

LOVING SELF

Text: Romans 12:1-5

Preacher: Rev Dr Leo Douma

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In a workshop some years ago I recall the presenter asking us to wrap our arms around ourselves, to hug ourselves and to say to ourselves 'I love me. I enjoy being me.' I noticed a significant number of people were uncomfortable doing that. How do you think you might go doing that? Some find it hard because they have a voice that says 'You're not good enough. You can't love yourself, you're not worth it.' When we get close to people we discover that an embarrassingly high percentage of ordinary, capable, loveable people secretly don't like themselves very much. It's not just a psychological issue it's a spiritual one. We have been looking at the summary of the Law *"Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. And love your neighbour as yourself."* We have seen we are to love God totally, with our entire being. And we are to love all other people as an expression of our love for God. Now our relationship with God is also reflected in how we love ourselves. Too many people feel so down on themselves that they find it difficult to conceive that they are worthy of God's love, and therefore of having any real relationship with God.

I want to explore this issue by considering if Christians should love themselves. The first reaction of many would be to say 'No! Christians are to deny themselves and love God'. Others would say 'We should think of ourselves as nothing. We are worthless sinners and as such we should despise ourselves.' But a careful look at the summary of the Law suggests we need to be a little more accurate in our thinking here. For you notice what it says *"Love your neighbour as you love yourself."* We are not commanded here to love ourselves. It doesn't say love our 'neighbour and yourself', but 'as yourself'. The assumption here is that we naturally care for our well being. Paul argues to that effect in Ephesians 5: 33& 29. He says each husband should *"... love his wife as he loves himself ...after all no one ever hated his own body but he feeds it and*

cares for it." So there is a close connection between loving others and ourselves. We have said my love for God is expressed in my love for my neighbour. So the implication here is that my love for God, as well as my love for my neighbour is very much tied in with my love for myself. In other words if my love for myself is not properly understood, then my relationship with God and my neighbour will not be right. *"Love your neighbour as you love yourself".* So if I hate myself- poor neighbour!

In my experience of over 30 years as a pastor I have found this line of thinking to ring true. If you don't accept who you are, if you don't love yourself properly, then you react in one of two ways. You either think too low of yourself or you tend to think too high of yourself. For example some people react in a very proud manner. My experience says that's because they are not really happy with who they are. They tend to be workaholics driven to achieve and want you to see their achievements. The reality is they often dislike themselves because they are not up to the standard they think they should be. We might say they think too high of themselves. But actually they are thinking too low of themselves and trying to cover it up. Others tend to go the other way and think too low of themselves. They can be withdrawn, introverted, depressed. They tend to be jealous because they perceive other people doing much better than they are. As a result they often drag others down to their own perceived 'low' level by their criticism and gossip.

Now with both of these types you will notice a tendency to always be thinking about themselves. The person thinking too high will always be wondering 'Did I impress that person with how good I am?' The person who thinks too low often wonders 'Has she seen my weakness? Did I cover it up? Why can't I be as good as her?' Now, of course, the result is that when your mind is always worried about these things you can not love God with all your heart and soul and mind because so much of your thinking is focused on yourself. Nor can you love your neighbour properly. People who do not accept themselves and love themselves properly are almost always in competition with their neighbours. They are often resentful or jealous or trying to dominate. Self doubt or worse self hatred invariably leads to self-centredness. So we can see it is very important to for each of us to have a correct love for ourselves.

Let's take a look at Romans 12 to gain some understanding. Romans 12:1 *"Therefore I urge you, in view of God's mercy to offer yourselves as living sacrifices, holy and*

pleasing to God, which is your spiritual worship." The way we as Christians are to regard ourselves must be in terms of God's 'mercy'. By our faith, professing Jesus as our Saviour and Lord, that is the context we are now in. A disciple of Jesus is someone who has been changed by Jesus' death and resurrection. Whatever your past, as someone who has professed their faith in Jesus, you are a forgiven child of God. You are seen as holy and given the gift of the Spirit, God himself dwelling in you. Our view of ourselves must be built on that perspective.

Romans 12:2 *"Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is- his good, pleasing and perfect will."* We notice there that our whole way of thinking is to be different. So when we talk of 'loving ourselves' we are not to be using the world's idea of loving yourself, being selfish, being 'on' yourself. We have very different concepts. For example in our culture our value as persons is often based on what we do or have. That's why so many people work like crazy to be 'successful' to show they have made it. It's why we are so materialistic; we think we are some one when we have got that house or expensive car. In other words we believe a person's value is based on what they do. In that way of seeing things a person who has a good job, is financially secure and happily married with two kids will be considered of more worth than a mentally retarded person who is kept in a home and seen as a financial burden on society. But the Christian way of thinking is to see the intrinsic value of each person, to see each person, no matter their condition or no matter what they have or can do, as being of great value to God because they are made in his image. Yet because of the prevailing view in our culture there are lots of people who have convinced themselves that they are worthless because they believe they have nothing to offer. Like the teenager who is rejected by his friends, the older person who can no longer serve as they used to, the sick person who is dependent on others to care for them, the person who feels friendless because of divorce, the person who is battling with substance abuse, the person who has made bad choices and now feels everyone as turned away from them. These people often feel they have no value. They are drawing their value from what others are saying about them. But we should look at what God is saying about us.

In Romans 12:3 Paul outlines how we are to think of ourselves: *"For by the grace given me I say to everyone of you do not think of yourself more highly than you*

ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgement, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you." Notice how Paul says "...do not think of yourselves more highly than you ought..." So no showing off 'I am the greatest. Look at me, here I am, the best, the coolest, the most successful.' This sort of pride is out. But before anyone says 'see Christians are to think of themselves as nothing' have a look again at what Paul says. He does not say 'Do not think high of yourself'. He says, note it carefully: "*Don't think of yourself more highly than you ought*". So our view of ourselves, through faith in Christ, should be 'high'! After all we are the children of God. We are heirs of the Father. Now Paul says that our view of ourselves should not be too high, but it should not too low either. Notice how he goes on to say "*...think of yourself with sober judgement.*" The Greek word we translate as 'sober' means 'balanced, level headed, and unexaggerated.' So we are to think of ourselves in a balanced manner, not too high and not too low.

So how do we maintain that balance? Or achieve it in the first place? Well Paul says in the last part of this verse "*...think in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you.*" Paul is not saying here that some Christians have more faith than others. Believing faith is not measured out. You either believe or you don't. You either trust in Jesus and profess him as saviour and Lord or you don't. The word 'faith' here in this context refers to the different gifts that the Holy Spirit gives to each Christian. In verse 4&5 Paul explains we all belong to the body of Christ so in one sense we are all the same. But as a body has different parts that go to make up that body, so each of us is different. Each one of us is human, made in God's image, a child of God. Yet each one of us is also unique. The spiritual gifts that the Holy Spirit endows us with are a heightening of the talents we have depending on how God has made us.

So, in coming to terms with who we are, we need first to see that as human beings we are made in God's image. That is what stuns David in Psalm 8, that God has made us a little lower than himself, called to rule creation on his behalf. Second, as human beings, standing before the Almighty God we recognise our limitedness as creatures and our failings as sinners. We are to be real about our sin and acknowledge our unworthiness because of our disobedience to God's laws. As Romans 3:23 reminds us "*For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*" But we are never to despise ourselves because we are made in God's image. We are indeed unworthy of God's love, but we are never (ever) worthless! Please note carefully the distinction here.

Thirdly as human beings we are not only made in God's image. He has created each one of us unique. We each have our own characteristics and abilities. No human being is alike. True, the sinful world in which we live, as well as our own sin, has had an adverse impact on us, morally and physically. Sin has brought out the weaknesses in our bodies and characters rather than highlighting our strengths. For some the distortions have been severe. But still, who and what we are, are creative acts of God. Psalm 139:14 says "*I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful.*" Therefore if I belittle myself, if I say 'I hate myself, I am useless, I'd do society a service if I were dead' then I belittle God. I insult God because I belittle his creative work. To love myself is to joyfully accept who I am by the creation of God.

Fourthly, we not only have our life and being from God. He has also given us, as Christians, forgiveness and new life. Are you of worth and significant? Jesus thought so! He thought so much of you that he gave his life for you. 1 Peter 1:18-19 "*...it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed...but with the precious blood of Christ...*" The cross of Jesus frees us from the ego trip. The cross humbles us because it reminds us that Jesus had to die for our sin. But it also lifts us up because it reminds us we have been forgiven of everything. So how are we now seen in the eyes of God? You are perfect! That is your and my status before God when we have repented and trust in Jesus. When we realise that then we don't have to be arrogant to show our worth. We don't have to pull others or ourselves down because we feel insignificant. You are to love yourself because the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit love you. They each have done their part to make you a unique person and worker in the kingdom of God. We can say to ourselves, I must be worth loving. Look at what God has done for me. Look at the price he paid. It means you can say 'I enjoy being me. I love me because God loves me. In that joy I give myself to love God and my neighbour.' True humility is not about thinking less of ourselves than we are. It is about not needing to focus on ourselves at all. Because we are comfortable with ourselves our focus can be on God and others. It is to be self-affirming yet self forgetful, positive yet realistic, grace filled and unpretentious. A true sense of self is hope inspiring. A young victim of prejudice wrote on a sheet of paper and stuck it on his wall 'I am of worth because God he don't make no junk'. Throughout history it has been seen that this truth, more than anything else, has enable men and women to find their dignity. It has given them the hope and empowerment to rise above oppression, to fight for justice and to work towards having a better society. So if we are to be a

'hope in the hills' then we need to be disciples of Jesus who tell others about Jesus. Because when they also profess Jesus as their Lord and Saviour they will see themselves in a whole new light. A new light that actually helps us love our neighbour as ourselves.