

Exegetical Brief: Show Love To Your Neighbor

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"Love your neighbor as yourself" is among the most famous and most quoted sayings of Jesus. In one form or another it occurs six times in the synoptic gospels, three times in the Gospel of Matthew alone (Mt 5:43, 19:19, 22:39). It also occurs twice in the epistles. This saying was not, of course, original to Jesus. He is quoting from Leviticus 19:18.

Today this saying is often quoted as a summary of the second table of the Law. It tells how we fulfill these seven commandments, namely, by showing the same kind of love for our neighbor as we do for ourselves. We should do things for our neighbor that are in his or her best interests, just as we do good for ourselves.

Recently, however, it has become popular to cite this saying for another reason, that is, in support of the current interest in promoting a positive self-image. These words are frequently cited as evidence that God wants us to love ourselves, that is, to have a healthy self-image. This passage allegedly shows that such a positive self-image is a healthy, natural, and God-pleasing thing.

It is, however, questionable whether this passage supports this idea. In the Bible "love for the neighbor" is not so much a feeling of admiration or approval, as it is a loving concern which results in actions that benefit every person in need of our help.

God-pleasing love for our neighbor does not flow from self-love. In the story of the Good Samaritan Jesus does away with the typical Jewish (that is, human) way of thinking of love as a series of concentric circles with the most loved object in the middle (namely, me), then my family and friends, then my countrymen, and, finally, outside the last circle, my enemies. Jesus teaches us that love is looking for the nearest person in need and helping him. Three men passed by the wounded man. Only one man loved him as a neighbor, because only one man helped him.

That "loving" is not necessarily "liking" is shown by the command to love our enemies. We are not necessarily to like them or to approve of them, but we are expected to love them, that is, to act in their best interest, whether that may be giving them food or "heaping coals of fire on their heads."

The love of God for sinners is not that he likes them as they are, but that he does something to help them and to change them.

On the basis of a similar study of love for the neighbor in the Old Testament, *TDOT* defines אהב as love which not only "presupposes a concrete inner disposition which is based on experiences and events, but it includes a conscious act in behalf of the person who is loved" (I, p 105). In the Old Testament "love and action are two sides of the same coin" (I, p 107).

Some Jewish Bible scholars paraphrased Leviticus 19:18, "Behave to your neighbor as you behave toward yourself." The Golden Rule, "Do to others as you wish them to do to you," is simply a paraphrase of Leviticus 19:18, "Love your neighbor as yourself."

A study of love of the neighbor in both the Old and New Testaments, therefore, suggests that this is not a feeling of approval, but a beneficial action. The grammatical construction of the source passage, Leviticus 19:18, may reinforce this interpretation in a striking way.

לֹא־תִפֹּם וְלֹא־תִטֹּר אֶת־בְּנֵי עַמֶּךָ וְאֶהְבֶּתָּ לְרֵעֶךָ כַּמּוֹד

Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against your countryman, but you shall show love to your neighbor as yourself.

The direct object of אהב is usually marked by את, but here it is introduced by the preposition לְ, "to." Some commentators claim that this לְ is an Aramaism and that there is no difference between the two constructions. However, אהב with לְ occurs only in Leviticus 19:18,34, in 2 Chronicles 19:2 where Jehosaphat's

"love for the enemies of the Lord" is explained by the parallel verb עֲזַר ("help the wicked"), and in 1 Kings 5:15 (5:1 in Eng) where it describes Hiram's love for (that is, his assistance to) David. These passages seem to support the claim of Malamat that אָהַב לְ means "supply help to" (*BAR* 16-4 [1990] p 50-51). Leviticus 19:18, therefore, is not commanding us to *feel* something, but to *do* something.

It is striking that in every case where the construction אָהַב לְ is used the meaning "show love for, help" fits the context. However, this meaning for אָהַב does not seem to be limited to the construction with לְ. The construction with לְ is not required to express this meaning, but it may be intended to call attention to this meaning.

This passage then does not command or promote a positive self-image. It rather promotes God-like benevolence toward everyone in need. The Scriptures do give us grounds for a positive self-image, but it is not in this passage. It is rather in the biblical doctrines of creation, redemption, and sanctification, which teach us how God created mankind in his image, how he sent his Son to enable us to regain that image, and how the Holy Spirit is now renewing us in that image. A positive self-image does not flow from natural self-love but from being made and restored in the image of God.