



Is Self-Love Biblical?

Matthew 22:39

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This is one of several occasional essays on “Scripture Twisting.” The purpose of these very brief essays is to challenge certain popular interpretations of the Bible that really have little or no basis.

Matthew 22:39 reads simply, *A second [command] is like it: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”* In popular circles this verse is often paraded as a text in which teaches that we are commanded to love ourselves. Thus, the implied meaning is, “You shall love your neighbor just as you are to love yourself.” Such a view seems to have come from secular psychologists (in which self-actualization is at the top of the pecking order of one’s goals). From there, it apparently made its way into Christian psychological treatises.

Our objective in this short essay is not to trace the history of this interpretation, but to argue that it is fallacious. Unpacking the meaning of the verse yields the following expanded translation: “You shall love your neighbor as you already do love yourself.” Thus, self-love is assumed in this text, not commanded.

There are two reasons for arguing that this is the meaning of the text here. First, a comparison normally sets up a standard or norm against which some position is put forth. The Greek particle $\omega\varsigma$ (like, as) is the primary means used to suggest such a comparison in the New Testament (and is used in Matthew 22:39). For example, in Matthew 12:13, Jesus healed a man’s hand, “making it whole, *like* the other one.” The whole hand was the standard against which the now healed hand was measured. In Matthew 17:2, Jesus’ face “shone *like* ($\omega\varsigma$) the sun.” Obviously, the sun is the standard by which the comparison is to be made. In Matthew 28:4, the soldiers guarding the tomb of Jesus “became *like* dead men” when they saw the angel. In Romans 9:27, the number of the sons of Israel is to be “*like* ($\omega\varsigma$) the sands of the sea.” Paul says in 2 Timothy 2:9 that he is wearing chains “*like* ($\omega\varsigma$) a criminal.” First Peter 1:24 says that “all flesh is *like* ($\omega\varsigma$) grass.” In all these texts (and scores of others in the New Testament) a comparison is made. In each one, the comparison starts with a standard or norm. But if Matthew 22:39 implies two commands, then there is no standard of comparison. To argue that we should love our neighbor as much as we should love ourselves sets up no standard, no norm.

Second, and more specifically, $\omega\varsigma$ is sometimes found following a command. When it is so, what verb is to be implied in the $\omega\varsigma$ clause? At all times, the indicative should be read.¹ That is, the comparison is not of a command to a command, but of a command to a standard that is already being followed. Note the following examples.²

- Matthew 6:5—“When you pray, do not be like the hypocrites [are]”
- Matthew 6:10—“May your will be done on earth as [it is] in heaven”
- Matthew 6:16—“When you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites [do]”
- Matthew 10:16—“Be wise as serpents [are], and harmless as doves [are]”
- Matthew 18:3—“become like children [are]”
- Luke 15:19—“treat me as [you would] one of your hired servants”
- Luke 22:26—“let the greatest among you become like the youngest”
- Galatians 4:12—“Become as [I am]”
- 2 Thessalonians 3:15—“Do not look on him as [you would] an enemy, but regard him as a brother”
- 1 Timothy 5:1—“Rebuke an older man as [you would] a father”
- Philemon 17—“Receive him as [you would receive] me”

In conclusion, is self-love biblical? Actually, yes. It is biblical in that it is *assumed* to be true (as Ephesians 5:29 reminds us, “for no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it...”). But is self-love *commanded*? Hardly. The primary proof-text for such is Matthew 22:39.³ And, as we have tried to demonstrate, that text means that self-love is assumed, not commanded.

Further, there are numerous texts that suggest that our lives need to be other-directed. The plain meaning of a

passage like Philippians 2:3 (“regard one another as more important than yourselves”) ought to counter-balance any notion that our focus in life ought to be on self. The example of the Lord Jesus follows this programmatic statement in Philippians 2:3. In verses 6-11 of Philippians 2, Jesus is seen as the supreme example of self-sacrifice. Verse 5 links Jesus’ attitude to what should be our own: “Have this mind in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus.” We, too, should follow the Master’s steps and direct our lives outward and upward.

Such absorption with the self is both endemic to human nature and in particular is becoming the hallmark of the West. We are propelling ourselves rapidly to narcissism and anarchy because of such attitudes. Against this, the Bible speaks plainly.

¹Not infrequently, the verb is actually stated. The indicative is the routine mood found. Cf. Matthew 5:48 (“be perfect as your Father in heaven *is perfect*”); 6:12 (“forgive us our debts, as we have forgiven our debtors”); 8:13; 15:28; 18:33; 27:65; Colossians 3:18; Revelation 18:6; etc.

²You might even want to test these examples by supplying an imperative or subjunctive in the $\omega\varsigma$ clause. For example, in Matthew 6:5, “When you pray do not be like the hypocrites should be.” Obviously, this makes little sense.

³Ephesians 5:33 has a similar construction and should be interpreted similarly. “Husbands, love your wives as yourselves” does *not* mean “love your wives as you *should* love yourselves,” but “as you *already do* love yourselves.”