

# Evangelical Review of Theology

GENERAL EDITOR: THOMAS SCHIRRMACHER

Volume 39 • Number 1 • January 2015

Articles and book reviews reflecting global evangelical  
theology for the purpose of discerning the obedience of faith

Published by



for  
WORLD EVANGELICAL  
ALLIANCE  
Theological Commission

# Self-Care: A Christian Perspective

Jeffery Gates

OUR ATTITUDE AND behaviour toward ourselves are very significant to us, but many of us who are Christians are not sure how we should think about and behave toward ourselves.<sup>1</sup> If we have never examined the subject, we tend to view ourselves according to our temperament, personality, upbringing, education, and church background. We might take an overly negative view of ourselves or see ourselves more positively than we should.<sup>2</sup>

We may emphasize that we are in the image of God without also considering our own sinfulness,<sup>3</sup> or we may stress the evil part of ourselves, equate affirming ourselves with selfishness, and think that love toward others should be without any advantage to

ourselves or without any thought of ourselves.<sup>4</sup> We might even put ourselves down.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, pastors and Christian counsellors can give bad advice to their congregants and clients because they lack understanding of the place of self in the Christian life.<sup>6</sup> The following scenario demonstrates this confusion about the place of self in the Christian life.

Imagine a thirty year old woman with severe depression coming to a

---

1 I wish to thank Dr. Chuck Dolph, Senior Professor of Psychology at Cedarville University, Dr. Dennis Sullivan, Director of the Center of Bioethics at Cedarville University, Dan Eads, missionary to Tanzania, and my wife for helpful suggestions in this article.

2 P. E. Staes, *Positive Self-Regard and Authentic Morality* (Manila: Loyola School of Theology, 1972), 57; J. McGrath and A. McGrath, *Self-Esteem: The Cross and Christian Confidence* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2002), 14.

3 See, for example, R. Schuller, *Self-esteem: The New Reformation* (New York: Jove, 1985).

---

4 J. R. W. Stott, 'Must I Really Love Myself?', *Christianity Today* 22/15 (1978), 34-35; J. R. W. Stott, 'Am I Supposed to Love Myself Or Hate Myself? The Cross Points a Way Between Self-Love and Self-Denial', *Christianity Today* 28/7 (1984), 26; See also J. E. Adams, *The Biblical View of Self-Esteem, Self-Love, and Self-Image* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1986), 111; K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 1.2, trans. G. W. Bromiley, G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, (eds.) (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 2004), 388; P. Brownback, *The Danger of Self-Love: Reexamining a Popular Myth* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1982), 155; T. J. Keller, *The Freedom of Self-Forgetfulness: The Path to True Christian Joy*, (Chorley, UK: 10 Publishing, 2012).

5 D. F. Weaver, *Self-Love and Christian Ethics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 4-7.

6 Weaver, *Self-Love*, 1.

---

**Jeffery Gates** (MA, Biblical Studies, Faith Baptist Bible College & Theological Seminary, MLS, Kent State University) is Information Services Librarian at Cedarville University, Cedarville, Ohio, USA and formerly Head Librarian at Faith Baptist Bible College & Theological Seminary in Ankeny, Iowa, USA and pastor in Nebraska, USA. He has studied biblical ethics extensively and currently leads a weekly discussion of current and ethical issues from a biblical perspective with laymen.

pastor for counselling. While the immediate cause of her depression is a second pregnancy, she has suffered from feelings of inadequacy and episodes of depression as long as she can remember. Her parents had negative attitudes about the body and sex and taught her that all physical suffering was the result of personal sin. These incited her to feel inferior, 'dirty', and wicked during this pregnancy. When growing up, she had been a model child and acted as a mother to the other children in her family. Though she received little affirmation from her father, she had followed his teaching that it was always wrong for her to do what she wished. Instead of pursuing normal interests as an adolescent, she took care of the home while her mother took courses at college and her father taught as a professor of philosophy. Rather than fulfil her dream of going to college and being trained as a musician, she stayed at home after her high school graduation to care for the younger children. When the next younger sister, her father's favourite child, was ready for college, the woman worked for two years to help her sister financially.

Now that she was married with a seven year old daughter, she felt she should give up her own music and devote her time to training her daughter to be a concert pianist. She also felt ashamed of herself when her husband showed any displeasure about meals, the appearance of herself or their home, or her sexual performance—regardless of the cause. She asked the pastor why she was so miserable when she had given up so much to help oth-

ers.<sup>7</sup> What advice should the pastor or counsellor give to this woman? After briefly discussing the meaning of self-care, we will look at the motivations for self-care and explore practical suggestions that could help the woman in the scenario.

Before discussing self-care, we need to define what it means. A definition of self-care may be derived from the second greatest commandment and Ephesians 5.<sup>8</sup> According to the second great commandment, people should care for others as they should care for themselves. When Moses, Jesus, Paul, and James made self-care a model for care of others (Lev 19:18; Mk 12:31; Rom 13:9; Jas 2:8), they legitimized it and helped define what it means. They were not to indulge themselves, but to care for themselves. As we should care for others rather than encourage their self-indulgence, so we should care for ourselves rather than indulge ourselves.

In Ephesians 5:28-29, the apostle Paul told husbands to love their wives as their own bodies and to nourish and care for their wives' physical and spiritual development, just as they did for themselves. The goal of a husband's love for his wife is not for her self-indulgence but for her ultimate well-being, that is, to encourage whatever helps this and to protect from whatever hinders this. If a husband

<sup>7</sup> R. H. Bonthius, *Christian Paths to Self-Acceptance* (New York: King's Crown Press, 1948), 126-129.

<sup>8</sup> C. E. Sheely, *The Christian Virtues* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1949), 123; J. Piper, 'Self-Love and the Christian Counselor's Task', *Reformed Journal* 28/5 (1978), 13-14.

is to care for his wife as he cares for himself, and this care entails promoting her ultimate well-being and protecting her from ultimate harm rather than encouraging self-indulgence, then a husband's care for himself includes promoting his own ultimate well-being and protecting himself from ultimate harm while excluding self-indulgence.

When people practise self-care, they do not indulge themselves but rather behave in ways that normally enhance their own ultimate well-being and avoid activities that usually bring them ultimate harm. According to the Bible, our primary motivation should be love (Mt 5:44; 22:34-40; 1 Cor 13:1-3; Eph 5:1,2; 1 Jn 4:7-12, 19-21). Though there is no explicit biblical command for us to love ourselves,<sup>9</sup> there is some positive biblical evidence for self-care (Ex 18: 17-18; Lev 19:18; Mk 6:31; 12:30-31; 1 Cor 16:19-20; Eph. 5:29; 1 Tim 5:23; 3 Jn 1:2). The biblical authors strongly imply that we ought to practise self-care, and there are two good reasons for us to care for ourselves; self-care imitates God's care for himself and self-care benefits God, others, and ourselves.

### I Imitating God's Care for Himself

Many assume that God is selfless and loves people without thought of ben-

efitting himself. Since they believe they should follow God's example, they conclude that they should love others without any thought of benefiting themselves. Indeed, to affirm otherwise is considered sinful by some.<sup>10</sup> There are, however, good reasons to believe that God is not selfless and that he is motivated to benefit himself. Additionally, since we are in God's image, we may be able to use his proper example of self-care to assess how we should care for ourselves.<sup>11</sup> The Bible teaches that God made all things for himself, is motivated to do what brings him the most glory, and cares about people primarily for those reasons (Isa 43:6-7; 48:9-11; Eph 1:3-14; 3:10; Col 1:16; 1 Pet 2:9; Rev 4:11). God values himself infinitely and seeks to have his creation value him as well.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> T. Barrosse, 'Christianity: Mystery of Love: An Essay in Biblical Theology', *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 20/2 (1958), 137-138, 145; Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, 75-77, 99, 140-143, 201, 500, 646-648, 678-680; Stott, 'Must I Really Love Myself?', 34-35; Stott, 'Am I Supposed to Love Myself Or Hate Myself?', 26. See also Adams, *The Biblical View of Self-Esteem*, 34, 111; Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 388; T. M. DeFerrari, *The Problem of Charity for Self: A Study of Thomistic and Modern Theological Discussion* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1962), 59; F. Tillmann, *The Master Calls: A Handbook of Christian Living*, trans. G. J. Roettger (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1961), 130; Weaver, *Self-Love and Christian Ethics*, 4-5.

<sup>11</sup> Davidson, 'The Four Faces of Self-Love in the Theology of Jonathan Edwards', 89, 91.

<sup>12</sup> J. Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, A.M. with an Essay on His Genius and Writings by Henry Rogers: And a Memoir by Sereno E. Dwight*, vol. 2, ed. E. Hickman (London: William Ball, 1839), 626; J. Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards with a Memoir by*

<sup>9</sup> Adams, *The Biblical View of Self-Esteem*, 66-67; C. Blomberg, *Matthew* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1992), 335; Brownback, *The Danger of Self-Love*, 59-60; Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, 100. See also Clark, 'Philosophical Reflections on Self-Worth and Self-Love', 7; J. Piper, 'Is Self-Love Biblical?', *Christianity Today* (August 12, 1977), 6-9.

Another argument against God's selflessness is that God seeks to have his love returned. While he cares for those whom he knows will never return his love simply because it is his nature to love, God also loves people so that they will love him in return.<sup>13</sup> This is true because God's love toward people is modelled after his mutual relationship within the Trinity.<sup>14</sup>

God's love may take the form of self-sacrifice or involve one-sided behaviour temporarily out of respect for human freedom, but the goal is mutual love.<sup>15</sup> Christ's example of enduring the cross for the 'the joy that was set before him' demonstrates how God took the first step of sacrifice to bring about or restore a relationship of mutual love (Heb 12:2). Likewise, we should reach

out in sacrificial love toward others in hopes of mutual love even if our love is never returned.<sup>16</sup> Divine suffering is incomprehensible and divine grief for the lack of response is illogical—unless God seeks a response.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, God has such a strong desire for a response from his love that those who fail to respond to his love are the subject of God's wrath.<sup>18</sup> Since God is motivated to seek his own benefits and loves people so that they will love him, God is not self-less.

Throughout the New Testament, we are encouraged to follow God's moral example (Mt 16:24; Jn 13:15; 1 Cor 11:1; Eph 5:1; 1 Pet 2:21; 1 Jn 2:6). Although we are unlike God in that we are limited and morally fallen, our similarities to him make his example of proper self-care a model for us.

## II Imitating God's Care for Us

Another reason that we should practise self-care is because people are the subject of God's love (Mt 12:11-12; Lk 12:7).<sup>19</sup> The greatest demonstration of God's love for people is his sending

---

Sereno E. Dwight, vol. 1, E. Hickman (ed.), (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1834), Section 3, para. 5, <http://www.ccel.org/e/edwards/works1.iv.html>; T. E. Fretheim, 'God, Creation, and the Pursuit of Happiness', in *The Bible and the Pursuit of Happiness*, B. A. Strawn (ed.), (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 54; H. Lubac, *The Discovery of God*, trans. A. Dru, M. Sebanc, and C. Fulsom (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1996), 164; Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, 440; J. Piper, *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist*, rev. ed. (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah Books, 2011), 43;.

13 Barrosse, 'Christianity: Mystery of Love', 139, 157-158; D. C. Jones, 'Love: The Impelling Motive of the Christian Life', *Presbyterian* 12/2 (1986), 88 [footnote 81].

14 R. M. Adams, 'Pure Love', *Journal of Religious Ethics* 8/1 (1980), 96; M. C. D'Arcy, *The Mind and Heart of Love, Lion and Unicorn: A Study in Eros and Agape* (Cleveland, OH: The World Publishing Co., 1956), 127-128.

15 G. Outka, *Agape: An Ethical Analysis* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1972), 175-176, 209, 277-278.

16 G. W. Schlabach, *For the Joy Set before Us: Augustine and Self-Denying Love* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), 17.

17 S. Post, 'The Inadequacy of Selflessness: God's Suffering and the Theory of Love', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 56/2 (1988), 215.

18 S. Post, 'Communion and True Self-Love', *Journal of Religious Ethics* 16 (1988), 345, 349, 351, 354, 358; Post, 'The Inadequacy of Selflessness', 213.

19 D. K. Clark, 'Interpreting the Biblical Words for the Self', *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 18/4 (1990), 310; B. Parmenter, *What the Bible Says about Self-Esteem* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1986), 25-26.

Jesus to redeem them from sin (1 Cor 6:19-20).<sup>20</sup> By taking on a human body, Jesus Christ affirmed the dignity of human nature, and by dying on the cross for human beings he demonstrated that to him they were worth saving (Jn 3:16; 1 Pet 1:18-19).<sup>21</sup> The Bible teaches that God cares for us just as he cares for other people.<sup>22</sup> Since God loves people, and I am a person, God loves me. Our care for ourselves has the same basis as our care for others, i.e. God's love for both.<sup>23</sup>

We may then read the second great commandment as 'Love your neighbour as a person like yourself.'<sup>24</sup> Thus, we are not to love our neighbour more than ourselves or instead of ourselves.<sup>25</sup> Rather, as we love ourselves, we should also love our neighbour.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, when the biblical writers instructed us to love our neighbour as ourselves, they were referring to self-care rather than self-indulgence.

<sup>20</sup> See McGrath and McGrath, *Self-Esteem*, 98, 116.

<sup>21</sup> See Clark, 'Philosophical Reflections on Self-Worth and Self-Love', 5, 7-8; Jones, 'Love: The Impelling Motive of the Christian Life', 73; J. McDowell, *See Yourself as God Sees You* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1999), 140; McGrath and McGrath, *Self-Esteem*, 129.

<sup>22</sup> Naugle, *Reordered Love, Reordered Lives*, 133-134.

<sup>23</sup> W. R. Clough, 'To Be Loved and to Love', *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 34/1 (2006), 29; O. O'Donovan, *The Problem of Self-Love in St. Augustine* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 44-45.

<sup>24</sup> Jones, 'Love: The Impelling Motive of the Christian Life', 91.

<sup>25</sup> Brownback, *The Danger of Self-Love*, 150.

<sup>26</sup> P. E. Johnson, 'Christian Love and Self-Love', *Pastoral Psychology* 2/2 (1951), 16.

Since God does not encourage self-indulgence, neither should we encourage self-indulgence in ourselves or others.

A valid implication of God's care for us is that we should care for ourselves.<sup>27</sup> It is 'inappropriate that you should value yourself any less than God values you....We ought to delight in what God delights in, affirm what He affirms, and celebrate what He celebrates, that is, people.'<sup>28</sup>

### III Benefitting God, Others, and Us

A third reason that we should practise self-care is for the ultimate benefits it brings to God, others, and ourselves. All Christians understand the importance of being motivated to honour God and help others, but many of them question motives that include any self-benefit because they equate this with self-indulgence. Many of them also have difficulty seeing how self-care could benefit God and others. As a result, they try to pit self-care and love for God and others against each other.<sup>29</sup> For them, love for God and others is based on the prohibition of self-love,<sup>30</sup> and promoting self-care puts

<sup>27</sup> DeFerrari, *The Problem of Charity for Self*, 115, 186; Evans, *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love*, 194-195.

<sup>28</sup> Parmenter, *What the Bible Says about Self-Esteem*, 162. See also A. Farrer, 'A Starting-Point for the Examination of Theological Beliefs', in *Faith and Logic*, B. Mitchell (ed.) (London: Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1958), 20; Naugle, *Reordered Love, Reordered Lives*, 131.

<sup>29</sup> Barrosse, 'Christianity: Mystery of Love'.

<sup>30</sup> Adams, *The Biblical View of Self-Esteem*, 43; Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 450; D. Gran-skou, 'The Concept of Selfhood in the New Testament and Modern Ethics', *Religion in Life*



too much emphasis on self instead of God.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, they assume that we cannot do well to God, others, and ourselves at the same time. However, there are good reasons to question these assumptions.

Loving ourselves is beneficial to God, others, and us, because love for all three are interrelated and complementary.<sup>32</sup> As we can love God and others simultaneously,<sup>33</sup> so can we love God and care for others and ourselves at the same time. Therefore, if we care for ourselves we will not fail to love God and others, because we cannot care for ourselves without also loving God and others.<sup>34</sup> Therefore, choosing

between loving God and others and caring for ourselves is not an either/or proposition.<sup>35</sup> Self-indulgence, rather than self-care, hinders people from loving God and others.<sup>36</sup> Additionally, if we try to care for ourselves without loving God and others, we are being self-indulgent and choosing what is against our well-being,<sup>37</sup> just as we do not love God when we do not care for others.<sup>38</sup>

### 1. Self-care benefits God

Love for God does not exclude self-care. Rather, self-care is a way to express our love for God. Self-care is a form of love to God in whose image the self is.<sup>39</sup> 'When I devalue myself, I fail to honour God's creative goodness as this is expressed in me, just as when I selfishly make myself the centre of the universe, I fail to recognize God as

---

30/1 (1960-1961), 97; G. H. Haas, *The Concept of Equity in Calvin's Ethics* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1997), 58; S. Krishek, 'Two Forms of Love: The Problem of Preferential Love in Kierkegaard's Works of Love', *Journal of Religious Ethics* 36/4 (2008), 598-599; M. Luther, *Lectures on Romans*, ed. and trans. W. Pauck (Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1961), 407-408; Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, 101, 131, 712-713; Post, 'Communion and True Self-Love', 345.

31 See Canning, 'Out of Balance', 70-71.

32 Schnackenburg, *The Moral Teaching of the New Testament*, 153.

33 J. Butler, *Studies Subsidiary to the Works of Bishop Butler*, vol. 2, W. E. Gladstone (ed.), (New York: Macmillan & Co., 1896), 197; N. Fiering, *Jonathan Edward's Moral Thought and Its British Context* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1981), 156-157; C. Maurer, 'Two Approaches to Self-Love: Hutcheson and Butler', *European Journal of Analytic Philosophy* 2/2 (2006), 87, 89.

34 T. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1981), II-I, 28, 1; D'Arcy, *The Mind and Heart of Love, Lion and Unicorn*, 103-104; Naugle, *Reordered Love, Reordered Lives*, 133; S. J. Pope, 'Expressive Individualism and True Self-Love:

---

A Thomistic Perspective', *Journal of Religion* 71/3 (1991), 388; Tillmann, *The Master Calls*, 130, 184.

35 See Johnson, 'Christian Love and Self-Love', 18; Outka, *Agape: An Ethical Analysis*, 73.

36 See J. Butler, *Fifteen Sermons Preached at Rolls Chapel: To Which Is Added Six Sermons Preached on Public Occasions*, 6th ed. (London: Printed for F. and C. Rivington, and S. Hayes, 1792), 17.

37 Edwards, *Charity and Its Fruits*, 233-239.

38 Butler, *Studies Subsidiary to the Works of Bishop Butler*, 188; DeFerrari, *The Problem of Charity for Self*, 144-147; R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002), 480; Jones, 'Love: The Impelling Motive of the Christian Life', 86. See also O'Donovan, *The Problem of Self-Love in St. Augustine*, 37.

39 DeFerrari, *The Problem of Charity for Self*, 18, 156-157, 178-179.

God.<sup>40</sup> People who depreciate themselves and deny their own worth do not honour God. Just as failing to accept a gift is a rejection of the giver, so rejecting the self is rejecting God who made the self.<sup>41</sup> 'To value ourselves... is to become receptive to what God has given us and to what He wants to make of us.'<sup>42</sup>

Furthermore, failing to care for ourselves properly may result in less glory to God because it can negatively influence our job performance and our ability to resist temptation, trust God, be a joyful witness for Christ, and grow to spiritual maturity. If caring for others is an expression of love for God, it is just as logical to say that caring for ourselves is an expression of love for God since both are in his image.<sup>43</sup>

## 2 Self-care benefits others

Self-care is interrelated with care for others. To love others is to love ourselves and to love ourselves is to love others.<sup>44</sup> Isaiah's vision resists 'the altruistic emptying of self for others [and] the pouring out of others for self [in favour of] the self deeply and meaningfully connected with other selves,

living in a community marked by a profound relationship to God and to one another.' Furthermore, 'the well-being of the self is extricably tied to the well-being of others, and vice versa, because all are woven into communal life....'<sup>45</sup> We can wish for our own happiness while wishing for the happiness of others, just as we can enjoy the benefit of the air and light of the sun while others enjoy it.

When Moses, Jesus, Paul, and James (Lev 19:18; Mk 12:31; Rom 13:9; Jas 2:8) spoke of loving our neighbour as ourselves, they addressed the manner in which we were to care for others, i.e. in the same way we care for ourselves. As we naturally seek our own happiness and avoid misery, likewise, we should do so to others.<sup>46</sup> In reality, we must care about ourselves before we can care about others, because our self-care is the model or standard of neighbour-care.<sup>47</sup> Therefore, self-care cannot be wrong because it is 'a rule and measure by which our love to others should be regulated'.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Evans, *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love*, 195.

<sup>41</sup> Parmenter, *What the Bible Says about Self-Esteem*, 199.

<sup>42</sup> McGrath and McGrath, *Self-Esteem*, 127-128.

<sup>43</sup> C. R. Gerber, *Christ-Centered Self-Esteem: Seeing Ourselves through God's Eyes* (Joplin, MO: College Press Pub. Co., 1996), 23-24, 62-63.

<sup>44</sup> D. O. Brink, 'Moderate and Extreme Harmony of Interests', in *Perfectionism and the Common Good: Themes in the Philosophy of T. H. Green*, D.O. Brink (ed.), (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003), 60-62.

<sup>45</sup> J. Lapsley, 'A Happy Blend: Isaiah's Vision of Happiness (and Beyond)', in *The Bible and the Pursuit of Happiness*, B. A. Strawn (ed.), (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 79, 93.

<sup>46</sup> DeFerrari, *The Problem of Charity for Self*, 112. See also A. J. Dyck and C. Padilla, 'The Empathic Emotions and Self-Love in Bishop Joseph Butler and the Neurosciences', *Journal of Religious Ethics* 37/4 (2009).

<sup>47</sup> O. Hanfling, 'Loving My Neighbour, Loving Myself', *Philosophy* 68/264 (1993), 153; Johnson, 'Christian Love and Self-Love', 16; Outka, *Agape: An Ethical Analysis*, 289; L. Thomas, *The Fragility of the Moral Self: Self-Love and Morality* (Bloomington, IN: Poynter Center, Indiana University, 1997), 10-11.

<sup>48</sup> Edwards, *Charity and Its Fruits*, 230.



Furthermore, without the model of self-care, we will have difficulty caring for others.<sup>49</sup> Love of others is intimately related to self-care because loving others fulfils the tendency to love beings like ourselves and it is in loving others that people care for themselves. Caring for ourselves is the basis and model for us to care for our neighbour, because our neighbour is like the one about whom we care a great deal, i.e. ourselves.<sup>50</sup> Moreover, we empathize with others because others are like us and, therefore, we treat others as we want to be treated. In this way, when we care for others, it is like caring for ourselves.<sup>51</sup>

Therefore, only when we have compassion for ourselves can we have compassion for others, and our ability to show compassion toward others results from our capability to substitute the interests of others for our own. We assume that others are like us and that the behaviour which makes us happy also makes others happy. So when we make others happy, we feel as happy as if we made ourselves happy. Furthermore, we were made to seek the happiness of others and ourselves, and we do evil and good to others as we do evil and good to ourselves.<sup>52</sup>

Caring for ourselves enables us to more effectively care for others,<sup>53</sup> but if we fail to care for ourselves we are less able to care for others.<sup>54</sup> The Second Greatest Commandment teaches that people who do not love themselves cannot love their neighbour,<sup>55</sup> and only those who have their basic needs met are able to help others.<sup>56</sup> Just as we cannot save another drowning person if we are drowning, so if we have pressing personal needs we will concentrate all our energies on solving them and have little left for God and others. Likewise, we cannot help others grow spiritually if we have not grown spiritually ourselves.<sup>57</sup>

### 3 Self-care benefits us

It is commonly believed that we naturally care for ourselves and, therefore, do not need encouragement to do so.<sup>58</sup> On the contrary, we frequently behave in ways that bring us harm instead of well-being.<sup>59</sup> As it is possible for us to behave toward our neighbour in unloving ways, so we can be unloving toward ourselves.<sup>60</sup> Gluttony, anorexia,

49 McGrath and McGrath, *Self-Esteem*, 128-129.

50 Aquinas, *Suma Theologica*, II-I, 27, 3; II-II, 44, 7.

51 DeFerrari, *The Problem of Charity for Self*, 64, 156-157, 178-179.

52 Butler, *Fifteen Sermons Preached at Rolls Chapel*, 66, 92, 193; Dyck and Carlos, 'The Empathic Emotions and Self-Love in Bishop Joseph Butler', 578, 587-588. See also Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards with a Memoir by Sereno E. Dwight*, Section 4, para. 10.

53 Canning, 'Out of Balance', 72.

54 See Maurer, 'Two Approaches to Self-Love', 86.

55 Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 22-23.

56 Clark, 'Philosophical Reflections on Self-Worth and Self-Love', 10.

57 See J. S. Norcross and J. D. Guy, *Leaving It at the Office: A Guide to Psychotherapist Self-Care* (New York: Guilford Press, 2007).

58 J. Makujina, 'The Second Greatest Commandment and Self-Esteem', *Master's Seminary Journal* 8/2 (1997), 222-223.

59 Naugle, *Reordered Love, Reordered Lives*, 36-47.

60 K. Green, 'Aquinas's Argument against Self-Hatred', *Journal of Religious Ethics* 35/1 (2007), 113-139.

smoking, drug abuse, and suicide are obviously not good for people, yet some people practise them.<sup>61</sup> People may also depreciate, demean, and put themselves down without realizing how destructive this is to them.<sup>62</sup>

Apparently, God made us with a natural tendency to care for ourselves, and this natural self-care is one of his ways of ensuring that we are cared for.<sup>63</sup> It is reasonable to assume that taking care of our bodies and seeking healthy relationships with God and others promotes our own physical, emotional, and spiritual health and protects us from physical, emotional, and spiritual harm.<sup>64</sup>

When sin entered into the human race, it brought a self-indulgence that hinders people from caring for themselves.<sup>65</sup> As a result, apart from God, self-indulgence tends to replace self-care,<sup>66</sup> and we often desire things for ourselves that are harmful to us and others.<sup>67</sup> Since sinful behaviour is always harmful to us, when we sin we

actually hate ourselves (Prov 6:32; 15:27, 32; 29:24). If we cared for ourselves perfectly we would not choose to sin. Since we choose to sin, this is evidence that we do not care for ourselves as we ought—just as our choice of sin is evidence that we do not love God and others properly.<sup>68</sup> Therefore, we should sacrifice immediate desires for our own benefit, just as we should sacrifice immediate desires for the benefit of God and others.

While many people are too concerned with their own happiness and unconcerned about the happiness of others, other people are overly concerned with the well-being of others and too quick to sacrifice their own well-being.<sup>69</sup> In light of the evidence that people often do not care for themselves, the phrase, 'no one ever yet hated his own flesh', in Ephesians 5:29 cannot be an absolute statement.<sup>70</sup> While we intend to care for ourselves, we do not always do so.<sup>71</sup> Though we intend to promote our own well-being and protect ourselves from harm, we may behave in ways that harm us.<sup>72</sup>

Jonathan Edwards referred to this thinking when he wrote that 'wicked men do not love themselves enough—

61 D. G. Myers, *Social Psychology*, 10th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2010), 74.

62 T. I. Rubin, *Compassion and Self-Hate: An Alternative to Despair* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998), 39.

63 T. Smith, 'The Practice of Pride', *Social Philosophy & Policy* 15/1 (1998), 82.

64 See D. C. Myers, 'A Level-of-Explanation View', in *Psychology and Christianity: Five views*, E. L. Johnson (ed.), (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2010), 65-66.

65 Davidson, 'The Four Faces of Self-Love in the Theology of Jonathan Edwards', 94. See also Butler, *Fifteen Sermons Preached at Rolls Chapel*, 17.

66 T. D. Cooper, *Sin, Pride & Self-acceptance: The Problem of Identity in Theology & Psychology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2003), 14-25, 38.

67 67 Adams, *A Theory of Virtue*, 101; Clough, 'To Be Loved and to Love'.

68 Jones, 'Love: The Impelling Motive of the Christian Life', 88; Pope, 'Expressive Individualism and True Self-Love', 399.

69 Cooper, *Sin, Pride & Self-acceptance*, 61-66, 71-86; Evans, *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love*, 182; V. S. Goldstein, 'The Human Situation: A Feminine Viewpoint', *Pastoral Psychology*, 17/3 (1966), 38.

70 Adams, *A Theory of Virtue*, 106-109.

71 Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I-II, 29, 4; Jones, 'Love: The Impelling Motive of the Christian Life', 87. See also Hanfling, 'Loving My Neighbour, Loving Myself', 156.

72 See Myers, *Social Psychology*, 47, 73.

not so much as the godly do; for they do not love the way of their own welfare and happiness'.<sup>73</sup> The biblical command to love our neighbour as ourselves does not state that we always care for ourselves in the right way, but that we should care for others in the same way that we intend to care for ourselves. Since we are often ignorant of what is truly good for us and are prone to self-indulgence, only when we care for ourselves as God directs, do we truly care for ourselves. For this reason, the command to love our neighbour as ourselves assumes that we should care for others as we should care for ourselves and that we should care for ourselves as we should care for others.<sup>74</sup> Consequently, we should not treat others as we treat ourselves when we do not care for ourselves. Furthermore, we have a moral duty to care for ourselves just as we are obligated to love God and others, and we are wrong not to do so.<sup>75</sup>

One source of confusion about self-care comes from a misunderstanding of Jesus' teaching about denying self and self-sacrifice (Mk 8:34).<sup>76</sup> However,

when Jesus referred to self-sacrifice, he spoke of giving up self-indulgence rather than self-care. In fact, Jesus offered what was ultimately good for his followers as a reward for giving up self-indulgence.<sup>77</sup> While focusing on immediate rewards was shunned, being motivated by future rewards was praised (1 Cor 13:3).<sup>78</sup>

Self-indulgence causes us to pursue immediate pleasure and avoid immediate pain without regard to long-range rewards or consequences. On the other hand, self-care enables us to sacrifice immediate pleasure and/or endure temporary pain, even to the point of giving up our lives, for the sake of joy in the future just as Jesus did (Heb 12:2). Self-indulgence is its only reward and often results in harm (Mt 6:16; Prov 21:17; 23:21; 1Tim 5:6), but when we sacrifice for Christ, he offered rewards that benefit us ultimately (Mt 5:11-12; 6:16-18; 16:24-27; 19:28-29; Mk 20:21, 29-30; Luke 6:22,35; 18:22,29-30; Rev 2:8-11).

Even in the clearest description of love in the New Testament, namely 1 Corinthians 13, the apostle Paul spoke of the advantage to self of loving others. The phrase, 'it profits me nothing' (vs. 3), implies that people benefit from loving others. Here Paul wrote as positively of self-benefit as he did of the benefit of others. His appeal to the Corinthian believers is based chiefly on their own ultimate advantage on three occasions in 1 Corinthians (6:12;

<sup>73</sup> Fiering, *Jonathan Edward's Moral Thought*, 171. See also J. Butler, *The Works of Joseph Butler, D.C.L.: Sometime Lord Bishop of Durham*, W. E. Gladstone, (ed.), (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1897), xiii-xxiv.

<sup>74</sup> J. W. Jenson, *Don't Blame It All on Adam* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 1984), 86; A. C. Knudson, *The Principles of Christian Ethics* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1943), 129; Sheely, *The Christian Virtues*, 123. See also J. Bransen, 'Selfless Self-Love', *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 9/1 (2006), 20.

<sup>75</sup> Johnson, 'Christian Love and Self-Love', 16; Outka, *Agape: An Ethical Analysis*, 70-74.

<sup>76</sup> See, for example, Canning, 'Out of Bal-

ance', 70, 72.

<sup>77</sup> Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*, 25-26. See also Naugle, *Reordered Love, Reordered Lives*, 131.

<sup>78</sup> See J. Lippitt, 'True Self-Love and True Self-Sacrifice', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 66/3 (2009), 132.

7:35; 10:23). Additionally, in his other writings he taught that suffering for Christ results in future rewards (Rom 8:18; 2 Tim 2:12; 2 Tim 4:8). Other New Testament writers also wrote of future rewards for faithful service (Heb 11:24-26; Jas 1:12; 1 Pet 1:6-7; 5:1-4; 2 Jn 1:8). In light of the proper place of rewards in the Christian life, Paul's affirmation that love 'does not seek its own' must refer to self-indulgence rather than ultimate benefit to self (1 Cor 13:5). If serving God for self-benefit is wrong, why did God appeal so often to rewards for service? Although many would argue that loving others only for the reward it brings is selfishness, a reward may be at least a partial incentive for doing so.<sup>79</sup>

An important benefit of self-care is prevention of the excesses of self-sacrifice. Some in church history castrated themselves as an application of Jesus's command to cut off an arm or pluck out an eye to prevent them from sinning. Others promoted martyrdom.<sup>80</sup> However, there is no command in the Bible for self-hatred or loathing the very per-

son God created and redeems.<sup>81</sup> Serving the needs of others while ignoring our needs is a false view of Christianity that should be repudiated.<sup>82</sup> In fact, 'excessive self-sacrifice or self-abnegation can potentially be at least as big a worry as excessive self-love',<sup>83</sup> and self-sacrifice could be as much a vice as selfishness.<sup>84</sup>

Moreover, the 'dangers of religion's inner restraint upon self-assertion, and its effort to achieve complete disinterestedness [impartiality], are that such a policy easily becomes morbid, and that it may make for injustice by encouraging and permitting undue self-assertion in others'.<sup>85</sup> Self-sacrifice is a sacrifice because the self has value. Therefore, there are limits to our sacrifices, and we should sacrifice ourselves only for something that is worthwhile.<sup>86</sup>

God's simultaneous love for himself and us is a model for us to love God, others, and ourselves simultaneously.<sup>87</sup> There is no contradiction between God glorifying himself and being benevolent to his creation, because glorifying him is good for his creation. In other words, when we honour God we are benefit-

<sup>79</sup> R. E. Ciampa and B. S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: William E. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2010), 638; F. W. Grosheide, *Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1953), 306.

<sup>80</sup> M. Hassett, 'Martyr', in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 2010), <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/09736b.htm>; M. Kuefler, *The Manly Eunuch: Masculinity, Gender Ambiguity, and Christian Ideology in Late Antiquity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); P. Logan, 'Sermon on the Mount', in *Holman Bible Dictionary*, T. C. Butler (ed.), (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1991), 1247.

<sup>81</sup> Duff, 'The Second Great Command', 22.

<sup>82</sup> D'Arcy, *The Mind and Heart of Love, Lion and Unicorn*, 103-104; Post, 'The Inadequacy of Selflessness', 224.

<sup>83</sup> Lippitt, 'True Self-Love and True Self-Sacrifice', 130.

<sup>84</sup> D'Arcy, *The Mind and Heart of Love*, 303.

<sup>85</sup> R. Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics*, 2nd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 261-262.

<sup>86</sup> Groenhout, 'Kenosis and Feminist Theory', 299-307.

<sup>87</sup> A. Von Hildebrand, 'Problematic Self-Love', *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture* 12/3 (2009), 88.

ted.<sup>88</sup> Thus, he encourages us to love him for his benefit (his glory) and our benefit. For that reason, self-care sees its best example in God whose primary motivation is doing what benefits him even as others are benefitted.<sup>89</sup> God's simultaneous love for himself and us is an example for us to love God, others, and ourselves simultaneously.

#### IV Practical Applications

Caring for ourselves while loving God and others goes against our natural propensity to self-indulgence, but we can improve over time with practice through the assistance of God and others. Here are some suggestions.

First of all, we can care for ourselves by recognizing the importance of doing so. While usually intending to care for ourselves, we often do not do so. God wants us to care for ourselves and to seek love from him and others, just as he cares for himself and loves us so that we will return his love. Harming ourselves or failing to care for ourselves is as bad as harming others or not caring for others, because we are equally valued by God. Caring for ourselves not only benefits us, it also enables us to honour God and give better care to others. Being aware of our need and responsibility to care for ourselves can motivate us to put self-care into practice.

Secondly, we care for ourselves by distinguishing between self-care and self-indulgence in our lives. Seeing our behaviour in the light of its long-term effects instead of just the immediate benefits or consequences is a good practice. So also does avoiding what brings us ultimate harm rather than what does not ultimately harm us, and seeking our ultimate well-being and long-range earthly and heavenly rewards instead of just what feels good at the time is proper.

Thirdly, we care for ourselves by viewing love for God, others and ourselves as one package. We need not decide between loving God, others, or ourselves. Recognizing that we can 1), demonstrate our love for others and ourselves by loving God, 2), show our love for God and ourselves by loving others, and 3), demonstrate our love for God and others by caring for ourselves, may help us see the need for loving all three. Some behaviour may be more beneficial to one than the other two, but we can seek to balance our love for all three throughout the day, week, or month.<sup>90</sup>

Instead of seeing only the immediate benefits to God, others, and ourselves, we can combine this practice with the previous two and ask ourselves the following questions that focus on long-range benefits for all three. What behaviour in this situation will bring the most glory to God ultimately? How will my actions in this particular time and place help others ultimately? Will my behaviour toward myself in this setting benefit me ultimately?

Fourthly, we care for ourselves by

<sup>88</sup> Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards with a Memoir by Sereno E. Dwight*, Section 3, para. 7-8, 12. See also P. Copan, 'Divine Narcissism? A Further Defense of God's Humility', *Philosophia Christi* (New Series), 8 (January 2006), 318.

<sup>89</sup> Fiering, *Jonathan Edward's Moral Thought*, 154.

<sup>90</sup> See Canning, 'Out of Balance', 72-73.

growing less self-indulgent and more loving to God, others, and ourselves through the assistance of the Holy Spirit and others (Rom 5:5; Eph 4:15; 1 Thess 3:12; Heb 10:24). The temptation to ignore God and not care for others and ourselves is strong. We can also be enticed to dishonour God and disrespect others and ourselves. We need assistance to care for ourselves, just as we need help to love God and others.

Nevertheless, through Bible study, prayer, and the encouragement of others, we can grow to overcome the temptation to indulge ourselves and give proper attention to God, others, and ourselves. This also includes helping us distinguish self-indulgence from self-care in our lives and putting aside self-indulgent practices that hinder us from loving God and caring for others and ourselves.

## V Conclusion

In the introduction we met a thirty year old pregnant woman with severe depression who came to see a pastor for counselling. In light of this study of a Christian perspective of self-care, what advice should the pastor give her? The pastor would need to help the woman gain a biblical understanding of her relationship with God, others, and herself. He would be required to help her see that God values her as much as he values other people and that consequently he wants her to care for others *and* herself. He would want to emphasize that it is just as wrong for her not to care for herself as it is for her not to care for her husband or daughter.

The pastor would be compelled to emphasize that caring for herself would

not necessarily hinder her from caring for her family, but that it would enable her to do a better job of caring for her family. He would be obliged to help her think of loving God, others, and herself as a package and help her think of ways that loving one benefits the other two. He would then need to discuss her needs and help her examine whether or not she was caring for herself properly. The pastor would have to explain the difference between self-care and self-indulgence to the woman and help her see which of her behaviours were self-indulgent and which contributed to her love for God and care for herself and others.

This might help her understand that her acts of self-denigration might be more to fulfil her desire to be perfect or some other emotional or spiritual need than to help her sister in the past and her daughter now. It might be essential for him to try to help her see how her extreme self-sacrifice was a way to avoid her other responsibilities, such as being properly assertive toward her parents and husband so that she can obey God.<sup>91</sup>

While helping the woman gain a biblical understanding of her relationship with God, others, and herself is necessary, it is not enough. She must also act upon that understanding. However, it would probably be difficult for her to change her self-deprecating ways. She needs the help of God and others (Rom 5:5; Eph 4:15; 1 Thess 3:12; Heb 10:24) and a determination to grow in self-care, even as she needs their help to grow in her love for God and others.

---

91 Groenhout, 'Kenosis and Feminist Theology', 305, 310-311.



Therefore, if she was not a Christian, the pastor should try to persuade her to receive Jesus Christ as her Saviour and to cultivate a relationship with God through prayer, Bible reading, and fellowship with other Christians.

Most probably, he would want to encourage her to read biblical passages and Christian literature to help her gain a biblical view of herself, her body, and sex. He ought to encourage her to meet regularly with him, another mature Christian, or a counsellor for encouragement and accountability regarding her relationship with God, others, and herself. While the insights the woman receives from the pastor can help her grow to be more caring of herself and more loving to God and others, he should caution her to be patient with herself.

If the woman grew to be more self-caring, how would her life be different? She would feel more positive about being pregnant and would probably feel higher regard toward her husband for making her pregnant and the resulting child in her womb. When her husband complained about a meal that she had prepared, the appearance of herself or their home, or her sexual performance, she would be more objective about the cause and better able to assert her-

self to discuss these issues with her husband and, if necessary, improve in ways that she could improve.

She would probably mature in her relationships with God, her daughter, and others outside her home. She would also grow closer to her husband, unless he was more interested in self-indulgence than in his love to God, his wife, and himself. The woman would probably continue to give her daughter piano lessons, but she might also enquire into taking advanced piano lessons or even consider obtaining a college degree in music. Her feelings of inadequacy would lessen and her depression would probably lift.

In this study, I have attempted to demonstrate a Christian view of self-care. We are made in the image of God and responsible to God to care for ourselves. Self-care is not indulging ourselves without regard for God and others, but recognizing our legitimate need to care for ourselves by seeking what ultimately benefits us and protecting ourselves from what ultimately harms us—even as we do the same for God and others. Although we often do not care for ourselves properly, when we do care for ourselves we imitate God, care for the subject of God's love, and express love to God and others.