

Sermon preached at OCC, 25 October 2026

Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my strength, and my redeemer. Amen.

Matthew 22:34-46

Learning to love yourself

Today, Matthew presents two related exchanges concerning Jesus' identity and authority. The first involves the commandments, and the second concerns the Messiah as David's son and Lord. We'll focus mainly on the commandments. In replying to the Pharisee, Jesus brings two commandments: to love God with our whole being and to love our neighbour as ourselves as the greatest commandments. When hearing these commandments, we often concentrate on loving God and serving others. But what does it mean to love our neighbour as ourselves? It may depend on how we understand ourselves. If we do not recognise our own worth as people created by God, how can we properly understand the worth of our neighbours? So we will explore three things: our worth is given by God; loving ourselves is not the same as healing ourselves; and learning to love ourselves in relation to God shapes how we love our neighbours.

1. Our worth is given by God

When it comes to love, what kind of image or words come to your mind? Recently I planted an apple tree in a plot where the old tree stumps were removed. The name of this apple tree is Sweetie M26— so I named it *Sweetie*. For the next few weeks, I checked whether Sweetie was standing alright; whether the ground was not too dry or too wet; whether the wind wasn't too strong; and so on. Whenever I stood by the tree, I would start to talk to the tree.

Sweetie has not produced a single apple. Yet I care for it, water it, and hope it will grow. I don't have to wait for its first harvest before I give it attention. That makes me wonder: how often do we measure the value of human beings by what they produce, rather than recognising their worth before they have proved anything? Take one example.

In this secular world, people tend to value other people's worth only by measuring empirical evidence, such as career, job skills, education and so forth. There is a website, namely SEEK, which advertises itself as the number one employment marketplace to find jobs and career-related information or recruit the ideal candidate. Potential candidates may upload their CV, in which they have to prove their worth through skill sets, education, job experience and so

forth. Now news reports have begun to report that AI does that kind of initial filtering in the business world. Yet, we don't say that people have worth simply because they passed a certain selection process. A CV can tell us what someone has done, what they know, and what they can contribute. But it cannot tell us the full worth of the person behind it. AI may help filter applications, but no algorithm can determine a person's ultimate value before God. Even churches assess ministers and workers for particular roles, but no assessment of suitability should be confused with a judgement of human worth.

Genesis 1:27 is particularly relevant because the image of God is not presented as a reward for achievement, intelligence, social standing, or moral perfection, which we often forget. Our worth is grounded in God, not in our recognition of that worth. Our understanding of ourselves may be incomplete, confused, or damaged, but God's gift of worth does not depend on how clearly we perceive it.

2. Loving yourself is not the same as healing yourself

In the 1993 psychological thriller, *Boxing Helena*, we can observe how one person's love can be torture to the other. Dr Nick Cavanaugh is a wealthy, emotionally scarred surgeon who harbours a deeply toxic obsession with Helena, who continuously rejects his romantic approaches. As a person, Nick always feels insecure since his mother left when he was young. One night, Helena is severely injured in a catastrophic hit-and-run accident right outside Nick's isolated mansion. Instead of calling emergency services, Nick uses his medical expertise to save her life at home. Out of his ultimate possessive desire, he amputates her injured legs to prevent her escape. When she retaliates with verbal and sexual mockery, he surgically removes her arms as well, technically making her a 'living Venus' by stripping away her autonomy and reducing her to a helpless dependent, his prisoner. I will stop to continue the story to avoid spoilers!

Nick seems to believe that if he can keep Helena with him, he can finally possess the love and security he has longed for. He confuses possessing another person with finding the security he lacks within himself. Yet his wounds may remain even when someone loves him. What Nick needs is to learn to understand himself in relation to God, rather than seeking his ultimate worth and security through possessing another person. Loving ourselves does not mean that all our wounds disappear. We may accept that we are loved by God while still carrying pain from our childhood, our failures, or our relationships. With God's help,

recognising our worth in God helps us to recognise the worth of others and love our neighbour.

3. Love yourself to love your neighbour

When a Pharisee asked Jesus about the greatest commandments, it could have been both – either from the ill purpose to trap Jesus, or from awe and wonder. They saw how Jesus had silenced the Sadducees about the resurrection (22:34), and they wanted to try their chance. To a Pharisee's question, Jesus answered to love God and love one's neighbour as oneself. At this stage, we'd like to ask –what 'as yourself' actually means – what matters here is how we understand ourselves and how we treat others. In Korea, there's a story about this.

Once upon a time, there lived a family. Since they were poor, whenever they had fish, the mother always served the best parts of fish for her husband and children, and she took the head and tail of the fish. As time passed by, the children grew up, they got married, and they had their own children. On a special occasion, they got together to have a meal; the daughters-in-law prepared special fish, and for their mother-in-law, they put the head and tail of the fish. Because they heard that she only loved the head and tail of the fish, nothing else!

The mother had been giving the best parts of the fish to her family, but her children misunderstood her sacrifice as her personal preference. They saw what she ate, but they did not understand why she ate it. They failed to recognise the love behind her actions. How often do we misunderstand one another because we see only the surface of what people do? And how might our understanding change if we recognised the worth of the person before us, rather than simply interpreting their behaviour through our own assumptions? When we understand ourselves as people whose worth comes from God, we can begin to see others in the same light. We are less likely to judge their worth by what they give us, what they do for us, or whether they fulfil our expectations.

For the grown children in the story, recognising their neighbour's worth- in this case, the mother- may be the starting point to love her as their closest neighbour. The neighbour is not merely someone who meets our needs, confirms our identity, or makes us feel valuable.

Look around you. What do you see? Each person here has a life, a story, and a worth that comes from God. Now ask yourself: Do I look to other people to tell me how much I am

worth, or do I learn to understand myself through my relationship with God? And how might that change the way I see and love my neighbour? May God help us to explore these questions with honest hearts. Amen.