

## Accepting that God Loves You



Christopher News Notes

**“LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF,” JESUS TELLS US IN MARK 12:31. On the surface, it’s an easy idea to grasp, though not always to practice. But the truth is that some people find it difficult to love themselves and accept the fact that God loves them, too. The problem may stem from their life’s circumstances, or maybe personal shortcomings with which they’ve struggled. Yet the belief that the Creator of the universe actually cares about even the lowliest among us is key to living in sync with God and the life to which He is calling us.**

## You Are Worthy of Love

It's not uncommon for someone to joke about their shortcomings: "Well, I'm no Mother Teresa!" That's because Mother Teresa, winner of the 1979 Nobel Peace Prize for her humanitarian work among the poorest of the poor in Calcutta, was lauded as a paragon of selflessness and holiness.

So when it came to light in 2007, with the publication of secret letters, that the holy woman had deep, hidden struggles with despair and depression, the world was astounded. Surely Mother Teresa of all people should've been secure in the knowledge that God loved her!

Yet in the book "Come Be My Light: The Private Writings of the Saint of Calcutta," Mother Teresa wrote this: "When I try to raise my thoughts to Heaven – there is such convicting emptiness that those very thoughts return like sharp knives and hurt my very soul. I am told God loves me – and yet the reality of darkness and coldness and emptiness is so great that nothing touches my soul."

Mother Teresa's spiritual struggles remind us that our feelings of worthlessness and loneliness don't mean that God doesn't love us with all His heart. But the distance between the head and heart can sometimes be the greatest in the world. So how can our spiritual lives blossom when we imperfect humans do not feel worthy of God's love? Rather than let Him see us in all of our frailty and vulnerability, do we push Him away and flavor our daily interactions with despair, sarcasm, or assertions that we don't "need anyone," not even God? The fact is, until we can accept that God loves us unconditionally and without reservation, we will not face our lives with confidence or purpose.

It can be difficult to accept this unconditional love from God. Our fallen human natures struggle to understand how someone could love us, especially when we hurt or fail them. But time and time again in the Gospels, Jesus uses parables to illustrate the extravagant love of God the Father for us.

Think of the tale of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32). A young man demands his inheritance—a

Jean Vanier is the founder of L'Arche, a network of 147 communities around the world for mentally disabled persons and their caregivers. In an Aug. 5, 2015 interview with "America" magazine, he gave some beautiful insights into the value of a person:

- "Love is to reveal to someone: 'you are beautiful and you have value.'"
- "The mission of Jesus is to announce a good news to the poor. What is that good news? It's not just that 'God loves you,' but that 'I love you!' The whole of the message of Jesus is to reveal to the poor that they are precious, whereas we live in societies where so frequently they are put aside."
- "For myself the future is to grow gently into weakness and to discover that in the heart of weakness there is the presence of God. And after that, growing in weakness, we grow in the greater weakness which is eventually to fall in the arms of God when we die."

slap in the face while his father is still alive—and then spends it all as he travels the world and becomes a party-boy. Then, when the money runs out, the son decides to go back home and beg forgiveness. Not only does the father forgive him, but he showers the wayward son with all sorts of luxuries.

Jesus was using hyperbole to illustrate that we don't "earn" God's love—He gives it to us even when we think we've messed up irrevocably. Though human justice would demand that the father teach his son a lesson, God's love says, "Quickly bring the finest robe and put it on him...Then let us celebrate with a feast, because this son of mine was dead, and has come to life again; he was lost, and has been found." (Luke 15:22-24)

And the beautiful thing about God's unconditional love is that He slowly teaches us how to love others like He loves us. We begin to see our lives for what they are—a chance to live a deep mystery of love where everyone plays a part. Instead of being mere receivers, we are now able to be givers.

## God Doesn't Only Love "Perfect People"

A transforming book for a person seeking self-acceptance and purpose is a short work by Rev. Jacques Philippe called, "Interior Freedom." In clear, outlined chapters, Rev. Philippe coaches the reader to peace by accepting him or herself, and he intro-

duces a surprising premise: "What often blocks the action of God's grace in our lives is less our sins or failings, than it is our failure to accept our own weakness—all those rejections, conscious or not, of what we really are or of our real situation."

This is a bold statement. It is easy to equate "holiness" with "perfection." But that is not the case at all! When learning to accept ourselves, we have to get over our false ideal of perfection and focus on reality—we have failings and shortcomings. We do not need to be anxious about this. It is a paradox of the spiritual life, that we must acknowledge our smallness in order to achieve greatness.

Rev. Philippe continued, "To 'set grace free' in our lives, and paving the way for deep and spectacular changes, it sometimes would be enough to say simply 'yes': a 'yes' inspired by trust in God to aspects of our lives we've been rejecting...The Holy Spirit never acts unless we freely cooperate. We must accept ourselves just as we are, if the Holy Spirit is to change us for the better."

Every single day, people are bombarded with messages that they aren't good enough. Commercials insinuate that life isn't worth living unless you have dazzling pearly whites. Advertisements show members of the opposite sex becoming attracted to each other after catching a whiff of some magical perfume or cologne. We dye our hair, go on diets, and refresh our wardrobes. All of this can very quickly wear down our psyche, as it is impossible

to measure up to standards the world presents us with, just on a natural level. What about the spiritual plane? Do we think we should look or act like a certain saint to be loved? Do we compare ourselves to others, who we perceive as more holy than we are?

“God is ‘realistic,’” says Rev. Philippe. “His grace does not operate on our imaginings, ideals, or dreams. It works on reality, the specific, concrete elements of our lives. Even if the fabric of our everyday lives doesn’t look very glorious to us, only there can we be touched by God’s grace.”

## Finding God’s Love in Prison

Once we begin to rethink how we see ourselves, not only do we experience God’s love and mercy in our own lives, we also begin to see our fellow man as God does. Bill Gaertner is a real-life example of how someone can be transformed once they own their mistakes and allow God’s grace to touch their hearts, and then in turn, help bring others out of darkness.

In 2012, Bill was finishing up a prison term for domestic abuse. Eight-and-a-half years in prison would turn most people bitter and cynical. But God was working through a Catholic deacon, who gave Bill a small book called “The Return of the Prodigal Son,” by Henri Nouwen. According to Bill, it became his “bible.”

Soon after Bill was released from prison, he went to a local church for Mass. There, staring him straight in the face, was a painting of the Prodigal

Son. “I cried and knew then that this was where I belonged,” he said.

Inspired by this spiritual experience, by February 2014, Bill had founded “Gatekeepers” in Hagerstown, Maryland, a re-entry mentoring program in partnership with other local ministries. A volunteer mentor or a “coach” is paired with an ex-offender to provide informal types of support as they’re re-introduced into society. A key component to their mission is a job readiness training program to help those with a criminal history find employment.

By teaching the ex-offenders interview skills and lending encouragement, men and women are given a whole new chance at life—all because one man accepted a book, said “yes” to God’s forgiveness, and allowed a painting to touch his heart.

See how God can use even the most commonplace items to change us? A book and a painting may not mean anything to one person, but to another it inspired him to transform an entire community. In a way, Bill had taken a page straight from Rev. Philippe’s book. He accepted what he had done, didn’t dwell on the past, and made a difference moving forward using his own unique story. “This was meant to be,” Bill said in his March 2016 interview with the Maryland Catholic Conference. “I was sent to prison for a reason.”

The beautiful reality is that God doesn’t look at what you want to be or what you think you should be. He sees you as you are and He accepts you. If God, who is all-good and all-perfect, can love you unconditionally, you can love yourself too! Jesus isn’t interested in our human notions of perfection. He wants and desires you to come to Him and be embraced by His warm love.

  
**“It’s better to light one candle  
than to curse the darkness.”**

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*“The LORD, your God, is in your midst, a mighty savior, who will rejoice over you with gladness, and renew you in His love, who will sing joyfully because of you.”*

— Zephaniah 3:17