

The Myth of Self-Hate

An extract from *The Seduction of Christianity*, Chapter 13
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Jesus summed up the law and the prophets in what has become known as the Golden Rule:

“And as ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise” (Luke 6:31).

Without complete confidence that every human already loves himself, Jesus could never have made such a statement. Certainly if we all innately hate ourselves, then we would wish upon others the same evil that we wish for ourselves. But who wishes evil upon himself? No one, except the very insane. Ephesians 5:29 states the universal truth that we all recognise:

“For no man ever yet hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it...”

Yet in the face of this, a deluge of Christian radio and TV talk shows, tapes, magazines, and books have been pouring forth the idea that we innately hate ourselves and must *learn* to love ourselves before we can love other people and even God.

Of course, there are many who express varying degrees of self-hatred. That they don't actually hate themselves can easily be seen. The person who says, “I'm so ugly, I hate myself!” doesn't hate himself at all, or he would be *glad* that he was ugly. It is because he loves himself that he is upset with his appearance and the way people respond to him.

The person who grovels in depression and says he hates himself for having wasted his life would actually be glad that he had wasted his life if he really hated himself. In fact, he is unhappy about having wasted his life because he loves himself.

The apparently remorseful criminal, who says he hates himself because of the crimes he has committed, should then be glad to see himself suffer in prison. Yet he hopes to escape that fate, which proves he loves himself in spite of his protestations of self-loathing.

So it is with the person who takes his own life. Most of these tragic people consider suicide to be an escape; but who helps someone he hates to escape? It is the ultimate act of self attempting to escape circumstances without considering anyone else.

The person who is always putting himself down doesn't really hate himself or have a bad self-image; he is simply letting others know that his performance is not up to the standard he has set for himself. This is not a symptom of low self-esteem, but the flip side of pride.

A.W. Tozer explained it well:

“Self-derogation is bad for the reason that self must be there to derogate. Self, whether swaggering or grovelling, can never be anything but hateful to God ... Boasting is an evidence that we are pleased with self; belittling, that we are disappointed in it. Either way we reveal that we have a high opinion of ourselves...” [1].

It was Friedrich Nietzsche, the father of “God is dead” philosophy, and the great inspirer of Hitler, who laid the foundation for the modern interpretation of Christ’s Golden Rule. Nietzsche wrote:

“Your neighbor love is your bad love of yourselves. Ye flee unto your neighbour from yourselves and would feign make a virtue thereof! But I fathom your ‘unselfishness’. You cannot stand yourselves, and you do not love yourselves sufficiently” [2].

Nietzsche is saying that we fail to really love our neighbour as ourselves because we don’t love ourselves enough. He was among the first to complain of this ‘epidemic’ of self-loathing which evangelical leaders are bemoaning today.

For 1900 years the church has taught that we are innately self-centered beings who do not need to learn to love ourselves. What we are urged to do is love God and others [3]. Yet through the influence of Fromm and other psychologists, the church has now accepted the idea that when Jesus said, “Love your neighbour as yourself”, He was teaching that we must “learn to love ourselves first of all” before we can love God or our neighbour [4].

Psychotherapeutic errors, no matter how sincerely held, inevitably corrupt one’s view of Scripture. The statement by Jesus that we are to love our neighbor as ourselves is not limited to those who have a so-called “healthy self-love.” Such a distinction, which Christian psychologists try to make, cannot be derived from the Bible. This command is to *all of us*, and there is not even a hint that certain people may not love themselves in a correct or sufficient manner to understand and obey what Jesus said.

Biblical exhortations not to think too *highly* of self, when interpreted in light of modern psychology, are understood actually to be admonitions against esteeming ourselves too *lowly*. And those who fail to accept this new gospel “just don’t know their psychology”, even though they may be very mature in their understanding of Scripture. To encourage selfism in creatures whose besetting sins are all centered in self is like pouring gasoline on a fire that is already raging out of control.

A.W. Tozer puts it all in perspective:

“Self is one of the toughest plants that grows in the garden of life. It is, in fact, indestructible by any human means. Just when we are sure it is dead it turns up somewhere as robust as ever to trouble our peace and poison the fruit of our lives...

“The victorious Christian neither exalts nor downgrades himself. His interests have shifted from self to Christ. What he is or is not no longer concerns him. He believes that he has been crucified with Christ and he is not willing either to praise or deprecate such a man” [5].

Footnotes

[1] A.W. Tozer, *Man the Dwelling Place of God* (Christian Publications, 1976), p.71.

[2] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (Modern Library), p. 75.

[3] For an excellent treatment of this subject, see Paul Brownback, *The Danger of Self-Love* (Moody Press, Chicago, 1982).

[4] Robert Schuller was among the first church leaders to pick up and promote this radical re-interpretation in his book *Self-Love, The Dynamic Force of Success*. Many others followed suit, until today this is the generally accepted interpretation, heard from many evangelical pulpits.

[5] Tozer, *op. Cit.* p.72.