

Women's Ministries Emphasis Day
June 10, 2023

SERMON

A Love That Precedes One's Choices

Written by Margery Herinirina

SEMINAR

A Love That Transforms

Written by Margery Herinirina



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By the Department of Women's Ministries
General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists
12501 Old Columbia Pike · Silver Spring, Maryland 20904-6600 · USA
women.adventist.org
womensministries@gc.adventist.org*

Seventh-day Adventist® Church

GENERAL CONFERENCE
WORLD HEADQUARTERS



WOMEN'S MINISTRIES

February 7, 2023

Joyful greetings Daughters of God. We live in a world where the word “love” has lost the original meaning that we find in the Bible, when we read the words, “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” John 3:16 NKJV. This love we find in the Bible between God and his created beings is not the same as the love we have for our pets, our homes, our car, etc. God’s love is a sacrificial love that He pours into our life each day we approach His throne seeking an infilling of the Holy Spirit.

Our packet for Women’s Ministries Emphasis Day 2023 is titled, “A Love that Precedes One’s Choices.” What choice are you making today? Are you choosing to love those who you think are loveable or are you loving those persons God has placed in your path?

To carry out Jesus’ command to take the Gospel to all the world, we need to remember that “all” means every race or tribe or nation. Social status and outward appearance do not matter. To carry the Gospel as Jesus did, we must first have His love in our hearts. That my sisters is our daily work.

My prayer is that we ensure our relationship with Jesus is sure and steady. Then each day as we are filled by the Holy Spirit with the love of God will overflow into the lives of all we meet.

With love and joy,

Heather Dawn Small

Heather-Dawn Small

Women's Ministries Director

"I thank God for you..." Philippians 1:3-6

12501 Old Columbia Pike, Silver Spring MD 20904-6600 USA • Office (301) 680 6608 •
women.adventist.org

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Program Notes

Please feel free to translate, adjust, and edit the resource packet according to your division's needs, including the best Bible version for your use. Also, you are free to adapt the packet according to your cultural audience. When your division has translated the assigned packet for French, Portuguese, and Spanish, please send us a digital file to share with our sisters who need it. Check our website for additional translated packets that you may be able to use.

<https://women.adventist.org/women-s-ministries-emphasis-day>

About the Author

Margery Herinirina, Women's and Children's Ministries director for Southern Africa-Indian Ocean Division (near Johannesburg), has served in these positions across different countries and territories for 15 years. She began leading in the Mauritius Conference and most recently served as Women's and Children's Ministries director for Indian Ocean Union Conference.

Born in Mauritius, but currently residing in South Africa, she is passionate about preaching the gospel of God's transformative love with others.

She enjoys traveling, as she likes exploring new cultures and meeting new people. She has two adult children, Uriel and Yasmina, who are also both involved in church ministry.

Scripture References

Scripture verses in this packet are quoted from NIV, unless otherwise noted.

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Outline of Divine Service

A Suggested Order of Service

Call to Worship

Opening Prayer

Scripture Reading

1 John 4:10-11, NIV

¹⁰This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us
and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

¹¹Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.

Hymn of Praise: #191
Hymnal

Seventh-day Adventist

“Love Divine”

Pastoral Prayer

Children's Offering and Story

“God Never Forgets His Children”

Call for the Offering

Special Music or Hymn

Sermon

“A Love That Precedes Our Choices”

Hymn of Response: #457

Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal

“I Love to Tell the Story”

Closing Prayer

-end-

Children's Story

God Never Forgets His Children

Written by G. Nageshwara Rao

Story selected from the book, *Children: Jewels of God*

Published by the Children Ministries Department of Southern Asia Division

"See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands..."

Isaiah 49:16, NIV

Dear little ones, Happy Sabbath. Our story today happened somewhere in the Southern Asia Division. One day a trash truck moved slowly down the city street picking up boxes and bundles of rubbish placed by the curb for collection. When the men came to a large pile of old newspapers, they bent down to pick them up. As one of them was preparing to throw his bundles into the truck, he felt a slight movement inside the bundle. Quickly, he laid it on the grass and unsettled the papers. Guess what was inside that bundle of papers? There lay a tiny baby girl, dressed in a dainty, pink dress and sweater!

"Whoever could have done such a thing?" muttered one of the men, "leaving a beautiful baby girl like that." One of his companions remarked, "You'll never know, that's for sure." They were all shocked and saddened to find a baby girl who was not wanted by her mother or father. It is sad, isn't? The men collecting rubbish rushed to the nearest hospital to save the life of the baby girl. No one ever learned who was the mother who abandoned her child in this manner.

God has promised that such a tragedy can never happen to His children. Our names, He says, are engraven on the palms of His hands. When He looks at His hands, He thinks of us And He loves each one of us.

We have done nothing to deserve the love of our heavenly Father. We have done nothing to earn the gift of eternal life that He promises us. All He asks is that we love Him with all our heart and love others as well.

Our Saviour can never forgets us. Let us never forget Him.

Prayer

*Father, thank You that You made all the children
and You never forget them. Help them to love You
with all their heart. Amen!*

-end-

Song

Jesus loves the little children
All the children of the world
Red and yellow, black and white
They are precious in His sight
Jesus loves the little children of the world.

Sermon

A Love That Precedes One's Choices

Written by Margery Herinirina

Southern Africa-Indian Ocean Division Women's Ministries director

Scripture

1 John 4:10, 11, NIV

¹⁰ "This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. ¹¹ Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another."

Introduction

Two church members were talking. One shared her distress caused by a family member who is frequently hospitalized, the result of an unhealthy lifestyle. Despite being warned by physicians, the family member ignores the severity of the condition and has made no effort to change diet or daily routine. The woman decided she could no longer pray for the health of that family member who willfully does things that destroys good health.

The second church member suggested that if one claims God's promises in prayer for another, it must be for the right reason.

Why is it so much easier to judge people rather than to love them and pray for them despite their behavior? What advice would you give to these two members?

Early Christian dispute

Some early church theologians believed that salvation could be earned by works. They believed that humanity was not born sinful but instead exercised their choice to sin. On the other hand, others believed something of the opposite. They held the view that humanity is born in sin, therefore, born with a sinful nature and in need

of God's salvation. Moreover, some asserted that God is the One Who chooses whom He wants to save—a perspective usually referred to as predestination.

You can imagine the confusion and frustration that these contrasting ideas spread amongst Christians. Many worked hard to earn their salvation while others did not because they believed God predestined those He wanted to save.

Prevenient grace

Have you heard of the term “prevenient grace”? Prevenient means preceding or coming before. The term was coined by John Wesley, founder of the Methodist movement in the 18th century, because of this ongoing dispute among Christian theologians surrounding the doctrine of salvation. This is the idea that divine grace precedes human decisions. In other words, God begins the process of giving grace, showing love to each person in their individual lifetime, regardless of their choices of right or wrong.

What a beautiful and profound thought this is about prevenient grace. It is anticipatory grace that goes before us beginning the process of love and restoration. It is the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts, convicting us, transforming us, and enabling us to repent.

Many of our Seventh-day Adventist pioneers such as James White, Joseph Bates, and Ellen White strongly held this theological view. They believed that as fallen beings, we are born in sin and have sinful tendencies. Only because of God's prevenient grace can we even begin to see the difference between good and evil. God's grace drives us, propels us to allow Him to work on our hearts and in our lives. It is God's grace that empowers an individual to take each step toward Him.

God's grace and love precedes our choices, decisions, and lifestyle.

Love that went before Rahab's life choices

The story of Rahab is a beautiful example of God's grace and love initiating a relationship

with humanity. Although scholars debate whether Rahab was a prostitute or an inn keeper, one fact they all agree upon is that she was a pagan woman who lived among people worshipping idols. But God did not look at her background or beliefs. He did not look at her choice of profession. He loved her because she was His creation and He wanted to save her.

Ephesians 2:8-10 reads, ⁸ “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— ⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast. ¹⁰ For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”

Friends, here is the truth of God’s character: before we chose Him, He chose us (John 15:16). He initiates contact. He opens the dialogue with us. God is relational, and He will do all He can to restore the broken relationship with fallen humanity. His love precedes our choices, decisions, and lifestyle.

The story of Rahab demonstrates prevenient grace. Let us read Joshua 2:10-11. We have heard how the LORD dried up the water of the Red Sea for you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to Sihon and Og, the two kings of the Amorites east of the Jordan, whom you completely destroyed. When we heard of it, our hearts melted in fear and everyone’s courage failed because of you, for the LORD your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below.

Rahab shared what she heard on two separate occasions about their God’s miracles and power. Because of the nature of her work, Rahab would have encountered people coming in and out of the city, bringing with them countless stories from far and near. So, what caused her to believe some accounts and not others? The Holy Spirit was already working on Rahab’s heart even before she heard the reports.

Titus 3:5 reads, “He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of His mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.” The Spirit had been reaching out to Rahab so that when she

heard these miraculous stories, she could believe. She could make the conscious choice of accepting Yahweh as the true God.

This text passage also demonstrates testimonies of the miraculous deliverance of the Israelites reached even pagan ears. But the amazing aspect of this narrative is that it demonstrates how God's love precedes the choices made by pagans—Rahab and her family members who then crowd into her home and stay for seven days waiting for the Israelite God to show the same power of deliverance for them.

Many critics who argue that the Red Sea miracle did not take place cannot refute this genuine testimony from Rahab. A Bible scholar writes, “There is no textual evidence against this testimony! It is the truth of God. Nothing but the literal truth of the Red Sea miracle could have inspired such words as Rahab spoke here. This pagan prostitute is the first one to recite saving history in this book!”¹

God's grace

The grace of God in the form of the Holy Spirit precedes human decisions. It goes ahead to work on hearts, to soften the sinful nature, and to help us fully know Him. It aims to loosen sin's natural hold so that we can be more inclined to choose God. This is a love that wants to reconcile us to Him.

And so, after being moved by the Holy Spirit, Rahab chose to exclaim, “The Lord your God is God in heaven and above and on the earth below” (Joshua 2:12).

We can be thankful for God's love towards Rahab—because His love is the same for us. Without excusing her sins, His love found a way for a sinful woman to be delivered from the penalty of death. Rahab was transferred from a house of shame to a hall of fame because of the prevenient grace of God.

Christ as our model of love

¹ James Burton Coffman, *Coffman Commentaries on the Bible* (Joshua 2:10).

Jesus went to the poor, the needy, the widows, the sick, and healed them and served them regardless of their life choices. Jesus defended the woman who committed adultery to her accusers despite her sinful nature and lifestyle. He sees us for what we can be and not who we currently are. In turn, He is calling us to extend a love that precedes other's actions and reactions. A love that knows no boundaries. A love that dares to go even to places where it is not wanted.

In Christ's model of love, we also see repentance. Paul asks us, "Do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, forbearance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness is intended to lead you to repentance?" (Romans 2:4). God's lovingkindness leads us to repentance, and when empowered by God's Spirit, we receive His traits of kindness, patience, and forbearance, and we can also lead others to Jesus for repentance.

The question arises, Why is it so much easier to judge people rather than to love them despite their behavior? As Christians who believe to have the truth, we can sometimes be blinded by our sinful nature. At times we may even feel more spiritual than others who do not share our beliefs, but we must remember that "whoever claims to live in him must live as Jesus did" (1 John 2:6).

Redefining the term "sinner"

Social scientists believe that humans are judgmental because it creates a sense of safety and comfort in their lives. If one person views himself or herself as better than another in a situation, that individual gains a sense of validation while reducing the feelings of inferiority and unworthiness. Being judgmental is our desire to be better than others, to feel we are more valuable and accomplished.

The biblical view of judging others can be defined as our sinful nature working.

Our societies are structured in ways where competition is celebrated, and we judge individuals either as successful or as failures. If one individual is better than another at something, society sets him or her above others and rewards these behaviors. James writes about this problem, "Have you not discriminated among yourselves

and become judges with evil thoughts?" (James 2:4). He continues his rebuke by revealing the active participation in prejudice, favoritism, and bias. They may not have realized it, but they had judged others based on appearance and other factors.

We may not like to admit it, but partiality or prejudice continues to exist today, even within church walls. Have we not assumed and judged someone based solely on our perception of them, by the color of their skin, their ethnicity, their class, or simply their outward appearance? If they look like us and behave the way we expect them to behave, they are welcomed with open arms. If they are considered inferior or different from us, they are let in (because we are Christians, after all), but they are kept at a distance.

How then are we to define a sinner?

We can see how this question will have different answers depending on how one understands the doctrine of salvation. If we believe that humans are fallen beings, then we believe all of us are sinners, even ourselves. "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). "There is none righteous, no, not one" (Romans 3:10, KJV).² Yes, we are all sinners and in need of God's saving grace.

Ellen White reminds us, "The closer you come to Jesus, the more faulty you will appear in your own eyes; for your vision will be clearer, and your imperfections will be seen in broad and distinct contrast to His perfect nature."³ We are all in desperate need of God's grace and mercy. It is not by our good works, good eating habits, or good church attendance that we will be saved, but it is only because and only through the grace and blood of Christ.

This should humble us when we endeavour to share the love of Christ with those living different lives than ours. We must not judge anyone for their choices or for their lack of understanding. We must see everyone through the redemptive lens that Christ sees all His children, and we must reach out to them with Christ's love.

² See also Psalm 14:3; 53:1-3; Ecclesiastes 7:20

³ Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, 64.2

Ellen White writes in her book *Evangelism*, "Love must be the prevailing element in all our work. In the representation of others who do not believe as we do, every speaker must guard against making statements that will appear severe and like judging. Present the truth, and let the truth, the Holy Spirit of God, act as a reprover, as a judge; but let not your words bruise and wound the soul..."⁴

You are loved to love

Turn in your Bible to 1 John 4:10, 11 and follow along as I read verse 10. ¹⁰
"This is love: Not that we love God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins." We see in verse 10 that God loved us first. He loves us even when we are unlovable, and He continues to love us.

Now, let's move to verse 11. ^d "Dear friends, since God so loved us..." It is important to mention here that the word *so* can be translated "in that way." Since God so loved us, "we also ought to love [in that way] one another." We have been commanded here in verse 11 to love others in the same way that God loves us.

But how, and what does it mean in practice? Let's admit for a minute that it is easy to love those we want to love. It's effortless to love people who are easy to love. Jesus knew this and mentioned that even gentiles love those who love them (Matthew 5:47). But to love the way Jesus loves is something much more challenging: ⁴⁴"But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous" (Matthew 5:44, 45).

To love like God is to love those who don't make it easy for us to love them. He asks us to love people who are different from us, people who think and behave differently from us. We are not saying that one cannot have boundaries when dealing with difficult or toxic people, because having boundaries creates healthy

⁴ White, *Evangelism*, 303.2

relationships. But we are referring to Christians who give up too easily because of differences. If God gave up so easily on us, we wouldn't be who we are today. Loving those different from us is not easy. And we cannot love well through our own efforts. Only through God's grace can we love the way God loves. It is the lifetime work of sanctification.

The Holy Spirit helps remove our pride and replace it with a forgiving, kind, and patient heart. The Holy Spirit helps heal our past hurts so that we can love others in the way that we have been loved by God. Rahab who experienced salvation from God did not allow the opportunity to be missed to save her family. Her trust and love in God meant that she loved and cared for the salvation of others.

How can we Christians enjoy our salvation without being deeply concerned about the condition of others? As Rahab pleaded for the protection of her loved ones, so Christ's followers should concern themselves with the salvation of others. A Biblical theologian writes, "It had been an ill nature in Rahab if she had been content to be saved alone: that her love might be a match to her faith, she covenants for all her family, and so returns life to those of whom she received it."⁵

Loving difficult people

We all have found it difficult to love certain people or to love them during certain circumstances. One young woman, Cheryl, had a classmate, Vicky, who was very difficult to interact with and hard to love. Vicky always had something negative to say about Cheryl. She would make up lies and often manipulated situations so that other students would dislike Cheryl too. Cheryl, the class captain and a position she held for many years, arrived in class a little late one day. Her teacher told her to report to the police station next door to the school. The teacher a formal complaint had been made against her at school. Cheryl was in shock but went right away. The tough person that she had taught herself to be shed no tears and showed no fear, but, as you can imagine, deep inside she was petrified!

⁵ H.D.M. Spence-Jones, editor, *The Pulpit Commentary* (Joshua 2:12).

When Cheryl arrived at the police station asking why they had summoned her, everyone seemed confused and told her they had not sent any message to the school. When she returned to class, she explain to the teacher everything was fine. She went about her day as usual. Before the day was over, however, she found out that Vicky had made up the lie that the teacher believed.

How does one love such a person, one who deliberately sabotages another person's life? We must plead for God's love to flow through us, preceding the choices others make.

Cheryl went home feeling both sad and angry. But she prayed about it. Taking it to the Lord in prayer, she clearly heard Him whispering to her, "In the same way you feel she is a difficult person to love, imagine how she feels about you."

Cheryl reflected on her own character and had to admit that she too had a difficult side. She could be wonderful, smart, and well-organized, but she could also be bossy, strong-minded, and perhaps even overbearing. She had probably hurt or offended Vicky and others without even realizing it. God opened Cheryl's heart to see her true self, even though she was young. From then on, Cheryl decided to love Vicky and show kindness to her. It was extremely difficult at first but, eventually, her kindness and forgiveness won Vicky over, and they became good friends. This story demonstrates that sometimes love is not just a feeling, it is a decision we choose to make.

Conclusion

Remember the conversation between two church members? One could no longer pray for the salvation of a loved one who deliberately chose an unhealthy lifestyle with many hospitalizations. The second responded that if one claims God's promises in prayer for another, then it must be for the right reason. If we were part of the conversation, how should we respond?

Because Jesus asks us to forgive 7 times 70 (Matthew 18:22), and because He continually pursues us, it is our privilege and duty to forgive others and to pursue

them in the same manner. Sometimes prayer is not enough. Sometimes we need to go meet people where they are and journey with them. To be like Jesus, we must proceed with love, grace, kindness, and patience even before others have made the right choices.

God calls us to a life of love that is deeper than human feelings or emotions. Love is a commitment, a thoughtful decision, to serve God and our neighbors. This kind of love compels us to work for the well-being of all people—those whom we find it easy to love and those whom we find it difficult to love.

Appeal

What is the work of love you need to do in your life today? If unhealed wounds plague your relationships, Jesus calls you this morning to seek each other out and find healing. If unresolved conflicts threaten your interactions, Jesus calls you to work on them and restore your relationships. If you are struggling to interact or work with a colleague, Jesus calls you to take the initiative to do whatever is necessary to improve the relationship. If you hold grudges or resentments toward others, Jesus calls you to confess, accept each other as you are, and put the past behind. If you easily judge people and think you are better than they are, Jesus calls you to see them differently, to see them as He sees you with His grace and mercy, and to humble yourself.

If you are ready to make these changes today with God's help, please stand with me. May God bless us all as we call on His grace and strength to love others. He who calls us to love one another is also the One who will enable us to do it. Amen!

-end-

Seminar

A Love That Transforms:

Emotionally mature and holistic transformation

Written by Margery Herinirina

Southern Africa-Indian Ocean Division Women's Ministries director

In his book, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*, Peter Scazzero states that it doesn't matter how "anointed" you may feel or how much of the Bible you know, "the indispensable element to say that you have reached maturity is love."⁶

What is spiritual maturity?

The most common definition for a spiritually mature Christian is one whose whole character reflects the character of Jesus Christ. In other words, maturity is growth that occurs over time through the development of a deepening faith and abiding love in Christ.

At its core, spiritual maturity is about becoming who God created us to be. It is the development of all our capacities as a child of God, which include our unique identity as a valued soul created in the image of God. It is not a self-focused process of trying to obtain personal fulfillment out of our own efforts. Spiritual maturity is not "doing" the Christian life, it is "being" in Christ as we live our lives. From this perspective, our "doing" naturally flows from a heart of "being" in love with Christ.

In this presentation we will explore how we can be transformed by love and thereafter reach spiritual maturity without neglecting our emotional health. We will focus on the two great commandments that Jesus quoted in the Gospel of Mark, 12:28-31. The text reads:

⁶ Peter Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*, 165-167.

²⁸ One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, “Of all the commandments, which is the most important?”

²⁹ “The most important one,” answered Jesus, “is this: ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.’³⁰ Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’³¹ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.”

As we unpack these verses further, we will discover what spiritual maturity is and what emotional maturity is.

The first commandment is to love the LORD with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength.

1. LOVE GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART

Jesus quotes from Deuteronomy 6:4, 5 when He responds to the scribe (Mark 12:30). This part of the great commandment urges us to love God with all our hearts. This means to love Him intensely at all times and under any circumstance, good or bad. It also means consciously preventing anything to separate us from Him.

Ellen White says that to love God with all our heart is to let nothing on earth take away our affection for God.

I saw that whatever divides the affections, or takes away from the heart supreme love for God, or prevents unlimited confidence and entire trust in Him, assumes the character and takes the form of an idol.... There is allowed no separation of our affections from God. Nothing is to divide our supreme love for Him or our delight in Him. Your will, wishes, plans, desires, and pleasures must all be in subjection.⁷

⁷ Ellen G. White, *Lift Him Up*, 142 (May 8).

2. LOVE GOD WITH ALL YOUR SOUL

This part of the great commandment reminds us to love our heavenly Father with all our soul. Albert Barnes writes that to love the Lord with all your soul, “means to be willing to give up the life to him, and to devote it all to his service; to live to him, and to be willing to die at his command.”⁸

David says it this way, “As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God?” (Psalm 42:1, 2). So, to love God with all our soul is to love Him with all that we are, to find our inner self inclined toward Him, to seek Him, and to keep Him at the center of our lives.

3. LOVE GOD WITH ALL YOUR MIND

This part of the great commandment shows us the importance of keeping our minds submitted to God. This begins with where we direct our thoughts. Paul encourages us to think about things that are true, noble, right, pure, lovely, good, virtuous, and praiseworthy (Philippians 4:8); and to be transformed by the renewing of our minds so that we can test the will of God (Romans 12:2).

4. LOVE GOD WITH ALL YOUR STRENGTH

This part of the great commandment encourages us to love God with all our strength. Strength refers to the physical aspect of love and is the “how” of showing that God we love Him. “With all our strength” is presenting our whole self, body and action, as a living and holy sacrifice to the God we love (Romans 12:1). It is speaking up when we see injustice. It is caring for the physically and spiritually wounded. It is doing what is right even if no one sees us. It is acting righteously even when we see no reward in doing so—even when we are persecuted for those righteous acts. If our inner motivation and desire is to love God, our actions (the strength of our body) will show it.

⁸ Albert Barnes [1834], *Notes on the Bible* (Matthew 22:37).

In summary, the way Jesus presents the first commandment teaches us how to be spiritually mature. The love we have for God will be seen through our relationship to Him and with every part of our being.

The second commandment is to love your neighbor as yourself.

1. LOVE YOURSELF

Jesus quotes from Leviticus 19:18 when he continues speaking to the scribe (Mark 12:31). Surprisingly, He says the second commandment is like the first. What does He mean? The clue is in the last phrase, “as yourself,” which we will look at first.

Awareness of yourself and your relationship with God are intricately related. Someone once said: “You can only love God and your neighbor as much as you accept and love yourself!” If we are to obey the second commandment, we must grasp the importance of loving ourselves, acknowledging our value, developing our emotional maturity, and cultivating a close relationship with God.

FIVE ELEMENTS NEEDED TO LOVE YOURSELF

1. Love yourself

It is vital to love ourselves in order to fully love others. Unfortunately, many Christians think that loving oneself is a sin, a selfish act. But Jesus Himself commands us to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. Paul instructs husbands to love their wives as their own bodies (Ephesians 5:28). To love others, we must be able to love ourselves just as we are, unique beings created by God. He wants us to celebrate our uniqueness.

It is difficult for us to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength if we do not understand and acknowledge how much He values us. He sincerely wants us to understand we are worth everything to Him. If we do not consider ourselves as wonderful beings created by God for His good pleasure, we will not recognize the depth of love God has for us.

If we cannot acknowledge our own value in God's sight, it is difficult to acknowledge the great value of others. Yet we are called to consider others as more important than ourselves (Philippians 2:3) and lay down ourselves for our brothers and sisters (1 John 3:16). Scazzero reminds us that "we should be aware that we need a 'self' to lay down."⁹ We have to take care of that self. This is not a selfish act. It is a matter of being good stewards of the life we have been given. In this way we will be able to care for others and love them as well as we do ourselves.

2. Recognize your false self

Individuals may strive to live according to their authentic self, but at the same time they may struggle with the need to use their false self in pleasing others and getting along or to get what they need to survive.

Donald Winnicott's developmental schema refers to the false self as "certain types of false personalities that develop as the result of early and repeated environmental failure, with the result that the true self-potential is not realized, but hidden. This idea is fully presented in 'The theory of infant-parent relationship' (Winnicott, 1965c)." Winnicott explains that this delusory self-creation process starts early in our childhood.¹⁰

Children often need to respond abnormally to fulfil the demands of their parents, feeling they must conform in order to be loved and tolerated. This attitude continues in their relationships with educational systems, careers, and religious practices.

To some extent we all cultivate a false self, but many of us are not aware of it.¹¹ It is natural for us to conform to the expectations of people around us, but we can begin wearing a mask, not only for others, for God and ourselves.

⁹ Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*, 35.

¹⁰ Jennifer Johns, "False Self," Encyclopedia.Com

¹¹ D.W. Winnicott, *The Maturation Processes and the Facilitating*. Comments and ideas in this seminar are taken from this reading. Additional articles by and about Winnicott's true and false self were also consulted: D.W. Winnicott, "The True and False Self," and Danielle Trudeau, "Dr. D.W. Winnicott: The True and False Self,"

3. Get rid of your false self

Allowing God to take control over us can help us to get rid of false selves. Robert Mulholland says in his book, *The Deeper Journey: The Spirituality of Discovering Your True Self*, “The temptation to take over God’s role in our life is the essence of the false self. The false self is a self that in some way is playing god in its life and in its world.”¹²

The false self is also like being locked in a cell that we and our societies have created. It is as if we personally locked ourselves in to avoid shame, pain, and embarrassment. Alternatively, we form ourselves into someone else and conform to people around us. When we feel locked in the cell, we sometimes we stop taking risks with people. We stop loving others, fearing they will not love us back. We stop going to others for support, fearing they will refuse to help us. We stop saying what we think because someone has used our words to hurt or condemn us. We isolate ourselves from others. Or, our false self sometimes pushes us to tell lies to get what we want, to pretend to be someone we are not, to conform to the varied situations in which we must perform.

Mulholland refers to these attitudes developed from the false self as fear, self-protection, possessiveness, manipulation, self-destructive tendencies, self-promotion, self-indulgence, and a need to distinguish ourselves from others.¹³

These attitudes develop into bad traits of character, but they can disappear if we take them to Jesus. The Bible says in 1 John 1:9 “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” Mulholland comments on this verse:

God’s purpose for us was not simply to forgive sins but to transform our false self—to cleanse all its unrighteousness, to make us righteous, to restore us to our true self in a loving relationship with God and in being Christlike in the world. ... It is only when we are in a close relationship with God that we

¹² M. Robert Mulholland, Jr, *The Deeper Journey*, 24.

¹³ *Ibid.*, chapters 2 and 3.

*will discover our true selves, find our own identity, find a greater love for others, and be transformed.*¹⁴

He also adds that “we are created to experience our true life, our genuine identity, our deepest meaning, our fullest purpose, our ultimate value in an intimate, loving union with God at the core of our being.”¹⁵ We need to be living constantly in the presence of God to live a genuine lives.

Paul writes to the apostolic church in Colossae, “Your life is now hidden with Christ in God” (Colossians 3:3). As Jesus’s life was hidden in God when He was on earth, Paul indicates that our lives are hidden in Jesus. This does not mean hiding our authentic self from God and others nor creating a false self. “We become autonomous, self-referenced beings who have abandoned the center of our true identity in God. We objectify or identify ourselves apart from God.”¹⁶

4. Live your true self

It is only when we have this close relationship with Jesus that we can live our true selves. Remember, God has created us and shaped us internally with a unique personality, unique thoughts and dreams, unique temperaments, spiritual gifts and talents, and with our own unique feelings and desires. These things make up the authentic self. We are made beautifully by a loving God. If we draw close to Him every day, He will help us live a blossoming life by using all our potential. However, more often than we would like to admit, we don’t celebrate our uniqueness like David did when he declared that he was wonderfully made. We have insecurities and too often focus on our flaws and imperfections rather than on our beautiful authentic selves.

5. Live emotionally healthy

Our past is more connected to our present than we realize. Most of us have experienced trauma that left us with emotional baggage, which does not allow us

¹⁴ Ibid., 26.

¹⁵ Ibid., 31.

¹⁶ Ibid., 32.

to live freely. We may avoid dealing with sadness, anger, grief, or fear, and even small events can trigger these emotions, opening past wounds. We can find ourselves living emotionally unhealthy.

This is when we remember the words of Paul, “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery” (Galatians 5:1). The Holy Spirit has been sent to empower us to break free from our burdens.

Always bear in mind that you were created in love and with joy by a joyful God who loves you. You are created to be loving and joyful, to be capable of giving and receiving love, and to exercise your humanity, and unique, God-given gifts without fear of rejection.

SIX FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO LIVING EMOTIONALLY HEALTHY

1) Listen to your interior in silence; wait upon the Lord.

Many distractions in this world keep us from listening to our feelings, likes, and dislikes. Parker Palmer discusses in his book, *A Hidden Wholeness*, how we always have people who want to fix, save, advise, and set us straight in becoming what they would like us to be.¹⁷

Every day when you get up, put your life into Christ’s hands and ask Him to help you be your true self, to hear His voice guiding you, and not to be influenced negatively by your surroundings. Pray and listen to Him in silence. David writes, “My soul, wait in silence for God only, For my hope is from Him. He only is my rock and my salvation, My stronghold; I shall not be shaken (Psalm 62:5, 6, ESV).

Sometimes it is hard to find this silent moment because there are countless demands pressing for your attention, the hectic pace of life, the bombardment of commercials, TV, radio, social media, and so forth. Peter Scazzero explains that silence and solitude are hard to find, but they are “essential for working on our

¹⁷ Parker Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness*, 80-81.

true identity and for being emotionally healthy, as God intends.”¹⁸ Spending more time with God intentionally on a daily basis is necessary for Christ-centered lives.

2) Be aware of and manage your emotions.

To be healthy emotionally, you need to manage your emotions and your feelings. Becoming aware of the emotions you are experiencing is an important part of learning to forgive yourself and to love yourself. Research has found that identifying and labeling your emotions can help reduce the intensity of your feelings.¹⁹ This can help you better regulate emotions, including those linked to feelings of guilt and shame.

Dan B. Allender & Tremper Longman III discuss managing your emotions in their book, *The Cry of the Soul*.

Ignoring your emotions is turning back on reality. Listening to our emotions ushers us into reality and reality is where we meet God. They are the cry that gives the heart a voice....However, we often turn a deaf ear, through emotional denial, distortion, or disengagement. We strain out anything disturbing in order to gain tenuous control of our inner world. We are frightened and ashamed of what leaks into our consciousness. In neglecting our intense emotions, we are false to ourselves and lose a wonderful opportunity to know God. We forget that change comes through brutal honesty and vulnerability before God.²⁰

It is good to open up to God, to tell Him all the feelings you have, and to ask Him to help you deal with them.

3) Develop your emotional intelligence.

¹⁸ Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*, 62.

¹⁹ Susan David, “3 Ways to Better Understand Your Emotions,” *Harvard Business Review*, online, November 2016.

²⁰ Dan Allender and Tremper Longman III. *The Cry of the Soul*, 24-25. See also Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*, 49.

Daniel Goleman defines five components of emotional intelligence and explains that you can and should develop them.²¹

- **Identifying your emotions.** Are you happy, sad, angry, afraid, ashamed? Being able to identify your feelings gives you the ability to understand your emotions.
- **Controlling your emotions.** You need to control your emotions. Ellen White penned, “If the thoughts are wrong the feelings will be wrong, and the thoughts and feelings combined make up the moral character”²² She also wrote, “Few realize that it is a duty to exercise control over the thoughts and imaginations.”²³
- **Knowing the emotions of others.** To become aware of another’s emotions, ask yourself what their feelings and emotions might be. Make it a priority to understand their behavior and show empathy to them.
- **Managing relationships.** When you know how you feel and are able to control your emotions and when you can also understand other’s behavior and show empathy to them, you will keep a good relationship with others.
- **Motivating yourself to achieve goals.** When you control your emotions and keep a good relationship with others, you will be able to move forward and achieve more.

God Himself feels a wide range of emotions. Listen to the emotion in God’s voice: “How can I hand you over, Israel?... My heart is changed within me; all my compassion is aroused” (Hosea 11:8). God created human beings in His image—with emotions. He has empathy with our feelings, and He is ready and willing to help us control our emotions. God personally counselled Cain to control his feeling of anger (Genesis 4:5-7), because God wants His children to develop emotional intelligence.

²¹ Daniel Goleman, Emotional Intelligence. This is an adapted list. See also “Daniel Goleman’s Emotional Intelligence Theory Explained,” Resilient Educator.Com. See also Adventist Possibility Ministries, “Mental Health and Wellness: Wholeness in Our Brokenness,” PossibilityMinistries.org.

²² White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5., 310.

²³ White, *God’s Amazing Grace*, 327.

In his book, *The Lost Art of Thinking*, Neil Nedley states that we cannot easily improve our Intelligence Quotient (IQ), but we can vastly improve our Emotional Quotient (EQ). He goes on to say, "EQ has the ability to step aside from the emotional reaction to an upsetting event and look logically at what really happened."²⁴

4) Live a transformed life.

Scazzero reveals that very often our true self is not seen by others because we hide our feelings and struggle alone. He says that only 10% is visible to others on the surface and 90% is hidden, unchanged, and unmoved. This part is not even touched by Jesus, yet He is willing and waiting to transform us in the hidden parts. Scazzero compares our lives to the Iceberg Model where only 10% is above the surface. The other 90% of the iceberg lies hidden in layers beneath the surface.²⁵

Past hurts or wounds, hatred, bad childhood, sadness, anger, all kinds of things, are lie buried. Even if we know God and go to church, there is no change in these layers until we open up and ask God to transform us. God created us in His image (Genesis 1:27) and intends for us to live with our full humanity, not with 90% buried and untouched. Being created in the image of God includes physical, spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and social dimensions. Ignoring any aspect of our being always ends with destructive consequences in our relationship with God, with others, and with ourselves.

Jesus seeks to transform all the layers that lie deep below the surface of our outward lives. What lies deep are those things not seen until they come out when under great stress. We must allow Jesus the access to our icebergs. When we present all the hidden layers of our iceberg to Him for healing and transformation, something amazing happens. "Deeply changed people change the world; they have a more powerful and sustainable impact in the world."²⁶

²⁴ Neil Nedley, *The Lost Art of Thinking*, 16.

²⁵ Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*, 17.

²⁶ Scazzero, 5.

Meet Jesus → Attend church → Emotionally healthy, being transformed → great impact

Meet Jesus → Attend church → Hiding emotions, not changing → small impact

5) Forgive yourself.

We all make mistakes and we all sin, but many of us find it hard to forgive ourselves. Thoughts of guilt and regret can creep into our minds and convince us that we are not good enough to be loved. But God does love us! He has forgiven us and freed us from the guilt of sin. We must also forgive ourselves and forget the past, so that we can accept the kindness and compassion God has for us. "All who are in Jesus are freed from condemnation" (Romans 8:1) and are freed to love (Galatians 5:13).

TWO FACTORS FOR FORGIVING YOURSELF

- **Have compassion for yourself.** We must accept what happened, but we need to be compassionate with ourselves to allow our lives to move on. We remind ourselves that no matter what may come, God is always by our side, whether it is something we do or something others do to make us suffer.

Paul writes to Timothy:

¹⁵ Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. ¹⁶ But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life (1 Timothy 1:15-16).

- **Acknowledge limitations of yourself.** Some people blame themselves for everything because they have suffered abuse and trauma in the past and still feel guilty. These people need to be emotionally supported to regain their self-esteem and to recognize their value in God's eyes.

It is often difficult for us to go through the process of forgiving ourselves, but we can move forward step by step with God by our side. This exercise of self-forgiveness will free us from harmful results, such as mental illness, which can have a negative impact on us and on our relationships with others.

6) Pray for courage

We need courage when we decide to make a change in our lives. Change does not come overnight. At times we don't succeed, and we get discouraged. Let's ask God to help us in this process and to trust His promises.

One of my favorite promises is Joshua 1:9: "Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go" (NIV).

Our God is faithful and just, and He will be there for you. You also need good friends, trusted friends to support you. You need friends with whom you can share your intentions and who will encourage you to move forward. A true friend refreshes the soul. As Solomon puts it, "The heartfelt counsel of a friend is as sweet as perfume and incense" (Proverbs 27:9, NLT).

Scazzero says that "emotional maturity and spiritual maturity go hand in hand. It is simply impossible to become spiritually mature while remaining emotionally immature."²⁷ We can conclude that it is a process of emotional maturity, not a selfish act, to learn how to love (and forgive) ourselves. It is the process of spiritual maturity, to live our authentic selves as God created us to be.

In summary, Jesus teaches us in the second commandment to love ourselves as God loves us so that we know how to love our neighbors as God loves them. Let's learn how to "love your neighbor."

2. LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR

²⁷ Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*.

The first part of the second great commandment is to love others. The great Jewish theologian Martin Buber wrote a brilliant book called, "I and Thou." In his book Buber described the most healthy or mature relationship possible between two human beings as an I-thou relationship. In such a relationship, according to him, we must recognize that we are made in the image of God and that every other person on the face of the earth is too. ²⁸

Having been created in the image of God, every person on earth deserves respect, dignity, and worth. We should never demean anyone. We should never consider another person as an object for our own benefit. We must affirm that each individual has a unique and separate existence. And even if they are different from us, we should love, respect, and value every human being.

How can we respect others?

Respecting others is done when we love unconditionally. God's unconditional love for His created beings is called *agape* love. (See John 3:16; John 13:34, 35; Romans 12:10.)

TIPS FOR SHOWING UNCONDITIONAL LOVE AND RESPECTING OTHERS

- **Empathize, sympathize.** Carry one another's burdens. (Galatians 6:2).
- **Serve.** Lend a helping hand, give support (Matthew 25:35-40).
- **Value.** Show as much care for them as for yourself (Ephesians 5:28).
- **Rejoice.** Appreciate their success without being jealous (Romans 12:15).
- **Provide.** When in need, share with them (Matthew 5:42; Romans 12:13).
- **Do not judge.** Allow God to be the judge (Matthew 7:1-5; Romans 15:19).
- **Accept.** Don't dwell on differences. (Romans 15:7-12).
- **Seek for their salvation.** Pray for them. Make disciples, baptizing and teaching them (Romans 10:1; Matthew 28:19-20).

²⁸ Matthew Martin and Eric W. Cowan, "Remembering Martin Buber and the I-Thou in Counseling," *Counseling Today*, May 8, 2019. Seminar comments adapted from this article written about the book *I and Thou* by Martin Buber.

"Buber saw the meeting between I and Thou as the most important aspect of human experience because it is in relationship that we become fully human. When one meets another as Thou, the uniqueness and separateness of the other is acknowledged without obscuring the relatedness or common humanness that is shared. Buber contrasted this I-Thou relationship with an I-It relationship, in which the other person is experienced as an object to be influenced or used — a means to an end. Regrettably, the I-It relationship requires little explanation for anyone living in a cultural frame of absent-mindedness and technological materialism.

<https://ct.counseling.org/2019/05/remembering-martin-buber-and-the-i-thou-in-counseling/>

The list can be exhaustive. You can add more ways to respect others.

Often, we consider people as an I-it relationship says Buber. We treat them as a means to an end—as an object to achieve what we want or need.²⁹

EXAMPLES OF TREATING SOMEONE AS THE MEANS TO AN END

- *We want something in return (our end-goal) when we listen to our neighbor's problems or help them with a need.*
 - *We hope that by our attention to them they will attend an evangelistic series or church-related activity.*
 - *But if they don't respond in the way we want, we move on to someone else.*
- *We act superior and give orders to others, as if they are serving us.*
- *We ignore certain people to separate ourselves from their situations, status, or behavior.*
- *We become friends with people who belong to a group or clique that we want to join.*

Ellen White writes:

To leave a suffering neighbour unrelieved is a breach of the law of God.... He who loves God will not only love his fellow men, but will regard with tender compassion the creatures which God has made. When the Spirit of God is in man it leads him to relieve rather than to create suffering.... We are to care for every case of suffering, and to look upon ourselves as God's agents to relieve the needy to the very uttermost of our ability. We are to be laborers together with God. There are some who manifest great affection for their relatives, for their friends and favourites, who yet fail to be kind and considerate to those who need tender sympathy, who need kindness and love. With earnest heart, let us inquire, Who is my neighbour? Our neighbours are not merely our neighbours and special friends, are not simply those who belong to our church or who think as we do. Our neighbours are the whole human family. We are to do good to all men, and especially to

²⁹ Ibid.

those who are of the household of faith. We are to give to the world an exhibition of what it means to carry out the law of God. We are to love God supremely and our neighbours as ourselves.³⁰

Conclusion

God has a distinctive path for each of us. Our prayer is that you would be faithful to yours. May God give you the courage to faithfully live out your unique life in Christ, and may He surround you. May He keep you close to Himself and transform you. May you hear His voice as you begin a new chapter, loving Him with all your heart, and loving your neighbor as yourself.

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³⁰ White, *Sons and Daughters of God*, 52.

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