

# The Secret to Loving Your Neighbor

## **Love your neighbor as yourself: Mark 12:31**

Do you know who you are? Yes, you. Do you know who you are? Because what I've learned is that **loving God and loving others, is only possible when I know who I am.**

According to Jesus, the whole law and the whole way of life for a Christian is summed up in these two commandments – love God, and love your neighbor. What has always struck me about this verse though is that Jesus says love your neighbor “as yourself.” It's a condition that must be in place before we can love our neighbor. We have to love ourselves because if we don't, then 1) how will we know how to love another human, and 2) from where will we get the energy and fullness of life that we need to love others?

In my own life, it's taken me awhile to be okay with taking good care of myself because I always thought that “dying to self” and “setting myself aside” and “sacrifice” meant that I had to put other people before myself in every way, or whenever asked. So that's what I did. And I was miserable. I had no boundaries because I always said yes to whomever needed me, whenever they needed me.

I was exhausted. I wasn't truly loving my neighbor because I didn't have much of myself to give them. How could I give them love when I didn't even know who I was or what I needed in order to be a whole, healthy, happy person?

I began to ask myself questions like **“What do I need today in order to be fully present to God and others?”** Sometimes that answer is daily Mass. Sometimes it's a walk with a friend. Sometimes it's alone time to write in my journal about whatever emotion I'm experiencing.

Whatever it is, the truth I've discovered is that in learning to take time to get to know myself, and to love myself in the ways that I need, I am so much more present and energized and simply more “me” when I go to love and serve my neighbor. Don't get me wrong, this isn't an excuse to be self-centered. There's a certain balance you have to maintain in order to properly care for yourself and love others.

The tough part I've learned is that sometimes I have to say no to things that are good in order to take care of myself. Like saying no to helping a friend move because I've been having back pain and need time to rest. Those are the times that I used to shame myself for being a “bad Christian” and not offering up the inconvenience for the sake of someone else, even if it came at too high a cost personally.

The truth is that life is tough and if I'm not caring for my own needs, if I'm not empowering myself to take care of me, I'll start looking in all the wrong places for fulfillment, and I'll only be loving God and my neighbor with half the capacity that I could be. If you want to give your best to those around you, start by caring for yourself. It's not selfish; it's honoring the gift of life God has given you.

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