

*Mirror,
Mirror,
On The
Wall*

*The
Struggle of
Loving
Self and
Loving
Others*

Mirror, Mirror, On The Wall

BY Annette Baines

For years, my family lived near a community of people who would not allow anyone to photograph them, believing it to be a direct violation of the commandment, “Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image.” Although Amish people have been photographed over the years by those wishing to depict their way of life, they forbid posing for portraits.

Outside the Amish community, “image” seems to be everything. The value of self-image in today’s culture has created a plethora of issues, from narcissism, which is the extreme of self-love, to low self-esteem, which can lead to extreme self-deprecation. This conflict of “image” and how people view themselves has been elevated, in large part, through the entertainment and sports worlds. Reflect with me for a moment about the Hollywood culture, Miss America Pageants, school beauty contests, and such. All these things, regardless of our personal opinions, create issues in both young people and adults, pertaining to one’s self-image and self-worth.

Now, with the NIL (Name, Image, and Likeness) being such a big part of college sports, it seems like one’s image has overshadowed one’s character and integrity in a university’s recruiting process. Character traits like team spirit, integrity, loyalty, etc.,

appear to take a back seat to how much money and success a name, image, and likeness can generate for an organization.

The social media frenzy has fueled issues surrounding image. I realize we cannot make a blanket judgment on all social media users, but evidence suggests much of social media is the attempt of many to present themselves as something not reflecting who they really are. This is just another example of an over-fascination with one’s image and how the world views them.

How did we get to this place in our culture? It is clear the issues surrounding one’s self-image are built upon a foundation of lies, a scheme of our enemy. Satan knows he can debilitate us, even those who are followers of Christ. Yet, we are not without hope. We possess truths found in God’s Word to help us put all of this into a proper perspective. Truth is always the answer and must be the “mirror” to which we look to understand what self-image and self-love are all about.

Self-Love vs Self-Esteem

In chapter 22 of Matthew’s gospel, a Pharisee, who was also a lawyer, asked Jesus which of the com-

mandments was the greatest. Jesus answered him by saying, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:37-39; ESV). It is interesting to note that while there are two commandments that go hand in hand in this passage, “loving yourself” is not one of them.

When Jesus says we should love our neighbor as ourselves, His assumption is this is something every human being already does. Jesus does not condemn this idea of loving ourselves, but we should understand what it means to develop an inappropriate love for self. Maybe the question we should ask is, “Can we love ourselves too much?” Loving ourselves too much can range from an unhealthy view of who we really are, (both too negatively and too positively), to becoming a full-blown narcissist. In Greek mythology, Narcissus was led to a pool of water where he stared at his own reflection, fell in love with it, and continued to do so until he died. I am certainly not suggesting most or any of us have loved ourselves to the point of becoming narcissistic, but we must be cautious to guard against it.

Warning Signs of Loving Self Too Much

A preoccupation with physical appearance

Both men and women struggle with this in an age where beauty and physical fitness, in some contexts, is a litmus test for acceptance and success. However, women seem to be a target of past and present societies (Proverbs 31:30; 1 Peter 3:3-4; 1 Timothy 4:8). While physical beauty and looking your best is desirable, it is the spiritual beauty of the godly woman that boasts of eternal value.

An unhealthy need for admiration and affirmation

There is certainly nothing wrong with being affirmed or admired in the proper way. I love it when my husband affirms me as a wife, mother, Mimi, and pastor’s wife. As important as it is for him to speak those things over me, it is just as important for me

to receive his admiration and affirmation in a way that encourages me, rather than inflating my ego (Proverbs 29:5; Matthew 6:1; John 5:44; 1 Thessalonians 2:6; 1 Corinthians 1:31). We must remember it is the Lord’s approval and acceptance that we must embrace, and He has been gracious in His Word to remind us often of His thoughts toward us. Psalm 8:4-9 says, “What is man that you are mindful of him...Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor” (ESV). When I feel the need for admiration or affirmation from others that may result in unhealthy thoughts and behaviors, I turn to the One who created me and remember His words.

A strong desire to be the center of attention

Everyone likes to be noticed. Everyone likes to be heard. Everyone likes to be praised by others. Do you see the friction here? There is nothing evil about desiring the things that encourage us and give us an emotional and mental boost. Sometimes these are the things that let us know others care. However, when we love ourselves too much, we can find ourselves in pursuit of these things in an unhealthy and even ungodly way. We chase after relationships that are not emotionally or spiritually safe. These relationships only feed this desire for attention and lead to self-centeredness. Potentially, they can lead down a path where God is replaced by self in our daily lives. In the familiar words of our present culture, “It is all about me!” (Philippians 2:3).

Having established too much self-love is unhealthy and spiritually dangerous, let’s look at what it means to “love our neighbor as ourselves,” particularly focusing on the Scripture’s assumption we love ourselves. If Jesus told us to love our neighbors as ourselves, surely there is an explanation for what this means and how we can define self-love in a healthy way.

In an interview with John Piper entitled “You Don’t Need More Self-Love”, he debunked the idea people need their self-esteem boosted and loving them-

selves equals self-esteem. Piper explained that for years, Christians have interpreted this command to mean the reason people didn't love others was because they didn't love themselves adequately. He went on to explain that this false teaching meant self-love always equaled self-esteem. As Piper said, "...this scheme colossally missed the point in several ways." (Read the entire interview at desiringgod.org.)

The Meaning of "Loving Ourselves"

Loving ourselves is not something we have to be taught. Think for a moment about our newborn babies. In those first few months, our precious little babies demonstrate not only that they were born with a sinful nature but also a lifelong love for themselves. Yes, we all love ourselves, and without proper guidance and instruction, self-love can turn into the things discussed earlier and even more. However, we can also demonstrate how to love ourselves in the way Scripture assumed, a way that helps us know how to love others.

I love it when God's Word uses the example of marriage to drive home a truth. Marriage is one of the most powerful relationships to demonstrate God's relationship with us. In discussing the topic of appropriate and inappropriate self-love, this example is right on target. In Ephesians 5, the Apostle Paul is writing to the people of Ephesus, instructing them on marriage, and speaks to the husbands about how they should love their wives. He first reminds them of how Christ loved the Church and gave His life for them. Paul then states, "In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh but nourishes and cherishes it (Ephesians 5:28-29a; ESV)." Did you notice the first phrase of verse 28? When speaking of husbands loving themselves (their own bodies), Paul uses the words nourishes and cherishes. The Amplified Bible adds the word "protects" in verse 28a. This is a great insight into what Jesus may have been talking about when He said, "Love your neighbor as yourself." Here are a few questions to ponder when considering how

one loves themselves in the context of nourishing, cherishing, and protecting.

When you are hungry, do you eat to satisfy your hunger?

When you are sick, do you go to the doctor, take your medicine, rest, etc.?

When you are thirsty, do you find something to drink to cure your thirst?

When your physical body needs attention, do you practice personal hygiene?

When you are in danger of any kind, do you seek a place or person of refuge or safety?

When you are lonely, do you call or seek out a friend?

If you are a student and want to make good grades, do you study?

When you are afraid, do you seek comfort?



These are just a few ways we love ourselves, and many others will come to mind as you meditate on and evaluate the way we nourish, protect, and cherish ourselves. This can translate into wonderful ways of loving others. You see, loving ourselves is just wanting the very best for ourselves. Believers and unbelievers can love themselves in these ways. However, considering the two Great Commandments, it is only in the follower of Christ proper self-love and a genuine love for others can function in unity. In addition to helping us show love to others, appropriate self-love takes the focus off ourselves, which in turn keeps us protected from unhealthy and inappropriate self-love.

It is not difficult to understand the concept of appropriate and inappropriate self-love. However, practicing the scriptural principles that help us stay on track regarding this issue is not always easy. God's Word gives us a wonderful passage in

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Philippians 2:1-11. Over the years, I have heard most Bible teachers identify the theme of Philippians as "joy". While I agree joy is an important theme, I believe this passage gives greater insight into the major theme, which may just be "the mind of Christ." Three times in these 11 verses, we find the word mind. Paul challenges believers to understand if they are really a part of Christ, they are to strive to be of "the same mind," and he emphasizes it again by saying, "and of one mind (Philippians 2:2; ESV)."

The admonition to be of the same mind was so strong in Paul's view that he correlates their one-mindedness to the fulfillment of his joy. Paul follows his passionate plea for the Philippian believers to be of the same mind with some instructions for how to accomplish this in everyday life. The question then becomes, how does this help one to avoid the dangers of inappropriate self-love and from becoming narcissistic? Philippians 2:3-4 gives us a few directives, if received and obeyed, will keep us on the right path regarding our relationship with ourselves and others.

A Strategy For The Proper View of Self

Our ambitions must be selfless, void of a haughty spirit, and have pure motives.

"Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit..." (Philippians 2:3a; ESV).

We must humbly think of others as better than ourselves.

"In humility, count others as more significant than yourselves..." (Philippians 2:3b; ESV).

We should look out for others and not just care about ourselves.

"Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interest of others (Philippians 2:4; ESV)."

These three principles, when applied, deal with one's motives, attitudes, and actions regarding caring for other people. All of these together place the proper

focus on loving others as we guard against the improper love of self.

Jesus: Our Greatest Example

Paul follows these instructions by giving us the greatest example of how they were lived out in the life of Jesus. Scripture gives us not only clear commands to obey but an example to follow. Jesus is our greatest example, and we should strive each day to become more conformed to His image—a bright reflection of His glory. Let's examine what Jesus actually did to show us the way.

Being God, He did not take advantage of His divine status (Philippians 2:6, ESV).

Being God, He humbled Himself to become a man who would be a servant of others (Philippians 2:7, ESV).

Being God, He was obedient by suffering the cruelest of deaths, death on the cross (Philippians 2:8, ESV).

Why did Jesus endure this and do it so willingly? Why did he think of others first instead of looking out selfishly for His own desires and ambitions? The writer of Hebrews gives us some insight in Hebrews 12:2. As the writer inspires us to run the race of faith with patience, he also gives us the key to endurance. He writes, "looking to Jesus the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the Father (Hebrews 12:2; ESV)." When we are tempted to think too highly of ourselves or even too lowly of others, we need to consider Jesus. He lived the perfect balance during His earthly ministry and will gladly help us do the same if we will only look to Him.

Just For Women

God's Word and these principles certainly apply to all humanity. However, as a woman and a pastor's wife for thirty-seven years, I have seen more women struggle with the issues of self-love and self-loathing. I, myself, have had moments wrestling with these issues. It is easy to get caught up in the comparison game and allow thoughts to penetrate your mind of whether you really do measure up. The moments of comparison can also cause a conceited spirit when we think we are

better than someone else. When either of these scenarios exists in our lives, we become less effective in loving and helping others. Life becomes all about us, and our motives and pursuits become selfish. Women and young girls in our culture easily fall prey to pursuing things that make them feel better about themselves as well as those things they believe will cause people to accept them. This potentially leads to an unholy pursuit of unsafe relationships and a plethora of other things that develop the kind of self-love we are trying to avoid. We struggle with loving ourselves too much. It is in our nature. However, once we become a follower of Christ, we will spend a lifetime allowing Him to transform us into His image and likeness. Then and only then will we keep a proper perspective of self and others in check. Remember. Consider Jesus!

Questions to Ponder?

1. Do you struggle with loving yourself too much? If so, how does it manifest itself in your life? (Words, deeds, relationships?)
2. Do you identify with any of the warning signs of loving yourself too much?
3. What are some other ways besides those listed that you express proper self-love?
4. What actions can you implement to develop a strategy to avoid inappropriate self-love?
5. How can you adjust your lifestyle to make sure you are spending enough time "looking to Jesus?" *W*

For Deeper Study

"*Victory Over the Darkness*" by Neil Anderson
Freedom in Christ Ministries – www.ficm.org
Do a personal Bible study on "one another" passages in Scripture.

"*The Danger of Self-Love*" by Paul Brownback

About the Writer: Annette Baines currently resides in Chesapeake, VA where her husband, Jay, serves as Lead Pastor at Great Bridge FWB Church. She has served in local church ministry for 37 years as a speaker, writer, teacher, and leader. However, her most cherished ministry has been her family. Annette loves being a wife, mother, and Mimi to seven grandchildren.