

STUDIES IN BIBLICAL ETHICS No. 10 May 12, 1996

Read: Matthew 22:34-40

We are clearing up some loose ends in our study of the law of God and of the guidance of the Holy Spirit as the two primary foundations of biblical ethics. Last week we considered the question of Christian Liberty. Tonight I want to consider the great summary of the law that our Savior gave us, the whole of the law and the whole of the ten commandments, in just two: to love God with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind, and our neighbor as ourselves.

The Lord is not inventing anything here, of course; indeed, he quotes both of the two great commandments from the OT (Deut; Lev.).

But, he is the first to summarize the law in this way. All through his ministry he placed special emphasis on interior obedience, the attitudes and motives of the heart, as the prophets did before him, because, of course, he, like they, was constantly dealing with folk who honored the Lord with their lips but whose hearts were far from him.

Christian theology has generally taken the first great commandment as a summary of the first four of the ten commandments and the second great commandment as a summary of the last six [The "two tables" of the law; and the problem with that interpretation in view of the suzerainty treaty parallel]. (There are differences of opinion, of course: some take the first as summarizing the first five.) This division is not wrong in itself, but it must be remembered that we love God by loving our neighbor as well. And we cannot love our neighbor rightly if we do not love God (e.g. we harm our neighbor by not keeping the Sabbath holy, by taking God's name in vain, etc.)

One of the truly wonderful things about love for God, indeed, is that it is not a limiting but a liberating affection. If a man loves a woman, he cannot love another woman without spoiling the first love. But God is an object of such infinite love himself, one can love him with all the heart, even wish all the while to love him still more, and, at the same time, love others fiercely. God is a jealous God in the sense that he will have us worship no one else or nothing else **as a god -- that would be false and evil--**, but he is so large hearted that he is perfectly willing to share our affection with others of his creatures. [Paul re people who marry in 1 Cor. 7; their interests are divided, they must be, and God approves of this division!] In the final sense each of the two great commandments summarizes the whole law.

But I want to devote our attention this evening to the second great commandment: to love our neighbor as ourselves. I want tonight to consider the "as ourselves" and then, Lord willing, next Lord's Day evening we will take up what the commandment actually requires of us in regard to our neighbor.

As you may know, a great question swirls around the words "as yourself" in v. 39. Is the Lord commending self-love there? Is part of the second great commandment that we love ourselves? There have been three answers given to the question, three interpretations of "as yourself" through the centuries.

There are those who regard the self-love spoken of in the commandment as sinful, so that the commandment reads, in effect, "love your neighbor as you shouldn't love yourself, but do

nevertheless; give your **neighbor** the love you sinfully give to **yourself**." Others regard the self-love spoken of in the commandment as natural. The commandment then reads "Love your neighbor as you, naturally, instinctively, love yourself, as all men by nature love themselves. Finally, others regard the self-love as proper, righteous, and a duty. "Love your neighbor," then, "in the same way you ought to love yourself."

I want to begin our consideration of this question by acknowledging my debt to Prof. David Jones of Covenant Theological Seminary whose fine examination of this question changed my mind.

I. We may begin with the position that the self-love spoken of in the second great commandment is **natural**.

On this view self-love here, at least, is considered neither a vice nor a virtue but simply a fact of nature. There is an instinct in us all to preserve ourselves, to seek our own happiness, to look out for our own welfare. This instinct is built into human life and is required for its preservation. In this way, as John Stott, puts it, this self-love is simply "a fact of our humanity that [Scripture] recognizes and tells us to use as a standard."

An argument for this way of looking at self-love is taken from Paul's remarks in Eph. 5:23, 28-30:

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her....So husbands ought also to love their own wives as their own bodies. He who loves his own wife loves himself; for no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ also does the church, because we are members of his body."

As a matter of fact, however, it is not obvious that we ought to take Paul as meaning here only a natural, instinctive sort of self-regard or care for one's own life and wellbeing. As a matter of fact, of course, people do hate their own flesh and do it positive harm -- by drinking, or smoking, or taking drugs, or over-eating. Paul should not be pressed to say what he clearly does not mean. He knew full well that people overeat or commit suicide. Judas was a case in point. We know of people who starve themselves to death out of a misplaced sense of what is good for them. All of this, of course, is of moral weight and consequence. In other words, it is right, **it is moral**, to care for one's life in the proper way, it is wrong to abuse your body. So Paul may just as well be speaking morally, not naturally, in speaking of a person not hating his own flesh. He may mean nothing more than that care for oneself, all in all, is a moral duty that people in general can be counted on to perform. A duty they should perform, of course, but one that most of them do, most of the time.

What is more, taking self-love in the commandment as simply a natural tendency or instinct, neither good nor bad, introduces a serious ambiguity into the commandment to love our neighbors as ourselves. Are we then to love our neighbor in this same natural way that we love ourselves? Are we being asked to do no more than a kind of thoughtless, instinctive attention to

basic needs would require? Clearly the commandment means much more than that, as we will see next Lord's Day. But, then, we are being commanded to love our neighbor morally in the way in which we love ourselves naturally. But how is that done and what does that mean?

II. A **second**, much more common, view is that the self-love referred to in the commandment is sinful. This view has impressive defenders from the past and many defenders today.

Here is Calvin, for example, on the command to love our neighbor as we love ourselves.

In the entire law we do not read one syllable that lays a rule upon man...for the advantage of his own flesh. And obviously, since men were born in such a state that they are all too much inclined to self-love--and, however much they deviate from truth, they still keep self-love--there was no need of a law that would increase or rather enkindle this already excessive love. Hence it is very clear that we keep the commandments not by loving ourselves but by loving God and neighbor; that he lives the best and holiest life who lives and strives for himself as little as he can, and that no one lives in a worse or more evil manner than he who lives and strives for himself alone, and thinks about and seeks only his own advantage.

Indeed, to express how profoundly we must be inclined to love our neighbors, the Lord measured it by the love of ourselves because he had at hand no more violent or stronger emotion than this.... he shows that the emotion of love, which out of natural depravity commonly reside within ourselves, must now be extended to another, that we may be ready to benefit our neighbor with no less eagerness, ardor, and care than ourselves.

Now there is truth, of course, in what Calvin says, as I will argue later. There certainly is such a thing as sinful self-love, the Bible speaks of it often. Paul warns of days when men will be "lovers of themselves" [2 Tim. 3:1] and countless times we are treated in the Scripture to considerations of self-worship and selfishness as bottom sins. And these sinful commitments to oneself, this self-idolatry, is a passion of terrible power. We know that.

In our day, when psychology has fostered a notion of self-love and self-esteem that, rather than condemn seems more to foster this native selfishness of human beings, this self-absorption, and self-worship, it is natural enough to read the Scripture as being in violent opposition to the worldview of modern psychology at exactly this point. Psychology admires self-love and fosters it while the Bible hates and condemns it.

I was reading just this past week a study highly critical of psychological approaches to human behavior. There is a cottage industry of such books written by evangelicals attacking modern psychology and in many of them you will find statements like this one in the book I was reading this week:

Throughout her therapy, he guided her into new areas. Eventually one of his prescriptions was to, in essence, honor herself. **Any form** of self-love and self-worship is not of God and can lead only to destruction. [Gary Almy, et al, Addicted to Recovery, p. 69]

Another statement, typical of many others in the book, reads:

The message that God sent Jesus to die in order to fill our empty love tanks and thus make us feel better about ourselves is found nowhere in the Bible; yet our bookstores bulge with this lie. [p. 160]

The psychologists are not wrong in observing that man seeks security and significance. The church is wrong in failing to point this out as a mark of our fallen nature. This search is hardly characteristic of what Paul describes as 'the new man in Christ.' [p. 161]

God has never permitted the elevation of self, and all of Scripture views it as rebellion. [p. 161]

Now, you know that I have little sympathy for modern psychological views of humanity and of human behavior. The fostering of self-love and self-worship that is common to those approaches is clearly wrong, unbiblical, and unhelpful. **But, I want you to see that these statements I just read to you from a Christian critic of psychology, such statements as "any form of self-love is not of God" are wrong also.** Now, perhaps it is true that this writer meant only that selfishness is sinful and that God never permits one to place himself in a position that belongs only to God. But, if he meant to say that, he should have said it more clearly.

Before I go on to make this case more positively, let me just point out to you the terrific problem created by the assumption that even Calvin makes that the second great commandment means, in effect, that our sinful self-love and self-worship is to be the pattern for our righteous love of our neighbor. As Dr. Jones puts it: "The stature of Calvin notwithstanding, it is hard to see how a 'violent emotion,' especially when it arises out of our 'natural depravity,' can provide a sound canon by which to gauge our conduct toward others." [p. 53] Take your sinful self-preoccupation and apply it to others and you will fulfill all the law of God? Really?

For the fact is, self-love **is**, in Holy Scripture, it seems to me, a moral duty and this view has been the view of a substantial number of the greatest of Christian thinkers, thinkers who could not be suspected of any sympathy with modern psychology's slighting of sin and guilt, ignoring of God, or idolatry of human happiness and self-fulfillment.

Here is Augustine himself [Jones, 55]:

It is impossible that one should love God and not love himself. In fact, he alone has a proper love of himself who loves God. Since a man can be said to have sufficient love for himself if he seeks earnestly to attain the supreme and perfect good, and this is nothing other than God...who can doubt that he who loves God loves himself?

Aquinas speaks similarly:

Thus it is necessary that that affection of man be so inclined through charity that, first and foremost, each one loves God; secondly, that he love himself; and thirdly, that he love his neighbor. [**We were taught to reverse the last two in our JOY class at Sunday School!**]

William Ames the famous puritan took the same view as did none other than Jonathan Edwards. We are made in the image of God, he said, and so for that reason should love ourselves. More than that, if we love God -- who loves us -- should we not love those whom God loves? That is a principle he teaches us himself, as, for example, in 1 John 5:1.

When Proverbs [19:8] tells us that "He who gets wisdom loves his own soul" is it not commending that love to us?

And, how many times and in how many ways does the Bible address us by appealing to our own happiness, well-being, and desire for our own good?

It holds before us the prospect of rewards if we will trust and obey the Lord, rewards both in this world and in the world to come.

The Lord Jesus appeals to the desire of men and women to be happy in his beatitudes.

In fact, the appeal to believe in Jesus and be saved, is nothing other than an appeal to do what is best for you, what will bring you happiness instead of misery.

Indeed, even when we are commanded to "hate" ourselves, we are urged to do so, **in order that we might become Christ's disciple and so share in his salvation.** We lose our lives precisely in order to save them.

You see, self-love can be a proper regard for one's own self-interest or it can be self-conceit, pride, selfishness, and idolatry. There is nothing unbiblical about such an idea as "self-esteem" or "self-fulfillment" or "self-realization" if we are willing and determined that God and his Word will define all of these terms and determine what the self is that we are to aspire to.

I want all of you to repudiate with all your hearts the kind of self-love that does not admit true sinfulness and guilt, is not humble before God, is not ready to repent of sin, does not confess its absolute dependence upon the mercy of God, does not consider the interests of others as more important than its own, is not compatible with the fear of God and absolute submission to his will, come wind, come weather, the kind of self-love that makes a person the center of the universe so far as he is concerned.

But, I want you also to see that the Bible does not teach us to deny the perfectly obvious facts that we are, as created in God's image, redeemed by the Savior's blood, and subject to his final judgment, persons of wonderful value and importance. The feeling of that value and importance is part of the experience of authentic humanity **as God made it.** We have every right to consider our own interests and the Bible often tells us to do just that in many different ways. It is part of

what it means to be a healthy, happy human being, to care about one's life and to care to be happy. God has made human life to require this.

The little child who craves the affirmation, the love, the approval of her parents is not in that craving expressing her fallenness but her humanity. The person who struggles to find life tolerable because he or she is so unhappy, clearly should not be told that his or her happiness is the ultimate good and so should be sought without regard to anything else -- clearly! -- **but, he or she should likewise not be told that, being a sinner, happiness is immaterial. No, the promise of the gospel is that what we crave as human beings, what we have been made to crave, Jesus will give us if we will trust and obey him. There is a cost that must be paid, painful acknowledgements that must be made, the surrender of oneself to God, a lifetime of struggle with sin, the flesh, and the devil, but it is precisely joy and peace that are the prize. We tell folk how truly to love themselves. We don't have to put it just that way, but there is nothing wrong in putting it that way. For it is true and the Bible says it over and over again. Jesus came that we might have life and have it more abundantly!**

This is my point, no one needs to be sour on himself or herself in order to be sweet toward God and toward one's neighbors. In the kingdom of God love points everywhere and connects everything. Indeed, as the Scripture seems clearly to teach, if one really loves God, he will really love both himself and his neighbor and in a way that does justice to both without some competition between the two loves.

In other words, the second great commandment then requires that we have the same proper regard for our neighbor's happiness and wellbeing that we rightly have for ourselves.

As C.S. Lewis put it:

I would prefer to combat the "I'm special" feeling not by the thought "I'm no more special than anyone else," but by the feeling "everyone is as special as me."

And that thought is much easier to find lasting in the heart of even selfish people like you and me, when beneath and above and all around it is this other thought: God is more special than all of us together.

It is true the Bible rarely commands us to love ourselves; the wrong kind of self-love lurks too near the surface for that. But, it everywhere teaches and assumes a proper regard and appreciation and affection for ourselves -- and treats that as good and right, indeed as the basis of a righteous life for ourselves and love for others.

And that love and that regard is the farthest thing from an ugly self-conceit and pride and selfishness and self-assertion and promotion that we should hate and always guard against.

True authentic humanity will always be found in the biblical direction. We are precious and can think so; only we must think carefully and well and remember that we are not as precious as God

and that our sin -- what we contribute to our lives -- is what ruins this precious life God has given us; what he gives is what restores the precious, the worthy, the beautiful. If there is that in us that ought to be loved -- he has given it to us. And if there is that in us that ought to be hated -- well, we did that ourselves. **Now that is a solid basis for both a cheerful and a morally worthy life.** That is a true psychology.