



We think that our love for ourselves can precede in time the love of our neighbour – after all, doesn't self-love come earlier in time to the love of others? Even more disturbing is that we think that our love of God can take place before we love our neighbour.

THE ERROR WE HAVE MADE IS THAT WE READ A PASSAGE THAT IS MEANT TO BE TAKEN AS A WHOLE...

The error we have made is that we read a passage that is meant to be taken as a whole, all the parts interconnected, and we separate it out into parts making of it a step by step process in which

we first love God and then, further on down the track, we love our neighbour, while in-between we are devoted to loving ourselves. By reading the passage in this way we obscure the reflexive logic that the two greatest commandments makes clear, a logic which informs all the commandments and grace as well.

St John in one of his letters wrote that anyone who says they love God but hates their brother is a liar.⁸ How, then, can there be any separation in time between loving God and loving our neighbour, and for that matter loving ourselves?

By having a wrong concept of self we can then have a wrong understanding of love, and among other things end up reading the Scriptures in a way that is actually opposed to their meaning proper. It should, however, be allowed that we rarely get it completely wrong, often enough we have the sense right but we have placed the accent in the wrong place. In other words, our error often lies in getting the emphasis wrong.

With this in mind rather than read the passage from Matthew as saying "If you do not first of all love yourself then you cannot love your neighbour," we might instead read it as saying "If you do not love your neighbour you do not love yourself, and you certainly do not love God." In short, we place the emphasis on the other and not on ourselves.

It is often on little things that big things turn, which is why it has been necessary in this article to focus on little things like definitions. If our definitions are wrong it is a pretty safe bet that we too will go wrong somewhere down the track, and often that will first become evident in the way we misread the Holy Scriptures. ■

¹Ruth Ostrow 'The selfie symptomatic of the rise of a nation of narcissists'. *The Australian* 23/4/15.
²Exodus 21:24.
³Matthew 7:12. It is also what informs his warning to "judge not lest you be judged" (Matt. 7:1-2).
⁴Matthew 5:7; 6:12, 14-15; Luke 6:37-38.
⁵Matthew 10:39; 16:25; Luke 17:33.
⁶For example Matthew 5:12, 46; 6:1-4, 6, 17-18; Luke 6:23, 35. Also Hebrews 11:6.
⁷1Thessalonians 2:19-20; Philippians 4:1. In a like manner, in 1Corinthians 12, St Paul argues that grace is given to us first and foremost not for us but so that we will be able to help to build up others in the Church which means that they will then be able to help us through the grace they have been given.
⁸1John 4:20.

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What all of this points to is the nature proper of the self: the self is only a self *insofar as it is already and always in a communion of mutual giving with others*. You can only receive the fullness of yourself in

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the giving of yourself to others, a principle that is fundamental to the understanding of grace and reward in the Bible.

Contrary to what many think the concept of reward is fundamental to Christianity, not least because Jesus speaks often of rewards.⁶ The thing is that these rewards are not how we in our sinfulness

think of them; we think of them as if they were something that we as autonomous individuals own, as things that only really benefit us, but the biblical understanding is different. St Paul writes that his reward (and his crown and glory) in heaven is the presence of others that he, *by the grace of God*, had a hand in bringing into heaven.⁷ Our reward for the good that we do is the blessed state of others, for in their blessedness *is our blessedness*.

If we think of the self in a wrong way then we will think of love in the wrong way and we will end up where Narcissus ended up. He thought of the self as an autonomous and individual thing, something that can stand alone, and for this reason he thought of love in terms of reflection and not reflexivity. When he looked at his reflection he believed that what he saw was the sum of all that was good and necessary; he saw himself *alone*.

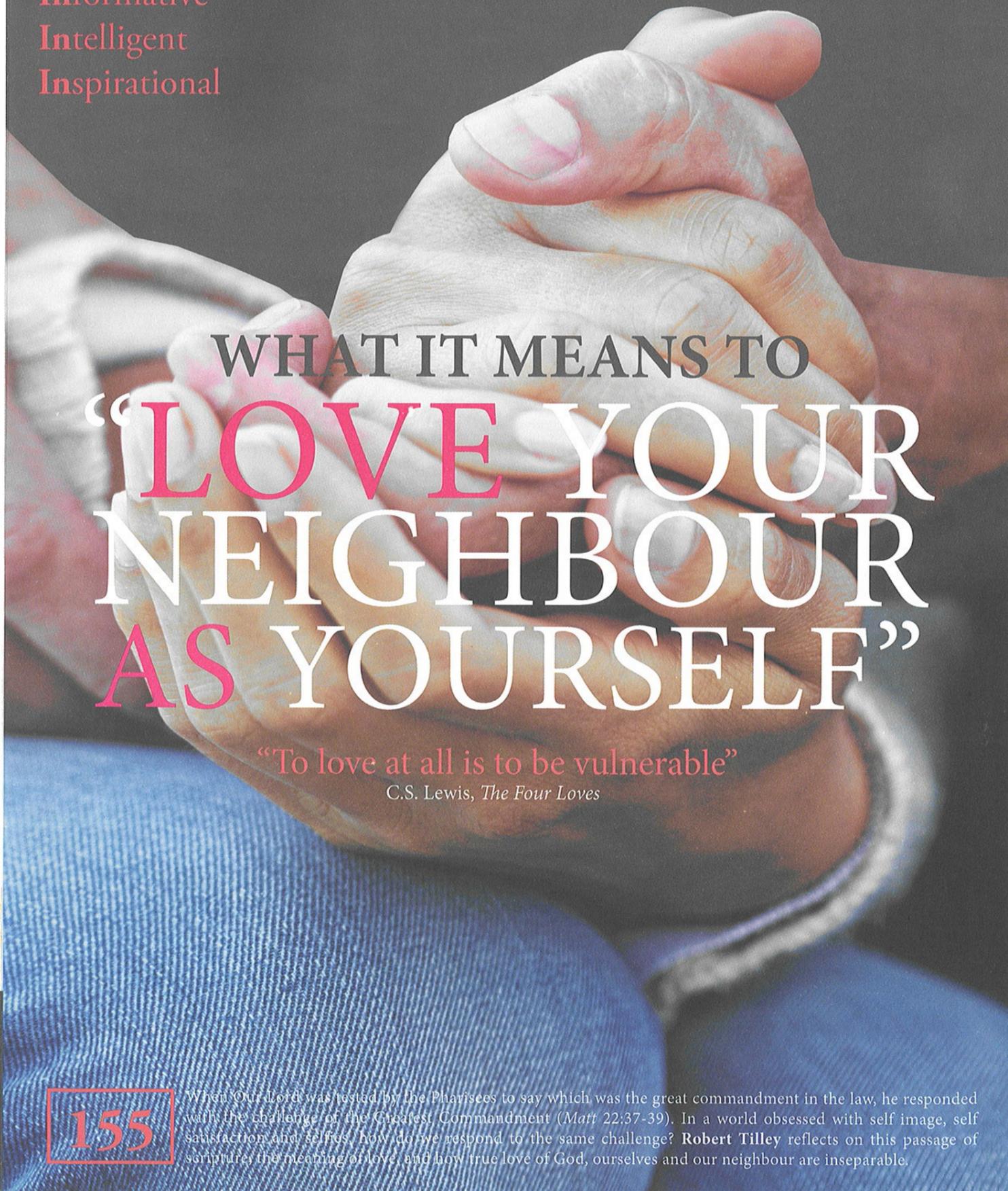
IF WE THINK OF THE SELF IN A WRONG WAY THEN WE WILL THINK OF LOVE IN THE WRONG WAY AND WE WILL END UP WHERE NARCISSUS ENDED UP.

When we have the wrong understanding of the self not only does this affect our understanding of love it also distorts our reading of the Scriptures. Thus we often read *Matthew 22: 37-39* as if it can be broken down into distinct parts that are able to be separated out, such that the love of God, of neighbour and ourselves can be abstracted one from the other. We thereby destroy the reflexive unity of the passage by translating its parts into something like a temporal sequence: First we love God, *then* we love ourselves, and *then* we love our neighbour.

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WHAT IT MEANS TO
 “LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOUR AS YOURSELF”

“To love at all is to be vulnerable”
 C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*

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When Our Lord was tested by the Pharisees to say which was the great commandment in the law, he responded with the challenge of the Greatest Commandment (*Matt 22:37-39*). In a world obsessed with self image, self satisfaction and selfish, how do we respond to the same challenge? Robert Tilley reflects on this passage of scripture, the meaning of love, and how true love of God, ourselves and our neighbour are inseparable.





NARCISSUS STARRING AT HIS REFLECTION

“YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOUR AS YOURSELF.”

that the greatest of all the commandments is to “love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength,” that the second is “like unto it,” and this is that “you shall love your neighbour as yourself.” Many people reason that if we do not love ourselves then how can we love our neighbour (or anyone else for that matter)? Hence, we must first of all learn to love ourselves and then we can move on to love others. But in certain Christian groups this has ended up sounding a lot like claiming that we have a divine mandate to be selfish. Well then, what does self-love mean against the background of Christian theology?

In order to begin to answer that we need first of all to ask what it is we mean by ‘love’.

The problem is that some Christians define love in such a way that it becomes something entirely different to what we mean by love in everyday life. They say that love is not about feelings but about obedience. Now obedience can be a good thing, and that especially so when although we do not feel like being obedient we do what we are meant to do because we are doing what is good. This shows that we are mature and not simply led by our emotions. But to define love in this way makes of it something altogether cold and passionless. Rather than the kind of love a couple may feel for each other, the kind a lover feels for their beloved, or a parent for their child, or for that matter the kind of love God is depicted as feeling for His people – love is turned into the sort of thing a soldier does when he obeys an order from his superior.

In contrast to this view of love others hold to something equally as flawed. They argue that love is ‘unconditional’ in that no matter what the beloved is like that’s okay. I for one am tempted to think that those who hold to this view of love have never actually been in love themselves, for those who love know that conditions are exactly the kind of things that love desires and demands. >

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There is no such thing as ‘unconditional love’...

When we love someone we may well love them no matter what they do, but we will love them *especially* so for those things that they do which are good and noble. We may well turn a blind eye to the bad things they do, we may even try to justify their behaviour by arguing that it is not bad but good, but we do these things because we do *not* want the one we love to be doing bad things. We want the one we love to stop doing bad things, and we want them to stop and we will nag them to stop *because* we love them. We do not nag someone to whom we are indifferent, we merely shrug our shoulders and walk away.

There is no such thing as ‘unconditional love’, it is simply a fancy and pious sounding way of justifying indifference. Indifference has its uses, it is one way of protecting ourselves against being hurt or made sorrowful, but it is of no use to a lover, indeed it doesn’t even enter into the head of a lover. If we are indifferent to someone they can die and we will say how sad, but we won’t be losing any sleep over their death. It is entirely different, however, when we are in love, then we can toss and turn all night worrying about the most absurd things: Perhaps a lion has escaped from a circus and is even now under our beloved’s bed waiting to pounce and eat them whole!

Whatever else love is it is the strongly felt desire for another; it is to be oriented to another and to believe that one’s happiness and well-being is to be found in them. One wants them to be well and good not least because having them so is pleasing to oneself. Love is neither mere obedience nor is it without conditions for informing love is the principle of reflexivity, a principle that tells us something about the very nature of the self, a point to which we will return.

Love is *reflexive* in that there is a reciprocal dynamic between the lover and the beloved, between oneself and another. Narcissus, however, fell for the lie that love is *reflective* in the way a mirror reflects, hence he only had eyes for himself and any sense of another was excluded; he only ever saw the ‘same’ and it was this that finished him off.

Now, whatever else love is it is something we know that has to do with perfect happiness for it has to do with the fulfilment of our lives. To be more specific, with the fulfilment of *the self*. This leads us to ask after the definition of the other part of the term ‘self-love’, namely what is the nature of the self? More particularly, what is the nature of the self as understood by the Bible and thus by Jesus when he talks of loving oneself?

The problem for us is that informing our modern concept of the self and thereby much else in our society, including our ideas of freedom, our politics, our law and economics, even our culture and notions of sexuality, is the concept that

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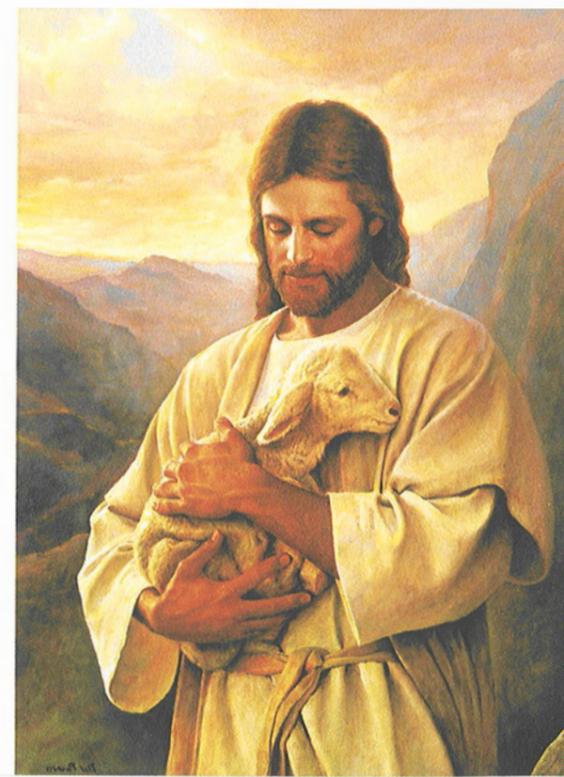
LOVE IS REFLEXIVE IN THAT THERE IS A RECIPROCAL DYNAMIC BETWEEN THE LOVER AND THE BELOVED, BETWEEN ONESELF AND ANOTHER. NARCISSUS, HOWEVER, FELL FOR THE LIE THAT LOVE IS REFLECTIVE IN THE WAY A MIRROR REFLECTS, HENCE HE ONLY HAD EYES FOR HIMSELF...

the ‘self’ proper is to be defined by reference to what is termed the ‘autonomous individual’. In a nutshell this is the belief that the *ideal* self stands alone and is a law unto itself, but because we live in society we have agreed to compromise our autonomy. Nevertheless the *ideal* state would be one in which we lived in the freedom to do whatever it is we will to do irrespective of others. The Biblical and thus the Christian understanding of the self is very different to this.

In our passage from Matthew, Jesus is quoting from the Torah, the sacred book of Israel, the book that contains the laws given by God. It is important, then, to see what kind of principle informs these laws. It is not too difficult to see that informing them all is the principle of reflexivity, hence tooth for tooth, eye for eye, that kind of thing.² Jesus makes this principle clear when he says that one ought “to do unto others as you would have them do to you” and concludes that this is the meaning of the Law and the Prophets.³ Just as this principle of reflexivity informs the law so too does it inform grace, thus to be forgiven we must forgive and to receive mercy we must be merciful to others.⁴ Many other like passages could be cited but the basic principle informing them all is the paradox that is at the heart of the Gospel: you must lose your life to keep it.⁵ As Jesus makes clear both in his life and his teaching, you must sacrifice your life for others if you want life in all its fullness. It is this paradox that expresses best the very nature of the self.

JESUS MAKES THIS PRINCIPLE CLEAR WHEN HE SAYS THAT ONE OUGHT “TO DO UNTO OTHERS AS YOU WOULD HAVE THEM DO TO YOU”

It needs to be stressed that in morality and law as well as in mercy and grace there is operative the fundamental principle of reflexivity. The well-being of others is a necessary condition for our well-being, a principle that is made clear in love for we are only really happy when our beloved is happy. >



IN THE GREEK MYTH OF NARCISSUS A HANDSOME YOUNG MAN, BELOVED OF ALL THE NYMPHS, ONLY HAS EYES FOR HIMSELF.

In a pool he sees a reflection of himself and so stricken is he by love for himself he stays there transfixed and soon dies. The myth is one that tells of the dangers of self-love, which is why it was referred to in a recent newspaper article on the topic of selfies.¹ Narcissism, the article suggested, is rife today so much so that whole generations of young people appear to be self-obsessed. Here we might add that today young people come in all ages and those of more advanced years can be just as transfixed by their own image. Perhaps the most telling thing about the article were the recommendations it gave to help parents combat this vice in their children. First on the list of ten things a parent should do was to teach their child ‘self-love’. It is a rather strange suggestion to make given that narcissism is about excessive self-love. It is as if the author were to say that the first thing one ought to do to fight a fire in a petrol dump is to pour more petrol on it.

QUITE POSSIBLY SHE UNDERSTANDS THERE TO BE A TRUE AND FALSE SELF-LOVE...

For the author to promote so counter-intuitive a cure for narcissism suggests that there is more to what she is saying. Quite possibly she understands there

to be a true and false self-love and that her readers already know this to be the case, perhaps they share her view and for this reason she does not have to spell things out. It certainly is true that we often meet with the opinion that if we are to be strong and healthy individuals then we must love ourselves, and that if we do not love ourselves in the true way then we will love ourselves in the wrong way.

The problem lies in the fact that people rarely have a clear idea of what it is that constitutes true love. So much so that they think of Narcissus as a role model and end up posting likes concerning themselves all the day long. Each time they look in the mirror they only ever see a thumbs up!

SO MUCH SO THAT THEY THINK OF NARCISSUS AS A ROLE MODEL

AND END UP POSTING LIKES CONCERNING THEMSELVES ALL THE DAY LONG.

It is important, then, for us to clarify the difference between true and false self-love and the best place to start is with the words of our Lord, words that are, in fact, often used by Christians to justify self-love.

In *Matthew 22:37-39* Jesus tells his hearers

