

"I have learned, that the person I have to ask for forgiveness from the most is: myself. You must love yourself. You have to forgive yourself, everyday, whenever you remember a shortcoming, a flaw, you have to tell yourself "That's just fine". You have to forgive yourself so much, until you don't even see those things anymore. Because that's what love is like."
~ C. Joybell C.

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Forgive Oneself

*It's time to forgive
yourself.*



Jesus' Forgotten Commandment: Forgive Yourself

When a man asked Jesus about the greatest commandment, Jesus responded that we must first love God. He then added, "Love your neighbor as yourself." This directive is a common theme across all religions and is typically viewed as the Golden Rule, where we are encouraged to "do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

I have heard many sermons over the years on the topic of loving my neighbor. But I can count on one hand the number I've heard on loving myself. I've observed that I'm not alone. When I raise the issue of loving oneself with the wounded persons with whom I speak, very few have a clear idea of what this means or how to express such loving.

Many ask, "Isn't that being selfish?" Most of these people have been very effective when loving their neighbors but don't seem to be able to apply the same standards of kindness and compassion to themselves.

When we look more closely at what Jesus said, we notice first that He said, "Love your neighbor as yourself," not "then yourself." He calls us to love ourselves in equal measure to loving others. How can this be selfishness if we are commanded by Jesus to do so?

What Jesus is talking about is balance. I have known many wonderful people of great service: physicians and other healers; persons working for social justice; priests, ministers, rabbis, and other religious professionals. Many of these people battle exhaustion and depression. Some have ceased spiritual practices because they "don't have the time." Jesus is clearly calling those people as well as the rest of us to pursue balance. This requires us to pay attention to how we treat ourselves in the areas of body, mind, emotion, and spirit.

Respect Your Body

To love yourself at the physical level is to treat your body as a temple. How often do I treat my body with respect? In my own case, for many years I desecrated the temple with alcohol and nicotine. To love my body is to not poison it. In a larger sense, though, loving myself

We can also grow in spiritual love for ourselves by embracing our role in creativity. The great scientist and mystic Teilhard de Chardin once wrote, "We may imagine that creation was completed long ago, but that would be quite wrong because it continues still." In other words, God continues to create and we play a part in that creation. Embracing that invitation can be a strong expression of love of self.

As with saintliness, many of us hesitate when considering that we all have within us an artist. We think of Van Gogh's paintings or Beethoven's symphonies or Frost's poems and think, "I can never do anything like that!"

Perhaps not. But that does not mean that you do not have creative potential. Creativity can be found in cooking or gardening, knitting or sewing. There are those who can "think outside the box" when confronting a problem. There are those who make us laugh. You could even write a poem or a song.

Jesus' Challenge

As Jesus noted, loving our neighbor is easy when our neighbor is lovable. The challenge is to love the unlovable. So it is with loving oneself. It is easy to love yourself when all is well. The challenge is to love yourself when you are down or grumpy, when you are angry or disappointed with yourself, when you sin.

Can you obey his command?

since I'd told her that I loved her. I have never made that mistake again.

Free Your Spirit

At the spiritual level, learning to love oneself certainly involves developing a capacity to accept God's forgiveness and forgive oneself. Beyond that, though, we are challenged to develop a spiritual world whose foundation is not based on guilt or fear. It is one thing to behave in a certain way to avoid being punished.

It is something else to behave in a certain way based on a set of values. If I am focused only on that within me that is sinful, then I will be forever judging myself. I need to balance that focus with a joyous celebration of that within me that is saintly.

Most of us hesitate when considering that we might be saintly. When I was young, we were encouraged to aspire to sainthood. All that I was aware of was how short I fell of such a lofty goal. Yet, in my life and work, I have met and known some very saintly people. Flawed, to be sure, but nonetheless saintly.

I think of a divorced woman who went to a wedding to pick up her son, anticipating an encounter with her ex-husband, his wife, and their new baby. This woman walked into the hall with her head high, walked across the floor, greeted her husband and his wife, pronounced a blessing over the baby, then walked out with her son. I think, too, of a friend here in El Paso who has devoted his adult life to providing a place of welcome for illegal immigrants.

I think of a man dying of AIDS who, when I asked him how he wanted to face his death, said, "I want to look forward to stepping into the light." These and many other saints have graced my journey. I honor them by being open to the possibility that I, too, can be saintly.

physically involves living a healthy lifestyle—attending to what I eat and drink, exercising, getting enough sleep, dealing with stress. You may already be aware of these lifestyle issues, but I, at least, don't always consider them as part of Jesus' command.

Take note of Jesus' lifestyle. He may have led a simple, even ascetic life, but one of the first things he did upon entering a town was to find something to eat. Many of his most dramatic teachings occurred within the context of eating and making sure that people were fed. He also would often try to escape the crowds and be alone as a way of managing his own stress. How many of us find a long walk to be calming and renewing? So did Jesus!

Finally, to love your physical self, you might want to borrow a phrase from the play *The Fantasticks*. At one point the narrator, El Gallo, exhorts the audience to "celebrate sensation!" Think of each of your senses. Then make a list of pleasurable experiences for each sense. Here's my list, just to give you a sense of what such a list might look like:

Sight: a painting such as Van Gogh's *Starry Night* or Hopper's *Nighthawks*

Sound: the laughter of my grandchildren

Smell: the rosemary in my herb garden

Taste: a good plate of enchiladas

Touch: a hug from my wife.

To celebrate sensation is to enjoy your body in all its wonder, enjoying one of God's finest creations.

Change Your Mindset

When I first came across those little affirmation books that are popular in recovery circles, I was turned off, thinking the various positive phrases were “corny” or “syrupy.” Thus, if I read something like, “You are precious in the eyes of the Lord,” I would dismiss it. One day, though, I realized I had absolutely no problem accepting negative thoughts such as, “You’re really stupid,” or “You have no idea what you’re doing,” and so on. Something was clearly amiss. I saw that I was quick to dismiss positive thoughts yet tended to invite negative thoughts in to stay awhile. In learning to love myself in my mind, I must confront such mental negativity.

Bad thoughts can become just as habitual as bad habits and just as challenging to break. Daily affirmations can certainly help. In addition, though, we can undermine mental negativity by embracing the powerful thought that we are loved by God—that God sees our goodness even when we don’t. There is much in Scripture about God’s enduring love for us. I hope there are a few passages that you know well and can turn to when caught in the grip of self-criticism. For me, there is nothing more powerful and reassuring than Psalm 139. These and other words of that psalm chase darkness:

“How precious to me are your designs, O God; how vast the sum of them! Were I to count them, they would outnumber the sands; when I complete them, still you are with me” (17-18).

In my quest to love myself in my mind, the other attitude that helps greatly is gratitude. To be grateful is not necessarily the same as saying I deserve good things. But it acknowledges that God has blessed me. Gratitude is more than a simple thank-you. It is to delight in the blessing.

How do you like someone to react when you give a gift? Does it not detract from the joy if the recipient says, “Oh, I don’t deserve this”? Is it not more enjoyable when the recipient beams, maybe even cries with joy, thereby accepting our message that he or she is loved?

Perhaps God also delights in our gratitude and is saddened if we view ourselves as undeserving of God’s gifts.

Mixed Emotions

To understand how to love yourself emotionally, I would first suggest you make a list of experiences that give you joy. Part of my list would include hiking the Tejas Trail in the Guadalupe Mountains, watching the Boston Red Sox play baseball or the Indiana University Hoosiers play basketball, taking a long run by the ocean, or watching a good old movie such as Casablanca or My Favorite Year.

After making your own list, ask yourself how often you allow yourself those experiences. In my own case, I find first that I have a hard time coming up with the list and also that I don’t often give myself the opportunity to have these joyful experiences. I allow work and other obligations to dictate how I use my time.

Some of us are wary of emotion. When I was growing up, by and large the only acceptable emotion for a man to display was anger. Feelings of sadness or fear—even positive displays of emotion such as affection—may be viewed as showing ourselves to be too vulnerable. And so we keep such feelings to ourselves. And yet we may not deal with others’ emotions in the same way, instead responding to them much differently than we do to our own emotions. Thus, we may reassure someone who is afraid, comfort someone who is grieving, or delight in a loved one’s display of affection.

And yet we keep a tight grip on our own emotions. The price for such self-control can be high. Have you had the experience of losing someone before you had a chance to tell that person how much you loved him or her? I have. I had an aunt, my father’s only sister, who was always kind and loving to me. She died somewhat unexpectedly, and I realized it had been years