

Self-Kindness as a Spiritual Practice

Ken Wilson, 01/05/20

Today: **Self-Kindness as a Spiritual Practice**. I want to root this practice in the most important portion of Scripture: ***“Love your neighbor as yourself: this is the law and the prophets”***

First, let's restore this portion of Scripture to its rightful place. If Jesus' movement in its early decades could have created a word cloud meme, the words in largest font, front and center—would be ***“Love your neighbor as yourself.”*** Let's unspool this.

When asked by Jewish leaders who are not followers of Jesus what the greatest command of Torah is, the gospels of Mt, Mk, Lk all quote Jesus combining two portions of Torah: First Deuteronomy: ***You shall love the Lord your God with all your hearts, soul, might*** [Jesus adds “all your mind” to this list] Then Leviticus: ***And Love your neighbor as yourself*** adding, ***“On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets”*** [his term for the Bible of his time] This combination is not original to Jesus.

But in the Sermon on the Mount, when Jesus is speaking to his disciples, he narrows it to one thing: love your neighbor as your self. At end of Sermon on the Mount, he says, ***“In everything, do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the Law and the Prophets.”***

What we call “the Golden rule—do to others as you would have them do to you—is his midrash, his unique rabbinic twist to “love your neighbor as yourself.” And it's followed immediately by this saying, ***“Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it”*** [The golden rule is the narrow path, not easy one]

We know this made a big impact on the disciples because in writings of the early followers, this is what they echo. Paul, a rabbi who came to faith in Jesus after the resurrection, writes ***“For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: ***“Love your neighbor as yourself.”****** In a later letter he clarifies, ***“And Love does no harm to the neighbor”***

Why would you need to say that unless people were harming their neighbor in the name of love?

Similarly, James: ***“If you really keep the royal law [Messianic law, the law of Jesus] found in Scripture, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing right.”***

There was something about second of the two commands—love God and love your neighbor--that gained prominence and was cited as the pre-eminent command of Jesus to his followers.

And that something was probably the experience of religious controversy that gave birth to the Jesus tradition as a movement.

It developed in a dispute over the interpretation of Scripture.

Everyone in this dispute was claiming Scripture, and many were using conventional interpretations of Scripture as clobber texts against the early Jesus following Jews... and this rhetorical move, claiming zeal for God as cover for religious harassment caused great harm to Jesus himself and his early followers. Paul himself started off as a persecutor, using Scripture as a weapon against the Jesus followers.

So “Love your neighbor as yourself” was their way of saying to their Jewish brothers and sisters, “Look, if you are using Torah to harm us, then your interpretation is wrong. Any use of Scripture that violates “Love your neighbor as yourself” is wrong

This was a very important move. It was a protest against “love of God”—zeal for God, zeal for Torah, as a reason to justify actions that were harmful to other people.

Today, we’re in a very similar situation in the dominant forms of Christianity. White Supremacy, lack of care for the environment, disregard for the well-being of LGBTQ people, all have their religious justifications. Support of those who flaunt the Christian label give these things their power, in fact. God have mercy.

No surprise that ***“The entire law if fulfilled in this one command: Love your neighbor as yourself”*** would be **domesticated**, rendered impotent—like **de-clawing a housecat**.

In fact, this is the narrow way, the hard way, not the easy way. The broad path, the easy path, the path that leads to destruction (literal destruction of precious life) is using Scripture, hiding behind zeal for God, to hurt people, to prevent efforts to protect future generations from the harm we are doing to the climate, and so on.

Now we are ready for our final move to consider the significance of this wording, so important to Jesus, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Love your neighbor was the given. **As yourself** is the twist, is the **punchline**, is the **attention-grabbing phrase**.

3X5 Card: write, *love your neighbor as yourself*—emphasizing in ALL CAPS or some other graphic means AS YOURSELF

This leads to a spiritual practice called “Exercising Self-Kindness”
(a crucial aspect of loving our neighbor)

Let’s move straight to the practice part: receiving a compliment.

I wonder how many of you are like me: you secretly crave compliments, but when someone gives you a compliment, you are strangely uncomfortable in the act of receiving the compliment.

You turn into Teflon and the compliment bounces right off you.

Someone says, “You look great today!” and you reply, “Oh! It’s a bad hair day!”

You treat the compliment like a punch, and immediately return fire. Someone says, “You have a beautiful singing voice” and you punch back, “Oh I think your voice is beautiful!” Or the more subtle version: Someone says, “you have a beautiful voice” and your reply, “You are so kind to say that!” Now it’s not about your voice, it’s about their kindness.

Or before even receiving the compliment, you redirect it to another person. Someone says, “You are a really good speaker” and you say, “Well I had a really good mentor”

Let's stick with this and apply Golden Rule version of love your neighbor as yourself: ***So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.***

Imagine it's not easy for you to give compliments. But you have such a sense of acute appreciation for someone, you just have to say something. So you think about it—what it is about them that you so appreciate? You look for the right moment-medium to deliver compliment: “You are such a good listener. First, you ask great questions, but then you really listen and don't just jump into offering your own thoughts ... but ask follow up questions. You are so good at that!”

Now imagine the person you have complimented uses one of the tactics I detailed: turn into Teflon and your compliment bounces off them, or they treat the compliment like a punch and punch with their own compliment to you, or they re-direct your compliment to someone else. It's like Christmas Day: you gone to the trouble of picking out a gift for someone, wrapped it, and they open it quickly, and say, “Oh you shouldn't have” and set it aside.

What would you have them do to to receive your compliment? You would want the to pause to take it in. You would want them to accept the compliment, receive it, to say “Thank you. That means a lot to me, coming from you.” If they could get a little misty-eyed ... that would be like your dream come true.

How are these brains of ours outfitted? To prioritize survival over everything else. So that means that our brains are highly attuned, attentive to, focused on potential threats. And as highly social creatures whose survival depends on our getting along with other humans, that means we are hyper-focused on any possibly negative input from other people. Our brains pay five times more attention to negative input than to positive input.

So in the research on stable partnerships, friendships, marriages, etc. you need five times more positive interactions than negative interactions to feel secure, at peace, safe.

That means to serve the social good, to enhance the power of love in our relationships with others, it really helps if we practice receiving compliments, positive input ... to balance our brain's natural tendency to hyper-focus on negative input.

Apply the 20 second rule. Human touch is important. If you embrace someone for 20 full seconds—your bodies release oxytocin, the feeling-connected hormone. That's a long time. Compare that with someone making a threatening gesture.

Walking downtown, dark with light stick: "Hey dude!"

What if the next time you received any positive input from someone else—in an email, text, a face-to-face interaction, you purposeful gave yourself 20 seconds to take it in? You re-read the email. You pause when the person says something positive about you. You say, "Oh thank you. That means a lot to me." You make a mental note of what they said, and you rehash it later, maybe tell someone else how nice it was to hear.

One example of Self-Kindness as a Spiritual Practice. A way to practically, concretely, specifically, actually love your neighbor as yourself. And as you practiced that—receiving positive input for 20 seconds, you would naturally have a stronger desire to notice other people doing things well, caring for other people well, and so on ... and then taking the effort to tell them.

In two weeks, part 2 on The Practice of Self-Kindness. Our focus will be responding to ourselves when we disappoint ourselves.

QUIET REFLECTION