



Life of Christ

A study of the life and teachings of Jesus

Loving Your Neighbor, Who is Like Yourself

by Rachael Bernardi

“Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?” The expert in the law replied, “The one who had mercy on him.” Jesus told him, “Go and do likewise.”—Luke 10:36-37

Today, Marc reminds us that the central Commandment, found in Deuteronomy 6:5 is, “And you will love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your strength.” He then punctuates this truth with how we go about doing that, which is found in Leviticus 19:18, by “loving your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus’ contemporaries understood that verse this way: “And you will love your neighbor who is like yourself.”

Did you know that you are currently in a relationship with someone you cannot get away from, as hard as you may try? Whether you walk down the street or drive to the next state, they will be there with you. You could even fly to the most remote island on earth, and when you arrive, they will have arrived. Who is it? It’s yourself! Of course, if you are in a relationship with God, He will be there, too! But I am talking about yourself. Or myself, in this case.

For the longest time, I interpreted Leviticus 19:18 to mean something more like this, “And you will love your neighbor as you love yourself,” or more clearly, “And you will be able to love your neighbor to the degree that you love yourself.” When you read that verse this way, subconsciously, you focus on self-love or self-acceptance. And self-love is not necessarily a bad thing, as long as it’s not the only thing.

According to mental health professionals, there are varying degrees of self-love on a wide range from super unhealthy to super healthy. Suppose we were to place overly simplified numerical values on this range (because I like to quantify things). In that case, we could say that a person with the most unhealthy self-love (whether that presents as extreme self-loathing or extreme, unbalanced self-love) would rate as a 1 or 2 on a scale of 1 to 10. In contrast, a person with balanced, healthy self-love—one who can have compassion for others—would rate somewhere between an 8 and a 9. (Come on! Nobody’s perfect, except Jesus).

So, for example, a person who rates low on that scale might be a narcissist! Maybe when they walk into the room, they're vying to get everyone's attention because they truly think they are the star of the show. They think they're more important than everybody else, and no one matters but themselves. I bet you think you know someone like that. You may have even imagined a name or a face while you were reading this. You may even be someone like that! I also imagined someone else's name and face when I wrote this, but I've also been like that.

Often, a root of that mindset is a deep-seated lack of self-worth. When you artificially boost your self-worth above others—without dealing with the root issue—it may be that at the core of your identity is the belief that, "I'm just not good enough." If you can boost your value by presenting yourself as "I'm better than," then maybe the two will offset, and you'll feel better about yourself. "I'm better than" doesn't have to present as "I'm better than you." It could come across as "I'm better than you think I am" or "I want to be better than I really am."

The point is that the lens through which we view ourselves will be the lens through which we subconsciously view others. It's like putting on a pair of colored glasses. When you look in the mirror, you see yourself through that tint, and if you view others, you see them through the same lens. So, if we struggle with self-hatred (which I have in the past), we may more likely make assumptions that others hate us. The way we view ourselves affects the way we view others, affecting our perceptions of how others view us. The reality is that most of us are having days-long conversations with the person we spend the most time with—the person we can never get away from—ourselves. And most other people aren't thinking about you. They're also thinking about themselves.

It is just a big waste of mental energy, isn't it? But what do we do with it, because it doesn't seem to be going away? What we can do is talk to God honestly right now about exactly where we're at—whether we feel self-hatred or self-loathing, whether we've worked all our lives to prove that we're "better than that," or whether we just don't know where we stand with ourselves, with others, or with God. The truth is that, if you go to God and talk to Him honestly, acknowledging where you are versus where you want to be, He meets you right there! Hebrews 4:16 promises this:

"Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need."

So yeah, whatever negative thinking pattern you've gotten stuck in, you can take that to God's throne of grace with confidence. You can have confidence about going to Him because God already knows what you're dealing with; He's just waiting for you to be honest with Him about it. The cool thing is that He always trades up. When you have a moment, check out His promises in Isaiah 61:1-3 about that. Whatever lies you believe about yourself, such as "I have to prove I'm better than this" or "I'm not good enough," God wants you to approach His throne of grace with confidence. And in that moment, He can give you mercy (compassion and forgiveness when you don't deserve it), and grace (blessing when you haven't earned it) where you need it.

Marc reminds us of the reality that you and I are more alike than either of us is like God, and between me and God stands you! And the way that I relate to you, God will relate to me. Therefore, if I want to receive God's mercy, I practice giving that same

mercy to you. Jesus even said, “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.”

Our God is good! He’s so, so good! And everybody else? Well, they’re just like you. They’re swimming around in their heads, worried about whether they measure up or are accepted, afraid that their performance just isn’t good enough, angry that they’re not where they want to be.

What mercy have you received from God in this moment? What grace have you experienced today? Now think about that person whose name and face you imagined when I was talking about narcissists earlier. Can you pray for that person? Can you view them the way God views you—with mercy, grace, and compassion? That person—or some other difficult person in your life—is the one who stands between you and God. And in the way you choose to relate to them, you are essentially saying, “Ok, God. I know You just gave me mercy and grace, but I’d rather that You treat me the way I treat others.” Hey, nobody prays that way.

Questions: Who do you need to be seeing that you usually pass by? Who do you need to find patience with that you typically don’t tolerate well? Who do you need to be loving, so that the people around you can honestly believe that you love God with all your heart, soul, and strength?

Children’s Ministry Question: Ask your children, “Who do you like more: yourself or your best friend? Who does God like more?” Talk about the truth that God loves your child just as much as their friend, and that He wants your child to see themselves and their friends through God’s loving eyes.

Take Action: Whether virtually or in person, meet with your small group this week and talk through both the questions you’ve answered this week and the challenges you have faced (or are still facing!) as you follow Jesus. Be honest about what’s worked for you and areas where you may have missed the mark.