

Training Session 11 -BLESS Rhythms: Love Yourself

Objective

Learn to love yourself through Christ-centered, holistic self-care by putting on your new self in Christ.

Key Scriptures

Mark 12:30-31; Matthew 7:12; Ephesians 4:22-24

Is Loving Yourself Selfish?

The BLESS rhythms are hopefully not one more thing we are asking *from* you, but they are one more thing we are wanting *for* you. Most significantly, we want you to experience the glory and wonder of God blessing you with more of His presence. If you have His presence, then you have *His* love and *His* joy and *His* hope and all the glorious fruit of that grows from *His* Spirit. The BLESS rhythms are an attempt to cultivate habits of the heart that will lead to you habitually experience the blessing of a cascading waterfall of God's presence.

As we implement the BLESS rhythms, we're spending two training sessions on love (the L in BLESS). If we lack love, then we lack the central aspect of what it means to be human: to love (1 Corinthians 13:2)! God is love (1 John 4:8), and as His image bearers, love is what we are created to do. None of us want to miss out on the bullseye of humanity, so we're taking two weeks to orient our hearts towards a life of love. This week we're going to consider something many of us (including myself!) have overlooked in two of the most important teachings in the Bible.

When Jesus gave His summary of the entire Bible (in the Great Commandment) and His most well-known ethics teaching (in the Golden Rule), He anchored both with an assumed love for ourselves (Mark 12:30-31 & Matthew 7:12). In both places, He uses love for ourselves as the standard by which we establish love for neighbors, but often times we don't feel all that comfortable focusing our attention on loving ourselves. Why? Because it feels selfish, and a self-centered life is something we are trying to avoid.

After all, doesn't Christ say, "whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves" (Luke 9:23)? Yes, He does, but learning to love yourself appropriately (not idolatrously), what we will call self-care, is one of the central God-glorifying ways of denying yourself—it is denying yourself of all the things that are robbing you of real, abundant life found in following Christ. As a follower of Christ, you learn to love yourself by denying yourself of certain foods (i.e. eating right!), denying yourself of certain slothful leisure (i.e. getting in shape!), denying yourself of extra-marital sex (i.e. loving your spouse!), denying yourself of bad debt (i.e. stewarding God's resources!), and on and on. Therefore, rather than being selfish, Biblical self-care is a journey of self-denying love that enables you to thrive!

Paul gives us great language for self-care that leads to our thriving in Ephesians 4:22-24 when he states, “You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, **to put off your old self**, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and **to put on the new self**, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.” If you are a follower of Jesus, these verses are at the heart of what it means to love yourself and we’ll spend several weeks unpacking them. For now, we can say this much: Loving yourself, or self-care, is a life-long journey of putting off the *whole* old self and putting on the *whole* new self in Christ.

Andy Stanley, a pastor and author, illustrates this principle well of putting on the whole new self in Christ in a talk on dating and relationships. To all who are single and dating, Andy asks, “Are you who the person you are looking for is looking for?” Read that slowly as I repeat it. “Are you who the person you are looking for is looking for?” It’s a great question. He goes on to say, “I’m not just hunting and I’m not just seeking. I’m intentionally becoming. I want to be the person that the person I am looking for is looking for.”¹

The principle of being and becoming the person who we’re looking for is looking for applies well beyond dating, doesn’t it. If you are married, who is it that your spouse is looking and longing for in a mate? Now, imagine the sanctified dreams that your spouse has for you. Not the selfish ones, but the sanctified dreams where he or she paints a picture of the very best you. Are you becoming that person? Now picture work. Picture your dream boss. Your dream boss has a dream employee in mind, one who makes everyone around them better off in the way they serve (with excellence) and love (with joy). Am I becoming the employee, the boss, and the leader my dream boss is looking for? Hint, it starts now, even if your boss is far from your dream boss, and it actually has nothing to do with your boss and everything to do with you and your self-care.

Being and becoming a person who is continually loving yourself by putting on the whole new self in Christ requires a holistic, all-out and all-in effort that encompasses every area of your life. Paul highlights the holistic nature of self-care by exhorting us to live as athletes who are priming our bodies to compete or as soldiers who are training for combat (1 Corinthians 9:27; Ephesians 6:12-18; 2 Timothy 2:3-6). Paul had in view athletes who were competing in the games and soldiers engaging in combat, which relates well to our modern world. The level of self-care surrounding 21st century elite athletes and modern special forces is extraordinary. Nutrition, exercise, health care, treatment, rehab, and endless hours of self-care are currently devoted to helping athletes and soldiers thrive.

The film *Act of Valor* provides a window into the level of holistic self-care that is required for elite combat units as a group of real-life Navy Seals act out real-life scenarios facing Navy Seals. On the night before deployment, while sitting around a bonfire on the beach in San Diego, the team leader says, “if we get over there and something's out of whack...with the family, things aren't right with the finances or something's off, it's gonna put us all out of balance, so we need to have that tight before we launch.” He is asserting what we all know to be true--we are integrated beings who require integrated self-care. Moreover, this Navy Seal acknowledges that neglecting self-care is not only failing to love yourself, but it is also failing to love those around you. Dr. Parker J. Palmer, agreeing with this Seal, states that self-care is not a selfish act, but “it is simply good stewardship of the only gift I have, the gift I was put on the earth to offer others. Anytime we can listen to true self and give the care it requires, we do it not only for

ourselves, but for the many others whose lives we touch.”² Moreover, as pastor and author Thabiti Anyabwile points out, “the more your life involves you giving yourself away to others, the more necessary is self-care.”³ Therefore, a Biblical idea of self-care involves the continual cultivation of the whole person as you grow (or mature) emotionally, spiritually, relationally, physically and intellectually into your new self in Christ.

In the remaining part of our training session, we’ll give an overview of these 5 key areas of Christ-centered self-care that we will return to in detail in future training sessions.

Emotional Self-Care

Very few of us have healthy emotional models to follow. Most of us have witnessed one of two models for emotional self-care.

Suck it up

Many guys have grown up with a machismo figure screaming in their ears, “Man up. Get tough. Don’t be so sensitive.” Many women have similar models, though couched in different language. While emotions may have spilled out in tears and fits, they were largely ignored, stuffed, or pushed under the rug. “Just suck it up and keep going,” defines this mentality.

The Psalmists, however, didn’t just suck it up and keep going, thankfully. They poured out the full range of their emotions to God as an act of worship. Moreover, we have an entire book of the Bible dedicated to lament (Lamentations). So at the very least, the suck it up model is incomplete, and in its worst expression, can be extremely harmful.

Authenticity is King

On the other hand, many operate in a world driven by authenticity. Authenticity has tremendous cultural cache in today’s world, especially among millennials. While authenticity is valuable, it must be bridled by a surrendered life of obedience to the Lord (regardless of how you feel). Unbridled authenticity demands that we listen to and follow our heart, despite the Bible’s warning that the heart is deceptively wicked and that our feelings can lead us wildly astray. Thankfully, Jesus, the most authentic human who ever lived, didn’t always follow His feelings. Instead, in the defining moment of His mission, when he didn’t feel like going to the cross, he said, “Father, not my will, but thy will be done” (Luke 22:42).

Emotionally Healthy Leaders with High EQ

We’re going to pursue a third way in which we are not bound to slavishly follow our feelings (in pursuit of authenticity) or constantly disavow them (just suck it up!). Instead, the hope is to mature into emotionally healthy leaders who have a high emotional intelligence (EQ) and a surrendered commitment to following the Holy Spirit. How would you rate your present emotional health? How would you describe your emotional EQ when it comes to yourself and others?

Spiritual Self-Care

Do you want to be healed? You might be offended by the question, as you think to yourself, “I’m doing just fine. I don’t think I need healing.” Others of you say, “Well, of course I do.” But remember that Jesus asked the same question to a guy who had been paralyzed for 38 years (John 5:1-15). If ever there was a question where the answer seemed obvious enough to negate the need for the question, then asking a guy who has been paralyzed for 38 years seems to fit the bill. Yet, Jesus asked the question, “Do you want to be healed?”

Hear him address you today with the very same question, “Do you want to be healed?” Do you really want to be healed of exhaustion, worry, fear, anxiety, bitterness, cynicism and all the other ills that plague you? Together we’re seeking healing, a new way of being captured in the BLESS rhythms. Why? Because we want more of God’s healing, more of God’s blessing, and more of His presence. Our hope over the years to come is to experience more of God’s healing self-care through the BLESS rhythms.

Relational Self-Care

Introverts and extroverts alike need people. Isolation isn’t good for anyone, and God made this clear when He said, “It is not good that the man should be alone” (Genesis 2:18). Discuss how you feel about your current level of community. Is it life-giving? Our next training session will address this in detail as we look at the E in the BLESS Rhythms that stands for eating with a purpose.

Physical Self-Care

Loving yourself certainly includes learning to love the body that God entrusted to you. 1 Corinthians 6: 19-20 says, “*Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit? Therefore honor God with your bodies.*” Putting on the new self means learning to love ourselves by honoring our bodies. Part of the challenge comes from body image issues (which we’ll address later), but the other part comes from the way we care for our bodies through eating, exercise, and rest.

Intellectual/Vocational Self-Care

Part of what it means to be a thriving human is realized when you are leveraging your God-given gifts to accomplish His work planned before the foundation of time (see Ephesians 2:8-10). When we are growing intellectually and cultivating the skills and vocational talents that God placed inside of us, we come alive. To use author Neil Doshi’s language, we experience a high sense of total motivation (TOMO) because work is fun (playful), it is meaningful (purpose), and it is developing us a human (potential).⁴ Therefore, a significant way to love ourselves is to set aside time in our week to pursue intellectual and vocational growth in the areas of play, purpose, and potential.

Gospel Self-Care

Holistic self-care, therefore, is a matter of putting on the whole new self in Christ. This approach differs radically from the secular view of self-care that is touted through the self-esteem movement. Tim Keller insightfully points out how shifting the sands can be of the self-esteem

movement.⁵ Until the 20th century, the traditional view, stemming back to ancient Greek culture, believed mankind's behavioral problems (violence, abusive behavior, criminal behavior, etc.) stemmed from *too high* a view of ourselves. The Greeks believed this negative behavior resulted from hubris, an Aristotelian term meaning pride. On the other hand, the modern western world came to exactly the opposite conclusion, positing that children and humans in general act out or end up in jail because they have *too low* a view of themselves. The problem, in the modern view, is that they have low self-esteem and what we need to do is build them up so they have higher self-esteem, whereas the traditional approach sought to humble people through conviction and lowering an inflated self-esteem.

The gospel, however, provides a third way, acknowledging that, on the one hand, the Greeks were right: we have far too lofty a view of our old self and are riddled with hubris and pride, leaving us far more sinful than we ever dared imagine. On the other hand, however, the modern view also has some merit in that our self esteem is indeed far too low if you consider who we are in Christ. As we put on the whole new self in and through Christ, what is true of Christ becomes true of us. As a result, the verdict is in and we have a sanction outside of ourselves that says so much more than the modern slogan, "I am enough." In Christ, we are not simply enough, but we are royal sons and daughters of the most High King. We are co-heirs with Christ and more than conquerors. This will build you up unlike anything else. The only one whose opinion matters in the entire universe has unequivocally declared, "This is my Son whom I love. With Him I am well pleased." Sheer grace.

The good news of the gospel is the self-care that all of us so desperately need. It's the message we need to preach to ourselves before our feet hit the floor everyday. I am loved now and forever by the only one who matters. Nothing I do or don't do today will ever separate me from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus. Therefore, as I seek to holistically put on Christ in every area of my life, I will do so out of a deep love for myself that is rooted in my Father's affection and delight in me. Amen!

Discussion Questions

1. What most impacted you from the training session?
2. Read Mark 12:30-31, Matthew 7:12, Lk. 9:23. Jesus anchors two of his most famous and important teachings into an assumed standard of loving yourself (or self-care). Discuss how this impacts how you think about self-care and how it interacts with a life of self-denial.
3. Read 1 Cor. 6:19-20. Answer these questions about physical self-care...
 - Are you honoring God in the way you eat and drink (alcohol, smoking, etc)?
 - Are you honoring God in the way you care for your body through exercise?
 - Write down your goals for your eating and exercise in the next year.
 - Are you living out the BLESS rhythm of taking one day in seven to rest (a Sabbath)?
4. When it comes to intellectual/vocational self-care, answer these questions:
 - Does your calendar reflect weekly time to pursue your passions and develop your potential intellectually and vocationally?

- Have you built reflection into your week so that you can learn and grow?
5. Describe how gospel self-care differs from modern self-care.

Endnotes

1. <http://northpoint.org/messages/the-new-rules-for-love-sex-and-dating>.
2. Parker J. Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation* (Jossey Bass, 1999), chapter 2.
3. Thabiti Anyabwile on Self-Care, message at MTF Twin Cities event.
4. Neel Doshi and Lindsay McGregor, *Primed to Perform: How to Build the Highest Performing Cultures through the Science of Total Motivation*, (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2015) 13.
5. Timothy Keller, *Blessed Self-Forgetfulness*, Redeemer Church, New York, New York, February 24, 2002.