got into doing what is good for God. Loving my neighbor means that I will do what is best for my neighbor even if he or she is rather unlovable and doesn’t even want anything done for them.

Jesus said, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus assumed that we must love ourselves if we’re going to be any good at loving others. He’s not talking about narcissism where people look in the mirror and think how great they are. It’s not selfishness or greed or pride. Self-love is doing right for ourselves. If we really love ourselves we’re not selfish; if we really love ourselves we are not greedy; if we really love ourselves we will not be proud because those are not loving ways to be. In fact, true self-love is loaded with self-discipline, with righteous behavior and avoidance of the sins that will wreck our lives.

Many times when we see people we think are really in love with themselves, we have misunderstood. Often it is self-hatred for complete self-indulgence is highly self-destructive and can ruin your body and your life. They alienate themselves from God and everybody else and it results in disaster.

A good self-relationship requires a biblical self-love, a love that comes up to God’s standards. It is a love for ourselves the way God loves us. It is treating ourselves the way God treats us. Imagine what this combination does for a person’s life! Someone who says, “I’m not who everybody says I am — I am a child of God and God’s imprint is in me. I love myself to the point that I care for myself the way God

cares for me. I treat myself the way God wants me to be treated.” Can you imagine how healthy that is? Can you imagine what that does to the self-relationship that previously was struggling and destroying?

That brings us to a third question, “What am I supposed to do?” If I am serious about this, how do I get to this point where I can get along with myself? There are three things that must be accepted. First of all, we need to accept responsibility for ourselves. That is contrary to the frequent messages in our culture today. We live in a blaming society and our culture today is not a culture that easily accepts responsibility. We all do it. Whenever we run into a problem or a difficulty we tend to quickly scan the horizon to find someone we can accuse of creating the problem. If I feel bad about anything I’ve got to find somebody else and figure it’s that other person’s fault. We blame our parents, our friends, our churches and our employers. The current hot number one on the list of blaming others is to blame the government for whatever problem anybody has.

We live in a sinful and difficult world. Others do us wrong and we do others wrong, but at some point God calls us to accept responsibility for ourselves. Somebody may do me in but that does not give me an excuse to respond inappropriately or unlovingly. Somebody may treat me unjustly but I am responsible for my reaction. I am responsible for my sins. I’ve got to be responsible for me.

When you think about it, it absolutely makes sense even though it’s contrary to what our culture is constantly telling us to do. We hear the same message through counselors, through 12 step programs, we’ve read it in the Bible. Galatians 5:19-21 tells us that we’ve got to take responsibility for the wrong we do including “sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness,

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orgies and the like.” We need to accept responsibility for our own rage, for our own anger, for our own behavior.

The sum of this is that I can’t blame you for my sins and problems. I have to take responsibility for myself if I am going to get any help. That is the self-loving thing to do. But, if we hear only God’s call to accept responsibility, we’re in big trouble. We have all this responsibility piled upon us and we discover very quickly that we cannot cope. That, in fact, is why so many people don’t accept responsibility. They can’t handle it.

But responsibility is just the first on God’s list of things we are to accept. The second thing for us to accept is God’s grace. Ephesians 2 in the New Testament calls upon us to accept this enormous generosity from God. When we quit blaming everybody else and take responsibility, we realize we can’t solve our problems so we accept God’s help — and he offers lots of it. God offers to forgive us no matter what we have done. He’ll wipe the slate clean. He will give us grace, that is gifts, goodness, to deal with whatever we face in life. He will always give to us whatever resources are needed in order for us to succeed and be all that he calls us to be. Not that we will be like somebody else, not that we will have our wish list fulfilled; but in order that we will come up to the standards of God, he will guarantee giving to us whatever that requires.

Some people just won’t accept God’s help. Some say, “I’m not worthy of God’s help.” That’s right, none of us is worthy of it. There are others who are quick to say, “I can do this myself. I don’t need help from God.” That is such a misunderstanding of reality that it is hard to know how to respond to it. The self-loving thing to do is to accept responsibility and to accept the grace of God. To not accept it is self-destruction. It is arrogant pride.

We are to accept responsibility and to accept God’s grace and then add a third to the list and that is to accept our own uniqueness. You are you and I am me and we are different. That’s

a great truth from God. It’s one that has been around in the Bible for thousands of years, but one that our society is finally coming to in terms of all of the scientific research and news articles related to DNA testing. Everyone of us is unique, completely different out of all of the billions of possibilities.

God is very clear that we are each one of a kind. Each of us is part of God’s greater whole and each of us is specially designed and has great value. When we accept our uniqueness it is transforming for all we need to be is ourselves. I don’t have to compare with you anymore. Age, height, race or gender don’t make any difference. I am me and you are you. We don’t have to compete — it’s silly to do so. When we accept the uniqueness that God has given to us then we can all be what we were meant to be in the bodies that we have, in the intelligence, race, gender and age that God has granted to us.

Put all that together and we are ready to grow. We’re ready to grow in our relationship with God, in our relationship with ourselves and in our relationship with others. It is a basis for healthy relationships all the way around. It’s a great way for me to be me and it’s God’s marvelous design for you to be you!

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