


1-26-2005

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Recommended Citation

Lowery, Kevin Twain, "A Wesleyan Understanding of Proper Self-Love in the Sanctified Life" (2005). *Faculty Scholarship - Theology*. Paper 2.

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A Wesleyan Understanding of Proper Self-Love in the Sanctified Life

Kevin Twain Lowery

I. Introduction

- A. In Wesleyan theology, Christian perfection (i.e. the life of holiness) entails the fulfillment of the Love Commandments. (Mt. 22:37-40; Mk. 12:30-31)
 - 1. Love the Lord with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength.
 - 2. Love your neighbor as yourself.
- B. However, holiness is also purity of heart. (Mt. 5:8; Jas. 4:8)
 - 1. Wesley described it as freedom from sinful thoughts, passions, and desires.
 - 2. The holiness movement taught that entire sanctification brings victory over carnality.
- C. The question is: What is pure love, and how is it attained?

II. Self-love has long been viewed suspiciously in Christian theology.

- A. For example, Bernard of Clairvaux outlined four steps (i.e. stages) of love.
 - 1. Loving ourselves for our own sake
 - 2. Loving God for our sake
 - 3. Loving God for his own sake
 - 4. Loving ourselves for God's sake.
- B. Thomas Aquinas asserted that inordinate self-love is the root of every sin.
- C. Even in the last century, Neo-orthodox theologians like Reinhold Niebuhr regarded self-love as pernicious.

III. In Wesley's day, there was a polarized debate about the value of self-love.

- A. French Catholic mystics like Madame Guyon and François Fénelon believed that pure love must be utterly devoid of self-love. For them, if we love God properly, we would gladly burn in hell if it would bring glory to God.
- B. In contrast, Bishop Joseph Butler viewed self-love positively, because he believed that enlightened self-interest is what leads us to the greatest good.
- C. Jonathan Edwards took a middle position, viewing self-love as a necessary part of all love.
 - 1. It is impossible to love something if we do not derive some type of pleasure from it. Therefore, self-love is a necessary part of all love.
- D. This middle position is reflected in Scripture.
 - 1. First, self-love is presupposed in the Love Commandments
 - a. love your neighbor *as yourself*
 - 2. Self-love is also presupposed in the Golden Rule.
 - 3. Moreover, St. Paul says that loving oneself is perfectly natural.
 - a. Eph. 5:29-30 – “So husbands ought also to love their own wives as their own bodies. He who loves his own wife loves himself. *For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it*, just as Christ also does the church.”

IV. Wesley also takes the middle ground.

- A. On the one hand, he believes that self-love is a natural part of the human psyche.
- B. On the other hand, he recognizes the fact that self-love can be easily become selfish and proud.
- C. He concludes that when self-love is properly regulated, self-love and love for others can reinforce one another.

[The love of the perfect Christian] is in itself generous and disinterested, springing from no view of advantage to himself, from no regard to profit or praise, no, nor even the pleasure of loving. This is the daughter, not the parent, of his affection. By experience he knows that social love, if it mean the love of our neighbor, is absolutely different from self-love, even of the most allowable kind, just as different as the objects at which they point. And yet it is sure, that, if they are under due regulations, each will give additional force to the other, till they mix together never to be divided. (Wesley to the Rev. Dr. Conyers Middleton, 4 January 1749, §§6.1.5-11, *WWJ*, 10:68-70)

V. What does this mean for the doctrine of holiness?

- A. Self-love is not inherently sinful, but it can become so by becoming selfish.
- B. Sanctification is not the elimination of self-love.
 - 1. It would be psychotic to not care about ourselves.
 - 2. In fact, we can only suppress self-love so long before it reasserts itself.
- C. Rather, in sanctification self-love is properly focused and regulated.
- D. As such, using terms like “crucifying the self,” “dying to self,” and “being free from self” can be misleading.
- E. This is why the holiness writers started making a distinction between carnality and natural human nature.
- F. Wesley used the term “self-will” to refer to improper self-love. Terms like “selfishness” and “self-centeredness” are also appropriate.

VI. So, then, how can we characterize proper self-love? We can evaluate the morality of love by three criteria:

- A. How much the object is loved relatively
- B. How much it is loved absolutely
- C. Why it is loved

VII. In other words, we can evaluate the morality of self-love by asking ourselves the following questions:

- A. Do I love myself properly relative to God and to others?
- B. Do I love myself as I deserve to be loved?
- C. Why do I love myself?

VIII. Let's look at these three questions separately.

A. Do I love myself properly relative to God and to others?

1. First of all, God must always be loved supremely.
2. With respect to loving others, the baseline is that I must love others *as* I love myself.
3. Nevertheless, as a Christian I am called to do more than this. I am called to make sacrifices.
 - a. This presupposes self-love, for if you don't really care, then it is not a sacrifice.
 - 1) E.g. Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane indicates that he really did care about his own happiness and well-being.
This adds to the quality of his sacrifice.
 - b. However, the Christian call to sacrifice requires us to place God and others ahead of ourselves.
 - 1) Ph'p. 2:3 – "Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself."
 - 2) This principle also applies to the call to forgiveness.
 - c. Christian love is thus self-giving love.
 - d. It is easier to give of ourselves when our perspective is broadened.

B. Do I love myself as I deserve to be loved?

1. This requires both self-esteem and humility.
 - a. Gal. 6:3-4 – "For if anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself. But let each one examine his own work, and then he will have reason for boasting in regard to himself alone, and not in regard to another."
 - b. Ro. 12:3 – We must not "think more highly of [ourselves] than [we] ought to think, but to think so as to have sound judgment."
2. It is not self-deprecation.
 - a. We have been created in God's image.
 - b. We have been redeemed by Jesus Christ.
3. It is not sinful pride.
 - a. This raises another question: Is pride ever legitimate? (e.g. having pride in some accomplishment, in your children, etc.)
 - b. Pride is sinful when we:
 - 1) forget our dependence on God,
 - 2) start to rebel against God,
 - 3) lack gratitude toward God and toward others,
 - 4) begin to value ourselves more than others, or
 - 5) lose perspective.
 - c. Pride is legitimate so long as:
 - 1) it is something that glorifies God, and
 - 2) does not lead to sinful pride.

C. Why do I love myself?

1. This is not asking, “Why do I care about my own well-being and happiness?” This is only natural.
2. Instead, this question asks me, “What are the sources of my self-esteem?”
3. People often love themselves for the wrong reasons.
4. A good question is this: Do I love myself for the reasons that God loves me?
5. In essence, are the things that give me self-esteem the kind of things for which the Lord will ultimately say, “Well done, good and faithful servant.”

IX. In the final analysis, holiness is neither pride nor self-loathing, for it requires proper self-esteem. It is the fulfillment of the Love Commandments.

- A. We should consecrate ourselves to God and to his will not because we stop caring about ourselves, but because we start caring about him even more.
- B. The better we understand God’s goodness, the more our pride and self-centeredness are undermined.
- C. To conclude, we should recall that Wesley referred to Christian perfection as “love expelling sin,” and we should return to the basic premise that holiness is, first and foremost of all, loving God supremely and loving others as we love ourselves.