



# Pilgrimage:

A Newsletter of Christian Spirituality

March 1984

## SELF-LOVE

A conversation between Ego and God:

Ego: "I've sinned and I'm wretched and I don't deserve your love."

God: "Of course not! Did you think that you ever did merit my love for you? My love is given not earned."

E: "But don't you expect me to be perfect? Isn't that what you require of man?"

G: "I want to make you perfect, and only I can accomplish it. You cannot. Your expectation of yourself is an excuse for not acknowledging that you need me."

E: "But I am sorry for my sin. Look how wretched I feel right now."

G: "You are sorry for yourself because you cannot make yourself perfect. True sorrow is sorrow for the evil that your sins have done to others and to me. There are scars in my hands, you know."

E: "Alas! I see that I have been proud as well as sinful. How could you love one such as I?"

G: "I told you already that I love because it is my nature, not because you deserve it. You would do well to imitate my love, and accept your sins as I have accepted them. I do not hate you: you need not hate yourself either."

E: "But it is so hard!"

G: "If you would but let go of your false image of yourself (which you are wasting so much energy trying to maintain), and let yourself relax into my loving arms, you would find it all very easy. The most natural thing in the world, in fact. Then your imperfections will draw us closer, since you will see in them your need for my help. And you will no longer need to fret, because you will be secure in my arms."

Many people today suffer from a lack of self-esteem. They do not believe that they are worthy or lovable people. The symptoms are familiar to us all: the frequent depressions which say, "No one can love me;" the grovelling quest for the love and approval of others; the unwillingness to accept love when it is offered; the pride which tries to compensate by saying, "I'm great at what I do; everyone says so."

At root of all of these is the failure to love one's self. We see our imperfections and hate ourselves for them. We rarely admit this: it is something too sensitive to be acknowledged very easily. So it is swept under the rug. But for many of us, it is there. Deep down, we do not believe that we are lovable people. We know our sins. We know the hurt we have done to other people. We know the hurt that we have done to ourselves. Besides all the bad things we know about ourselves, we fear that there are even worse things lurking in those dark corners of ourselves that we have not yet seen into. What we have seen makes us afraid to probe further. Between what we know and what we are afraid to find out, we have a strong sense of ourselves as very bad people.

This sense of our own failure keeps us from loving ourselves. Sin is an unpleasant subject. We seek to avoid it as much as possible. So, except when we are depressed, we avoid consciously dealing with our sins and failures. Unfortunately this leaves them to fester, and inhibits the development of a Christian understanding of ourselves -- not to say a Christian love for ourselves.

Our lack of love for ourselves manifests itself in different ways in different people. Some people devote themselves to the quest for the approval and love of others. Since they don't really love themselves, they compensate by seeking the love of others. Then such a one will be able to convince himself that he is lovable (or at least, he will try). He is out to do anything that will make others love him. At the same time, he is desperately afraid of rejection, for that will only confirm his worst fears. This approach is self-defeating, because while people may express approval and some affection for him, no one will love him deeply. No one can because they will never be able to find out who he really is. He is always trying to be the person he thinks they want him to be, so he will be making himself into someone he is not. They will sense this. And failing to find a real person (with unlovable characteristics as well as nice ones), they will never be able to love him with a deeply personal love.

Then there is the person who rejects love whenever it is offered. Even though he may be spending great effort to cultivate love from others, when it is finally offered he rejects it because he doesn't believe that it is possible. He knows that he is unlovable, so the love which is offered must be unreal or else a mistake. His lack of self-love has him in a terrible bind.

Another approach is that of pride. This person attempts to make up for being unlovable by living without love. He tells himself that he doesn't really need it anyway. He finds some aspect of his life that he is good at, and stresses that. He finds in his success the confirmation of his approach. But because he knows deep down that he needs love, he will be insecure about the very thing he is successful at. The self-defeating character of this approach to life shows that it is false.

Finally, there is a person who is overcome by that perverse form of pride which says, "I am so bad. God cannot possibly love me until I get myself straightened out. I don't deserve God's grace." Or, at least: "God shouldn't do anything for me until I have done something for myself -- and I won't accept anything from Him until I have made a start." The implication is that we must save ourselves, that we must make ourselves worthy of God's grace. This is wrong, of course: grace is a gift. God gives it to us out of His bounty. While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us (not after we made ourselves worthy of His sacrifice). This person uses his sin to set himself further apart from God. Rather he ought to use it to acknowledge his need for Him and draw that much closer.

These are the symptoms. The solution to the problem is Christian self-love. We know that we are to love God, and that we are to love our neighbors as ourselves. But we are also to love ourselves. That does not mean that we should pander to every selfish desire. It does not mean that we should do whatever we feel like, living a life of pure self-indulgence. It does not mean that we are to love our sin or approve of our self-centeredness.

It means that we are to love ourselves just as God loves us. He loves us unconditionally. He sees the sin that is within us. He sees the many respects in which we are not deserving of His love: and He loves us still. He loves us not because we are sinners, but in spite of our being sinners. The sin can have no part of Him. It wounds His love, in fact, just as the nails wounded His hands and feet. But His love swallows up the hurt, and loves still. The love between a husband and wife (for example) absorbs many such hurts: the hurts violate the love, but they cannot extinguish it.

God's love is the model for our self-love. It requires first of all, that we look honestly at ourselves. We must admit that there are things within us that are bad, things that keep us from being very lovable. So long as we refuse to face the fact, we will not come to true self-love. We cannot love someone unless we know them truly.

But having faced up to our sins, we must move on. We must lay them at the foot of the Cross. We must offer them to God, and receive His forgiveness. This is an essential step. Upon the Cross, Jesus takes the burden of our sins. He frees us from them so that we can

love, and so that we can receive God's love. We must not cling to our sins. We tend to do just that because sin is familiar and thus has a certain safety in it. Forgiveness is new and strange and a little frightening. But we must let go of our sins.

Then we must open ourselves to God's love. We must try to receive it. He cannot fill our hands if we keep them tightly clenched. We need to begin to receive His love, if we are to understand how to love ourselves. We cannot love ourselves unless we experience something of His love for us. The one is the basis of the other. We need the experience of His love if we are to understand anything about the nature of all love as gift. We are forever trying to earn love. Love doesn't work that way. Either it is a gift or it isn't really love. We resist that because it means we are always dependent on the lover (whether human or Divine) for his love -- and we crave our independence. But as we see that we are unworthy of God's love and that He loves us anyway, we begin to understand. He loves us in spite of our sins. It is His nature to love. In fact, He will keep loving us whatever we do. Some have even taken this as a license to sin. But if they would understand that their sin drives the nails into our Lord's body (the other side of His love for us), they could hardly sin willfully.

It is hard for us to accept the magnitude of God's love for us. We think too much in terms of deserving and earning and merit to understand such a gift. But even though it is hard, it is what we must do. For it is the only way we will learn to love ourselves. Otherwise we will spend our efforts trying to earn our own love as well as that of others: a futile undertaking.

Instead of trying to earn love, we should relax and accept it as it is offered to us by God, as a gift. In the same way, repentance of our sins should lead not to panic or depression over our sinfulness, but to the peace of God's sure and certain forgiveness. His love is sure. We have only to receive it, and live within it. That is the basis for our own self-love.

Then we will hate our sin as God hates it, and know at the same time that He has created us to love and be loved. We will know that on our own we are not lovable, any more than we are capable of selfish love without Him. But we will also know in the depths of our heart that we are loved, not because we deserve it but because God's nature is to love. We are made in the image of that Nature: we too are made to love. Loving ourselves, forgiving ourselves -- just as He loves us and forgives us -- this is the key to the problems of self-esteem.

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