# The Gospel

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Perhaps you are dissatisfied with yourself, believing that you ought to be something more or different than you actually are. If so, you share the feelings of many others who struggle to meet impossible standards they have set for themselves.

Karen is an advertising executive and a very good one. She constantly amazes her colleagues with the original and exciting new concepts she creates to promote her clients' products. Karen is also a wife and mother of three children. Despite her heavy workload she makes space for "quality time" with her husband and children. At the church she and her family attend, she is recognized as a person of competence with ideas and energy that her congregation could well use. So Karen serves on church committees and was enlisted to chair her congregation's long range planning process. The schools her children attend sponsor a PTA and offer regular parents' nights, when parents can learn about the programs of their children's schools and meet their teachers. Karen is scrupulous about attending parents' nights and is considering whether she should agree to serve on the PTA program committee. Karen and her husband Roger share fairly idealistic social values and have contributed generously both to their church and to a number of charities and advocacy groups. They are now wondering whether they should become active in Habitat for Humanity, a non-profit group that builds homes for poor people in the United States and internationally. Because she and Roger own a beautiful home and live well, Karen feels somewhat guilty that she has not done more to help others.

Tyrone is a freshman at a state university about an hour's drive from home. He is the oldest of three sons his mother has struggled to raise pretty much single handedly since his father disappeared when Tyrone was about 5 years old. He has always been a good student, and because his mother's income is very low, he is eligible for a full tuition scholarship to attend college. To help cover his room, board, and books, Tyrone works almost 20 hours a week at a supermarket near the university. He studies when he is not working and also tries to fit in some intramural basketball to keep up with his favorite sport. Tyrone worries about not maintaining the near-A grade point average he had in high school. He feels badly about leaving his mother at home with his younger brothers. When he takes time off occasionally to go to a movie with some dormitory buddies or to watch TV or just "hang out," Tyrone gets uneasy; he wonders if he is working hard enough and whether he may fail because he is less disciplined than he thinks he should be.

Karen and Tyrone are good examples of responsible, committed, hard working persons who try to do what is right. Karen we know to be a Christian; from my description it is not clear whether Tyrone is. But both are troubled by the anxiety common to all human beings and most evident in those human beings who are most principled and conscientious. They ask themselves, "Am I doing enough? Am I doing what I'm supposed to? Am I good enough? Am I OK?" Most people don't think that much about whether they are doing enough or whether they are good enough in God's eyes. They are plagued with the question of whether they are doing enough or whether they are good enough in their parents' eyes or in the eyes of friends or business associates or of "society." And, most troubling is the question whether they are doing enough or whether they are good enough in their own eyes.

These feelings, which in varying degrees are probably universal, have their origins in our early development. When we were just about a year old and discovered how to crawl, creep, stand, and finally walk, most of us were filled with a fearless, bold zest for life that sent us out like young adventurers to explore an ever expanding world. Our new ability to stand up tall and move around on our own feet produced what psychologist Margaret Mahler has called an "intoxication with [our] own faculties and with the greatness of [our] own world."[1] The toddler seems to be everywhere at once and into everything. She wants to see and touch, taste and smell and hear all the sights and sounds the world has to offer. She radiates sheer delight in every new discovery. Audaciously self-confident and daring, she seems oblivious to danger as she seeks ever new experiences, experiments with new behaviors, and attempts ever new and bolder feats.

As we approached our second birthday, however, our minds caught up with our bodies and we began to sense that we were not really as big or strong or invulnerable as we had imagined ourselves. We began to feel crushing frustration when we found ourselves unable to do what adults and even bigger, older children do with ease. "I want to do it myself," the almost two-year-old exclaims, even as it finally becomes as obvious to him as to his parents that his repeated efforts are doomed to failure. He throws his toy across the room in a rage after agonizing minutes of futile effort to make it work. He may cry abjectly and yet refuse his parents' attempts to console him, as though his humiliation is too great to bear. What happens is that the growing child at last discovers that the new capacity to run away from mother and father can be as frightening as it once was exhilarating, for he comes to see that he is actually small, weak, and relatively unskilled. This is a sobering experience for the one-time adventurer and daredevil.

In the years of childhood and adolescence that follow we experience failure again and again—physical, intellectual, and moral. We may also experience successes and even proud triumphs. But inevitably we also will find ourselves in situations that are beyond our capacity: our bodies aren't strong or agile or skilled enough; our brains aren't smart enough; our moral will isn't firm and sure enough. So we fail. And with our failures come shame and guilt.

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[1]Margaret Mahler, Fred Pine, and A. Bergman, The Psychological Birth of the Human Infant. New York: Basic Books, 1975, p. 71.

Even our successes become problems for us, for we learn that if we take too much pride in our successes, if we are too exuberant in describing our victories, if we luxuriate in our accomplishments, we receive severe criticism for being conceited, boastful, and arrogant. The ancient Greeks warned against the sin of hybris, their word for excessive admiration for oneself or pride in one's achievements. In fact, the Greeks believed that success and prosperity (olbos) would almost surely lead to excess pride (hybris), which the gods would then punish by visiting doom and disaster (atê) on the proud. These ideas remain alive today. Many of us can acknowledge that we experience our successes and achievements as threatening, as though they are the result of good luck that must inevitably reverse itself or the expression of self-assertion that must eventually be rebuked and punished. We fear we will be "cut down to size."

So we are caught lifelong between shame for our inadequacies and guilt for our transgressions, on the one side, and fear of our accomplishments on the other. The Bible itself provides plenty of its own fuel for these feelings. The New Testament writings provide lists of vices to be renounced by Christians and virtues true Christians will evidence:

> Galatians 5:18-26 (NRSV) Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

Christians growing up hearing passages like these and conclude that their normal and irrepressible feelings of anger, envy, and sexual curiosity are dangerous evils that threaten their relationship to God. Since their love, joy, peace, generosity, self-control, and other such "fruits of the Spirit" are noticeably and hopelessly flawed, they are caught between the reality of their unacceptable feelings and the vision of desired feelings and behaviors they know to be beyond their reach.

Even more, the Bible warns again and again against placing trust in oneself and one's own powers rather than in God. Pride in oneself is even understood as a form of idolatry (trusting in a creature more than in the Creator). And, just as for the ancient Greeks, success and prosperity are seen to lead to pride and finally to disaster:[2]

> Hosea 13:6 (NRSV) When I fed them, they were satisfied; they were satisfied, and their heart was proud; therefore they forgot me.
>
> Proverbs 16:18 (NRSV) Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.

We are warned that God, in fact, destroys the proud and brings them low, while God raises up the humble:

> Luke 1:51 (NRSV) He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
>
> James 4:6 (NRSV) But he gives all the more grace; therefore it says, "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.

These and other Bible passages reinforce messages that we receive in childhood from our parents, other adults, and our peers that our expressions of self-reliance, self-assertion, pride in ourselves and trust in our own abilities risk censure, if not punishment.

Bible passages such as these are challenges to right living common to all religions. They also are reflections of the common human experience of failure and the fear of moral judgment. They are examples of what theologians call "Law," that is, messages that in one way or another accuse us of our inadequacies, faults, or pretensions to be what we are not. We are hearing "Law" in this theological sense whenever we receive criticism, correction, reproof, blame, whenever we get the message that we are not acceptable as we are. Ultimately, and most threatening, we are hearing "Law" when we are accused of trusting ourselves and our own goodness, strength, and initiative, more than God.

"Law" is a valuable means of clarifying important truths about ourselves. It invites us to take stock of ourselves and to come clean about where our commitments lie and about the values by which we conduct our lives. "Law" becomes unbearably threatening and can't be heard or appropriated, however, unless it is set in a safe context of acceptance. That is why I take the Gospel as my starting point, for it is exactly the assurance of God's unconditional acceptance and love of humanity and of each person (the Christian doctrine of justification by grace) which Luther rediscovered to be the biblical foundation of Christian faith and practice. This love that God has for all God's creatures remains sure and certain independent of either our efforts to earn it or the destructive behaviors which we fear will cause God to withdraw it. Because we are assured that the One who has given us life will never withdraw his love and care from us, we are free to grow up, test our wings, and live our lives to maturity without fear of abandonment or reprisal.

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[2]This is the theology of the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy, which details the fall of rulers who gain success, then fall away from God, and finally are destroyed by God's wrath.

This Gospel center of Christian faith is the primary criterion for Christian maturity and the foundation for all other marks of Christian health and wholeness. The Lutheran Reformers suggested as much when they asserted that good works are, in fact, "good fruits" that grow spontaneously in those who have experienced "forgiveness," that is, God's unconditional acceptance.[3]

Using the non-religious language of "self psychology,"[4] its founder Heinz Kohut has described what children need from their parents if they are to grow into healthy, mature adults. He writes that parents need to fill three essential roles for their children—mirror, model, and mate.[5] As a mirror a parent reflects back to the child its moods, feelings, self-expression in such a way that the child feels related, understood, and appreciated. As a model a parent's strong. trustworthy, caring, and protective way engenders the child's admiration, respect, and trust. As a mate a parent's attunement to the child and affinity with the child create a sense in the child that he or she is like the parent, a "chip off the old block," not an alien who doesn't fit. In each of these roles parents fill, in their own finite, "sacramental" way, roles that God fills for all creation.

**God as Mirror**

A mother is a mirror to her child already as she gazes into the eyes of her nursing infant and mimics the infant's expressions and moods. It's as though the child sees itself reflected in the parents' eyes. In fact, from the first a real non-verbal conversation links mother and baby as baby sucks faster or slower, mother coaxes and soothes, baby looks wide-eyed at mother and mother responds with her own wide-eyed gaze, baby grimaces and mother grimaces and makes soothing sounds. As mother attends to her baby and responds to its expressions of need or satisfaction, she is attuned to her baby, and the baby feels understood, loved, valued, special, and secure.

That mirroring continues throughout childhood as parents listen to their child and respond appropriately in ways that are congruent with the child's feelings and behavior. Even more explicitly, in word and deed they communicate to the child year after year, "I know you perhaps better than you know yourself, and I think you are wonderful. You are beautiful. You are wise and intelligent. You are clever and skillful. You are witty and entertaining. You are industrious. I love you not because I am so loving, but because you are so lovable." If they are to mature, children need that kind of mirroring from their parents.

Psychologist Erik Erikson has written that the mutual gazing of mother and child is the foundation of the adult's capacity for basic trust of self and others. We can add that it is also the foundation for both the adult's image of God and capacity to trust God.[6]

I believe that the mirroring I have described, this admiring approval of the child by its parents, is a modern, secular reframing of the Gospel and the Reformation doctrine of justification by grace. It does not imply a parental denial of their children's mistakes, foibles, and shortcomings any more than the Gospel implies divine blindness to human "sin." Rather it describes parents' intention to focus attention on the child, to see their child fully, and to delight in the good in their child. It describes their assurance that nothing the child might ever think, say, or do will destroy the relationship between child and parents or cause the parents to withdraw their love and care. Parents are not required to attend to their children, see them, and delight in them perfectly and at every single moment without fail. Psychologist Donald Winnicott coined the term "good enough" to describe a mother (or father!) who parents spontaneously according to her own natural sense of parenting. Even if they are not able to provide perfectly for their child's needs, they are "good enough" when the balance of their care is dependable and positive. Winnicott says that "good enough" parents provide their children that balance of secure affection and admiration, and I believe that we can expect at least as much from our God, whose goodness is greater than human imagining.

According to much of traditional Christian teaching it appears that God loves us because God is so magnanimous, that is, so condescending in his capacity to love the "unlovable." In an influential book theologian Anders Nygren emphasized the difference between God's love (agapê) and human love (eros).[7] Human love, according to Nygren, is aroused by something lovable in the object of that love. It is always an attraction to something good and beautiful in the person or thing loved. It is selfish because it seeks to possess the goodness or beauty of the desired object. It is conditional because that love will not be given to anything or anyone that is not good or beautiful. God's love, by contrast, is not motivated by attraction to the goodness and beauty of any object. In Nygren's view, it is an expression of God's own nature, God's overflowing and irrepressible goodness and beauty, God's infinite capacity for love. It is selfless because God already possesses perfect goodness and beauty and has nothing to gain from love of the object. And it is unconditional because nothing about the object—what it is like or how it acts—will affect God's immutable decision to love, a decision that comes from God's nature rather than from the nature of the one whom God loves. In this understanding, God has infinite worth and we have no worthiness at all, no attractiveness, no lovability. It's as though God loves human beings ("sinners") despite who they are rather than because of who they are.

But I think the Gospel implies something else: God is the ultimate mirror. Not that God is so much more loving than

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[3]Augsburg Confession. Article VI.

[4]For a readable introduction, see Crayton E. Rowe, Jr. and David S. MacIsaac. Empathic Attunement: The "Technique" of Psychonalytic Self Psychology. Aronson, 1991.

[5]In Kohut's technical terminology for these roles, parents serve as mirroring, idealized, and twinship "selfobjects."

[6]Ana-Maria Rizzuto, The Birth of the Living God: A Psychoanalytic Study. Chicago: U. of Chicago, 1979.

[7]Anders Nygren. Agape and Eros. Translated by Philip S. Watson. Harper, 1969.

we, but that God's sight is so much clearer and sharper than ours. In this understanding, God loves us because God's attention is so uncluttered, God's attunement is so accurate, and God's vision is so clear and unsullied that God can see and grasp and take delight in what is lovable in all creatures, even those that seem, in their own eyes and in other creaturely eyes, to be hopelessly unlovable. Forgiveness, in this view, is not simply God's release of the sinner from guilt and punishment; it is God's reaffirmation of the creature's creaturely goodness and of God's continued delight in everything and everyone God has made. God looks again and again at everything and everyone he has made and every day marvels, "Indeed, this is all very good." (Gen. 1:31). And looking at each of us day by day and marveling at his handiwork, God blesses and hallows each of our days and rests each evening at peace with the world. (cp. Gen. 2:2f.)

**God as Model**

When the parent serves as a mirror, her attunement to the child's needs and feelings helps the child to feel understood and valued. As a result, the child grows to understand, appreciate, love, and trust herself. When the parent serves as a model, the parent intervenes with appropriate help for the child. Small children can easily be overwhelmed by their emotions—whether happy, sad, or angry. When the parent shares the joy, soothes the hurts, and calms the anger, the child comes to feel his world is safe and secure. Even more, the child grows to appreciate, even idealize, love, and trust the parents. Parents who are dependably available to their children when they need them, who provide just enough parental control and structure to protect them from danger without stifling their initiative and independence, and who live lives consistent with their professed values become models for their children of what it is to be a healthy, caring, mature adult, and their children are able to idealize their parents and feel safe within their care. Through mirroring the child grows to admire herself; through modeling, the child grows to adore her parents.

Modeling, like mirroring, provides a way to grasp the Gospel today. While mirroring highlights God's attunement to, and appreciation for us, God's children, modeling highlights the strength, reliability, trustworthiness, and protective care of a God who is the exemplar of all goodness and the worthy object of ultimate admiration.

We find this image of God as strong, loving, trustworthy model in many passages by which Jesus portrays himself.

> Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden in light. (Matt. 11:2830)

Jesus' parables of the Lost Sheep, Lost Coin, and Prodigal Son (more appropriately renamed the Waiting Father) found in Luke 15 portray God as the dependable, consistently caring parent who takes delight in his children and stands by them whatever their behavior. A favorite story about Jesus has him welcoming little children, holding them despite the attempts of his disciples to protect Jesus from them, as though they might be a hindrance or a nuisance.

> But Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs." (Matthew 19:13-15)

We admire and trust a Messiah who loves and accepts children and offers rest to the weary; we admire and trust a God who accepts back his wayward son without reproach or reprisal. Such a Messiah, such a God, becomes the respected and trusted model of goodness. Knowing the whole world is in the hands of a God like that makes us feel safe and secure.

**God as Mate**

Even though the child idealizes the parent who mirrors appreciation and love back to the child, the child develops during early childhood the need to see and understand, as well as be seen and understood by, someone like herself. Initially this need may show up in the child's creation of imaginary playmates, and it certainly develops as the child forms real friendships with children her own age. In these relationships we had the opportunity as children to practice our own mirroring of others even as they became mirrors of ourselves. The "pals" and "chums" and "buddies" of childhood provide equal and mutual relationships in which children act out for each other the roles they have observed their parents modeling for them. Often enough parents can hear their own favorite expressions coming out of their children's mouths, sometimes with the same intonations and accompanied by the same gestures. But the children also mimic each other's phrases, intonations, postures, and gestures so that they become like identical twins or clones of each other. This is why Kohut has called this need to be like someone else an "alter-ego" or "twinship" need.

Ultimately we direct that need toward our own parents. We need to be validated and accepted by our parents, and that need implies to us that we need to be like them and we need them to see us as like them. That is, we want to be like the persons who admire us and whom we simultaneously idealize and admire. Otherwise we feel odd or strange and out-of-place. And our sense of validation is called into question, for we can't imagine that another person could really understand us, admire us, and endorse our identity unless we are essentially similar.

It's just the same in our relationship to God. We need to believe that we are somehow like God, not total strangers or aliens to God. To feel at home in the creation we need to feel kin to the Creator.

Christians have sometimes stressed the total otherness of God and emphasized the gap between God and God's creation. The book of Job represents that tradition within the Bible itself. In chapters 38-41 God, speaking out of a whirlwind, taunts Job:

> Job 38:2-13 (NRSV) "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Gird up your loins like a man, I will question you, and you shall declare to me. Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements—surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy? Or who shut in the sea with doors when it burst out from the womb?--when I

> made the clouds its garment, and thick darkness its swaddling band, and prescribed bounds for it, and set bars and doors, and said, 'Thus far shall you come, and no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stopped'? Have you commanded the morning since your days began, and caused the dawn to know its place, so that it might take hold of the skirts of the earth, and the wicked be shaken out of it?

After continuing at length with similar questions about the weather, the constellations, and wild animals God demands a response from Job, who declares compliantly:

> "See, I am of small account; what shall I answer you? I lay my hand on my mouth. {5} I have spoken once, and I will not answer; twice, but will proceed no further." (Job 40:4-5)

At this, God out of the whirlwind renews his attack, castigating Job for daring to question God, and two chapters later Job responds even more abashedly:

> "I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted. 'Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?' Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. . . . I have heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes." (Job 42:2-3)

In the end God restores all of Job's fortunes, but only after Job has been compelled to acknowledge the enormous gap between human beings and their Creator God, who is great beyond all human capacity to understand. Job represents the biblical tradition that portrays God as the unimaginably great parent figure, totally above, beyond, and unlike the paltry creation that is God's hobby and handiwork. In this tradition God can be idealized, but God can never be a mate.

Equally strong, however, is the biblical tradition that paints a bond between God and human beings. Already in Genesis 1 God creates humankind "in our image, according to our likeness" and appoints human beings as God's surrogates, carrying out God's sovereignty over the creation in God's stead. If not mates, human beings are portrayed here as God's colleagues.

The theme is repeated in Psalm 8, where human beings are described as made just "a little lower than God" and crowned, like God, "with glory and honor." In phrases reminiscent of Genesis 1, human beings are described as having "dominion" over the works of God, who has "put all things under their feet."

The kinship with God becomes paramount, however, through God's birth as a baby, an act by which God has become like us so that we may fulfil our need to be like God.

> Though Jesus was in the form of God, he did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. (Philippians 2:6-7)

By joining the human family, God is not only "God-with-us" (Emmanuel), but "God-like-us." In John's Gospel Jesus even declares his disciples to be his friends:

> I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. (John 15:15)

Here Jesus allows the disciples into his confidence. Maintaining no secrets, withholding from them no special knowledge, Jesus admits them to his inner circle of peers. predicting that,as they have shared the fullness of his life, they will also share the fullness of his death (and resurrection).

Interestingly enough, Jesus, the human God, provides also the model from which all human parents can learn how to meet their children's need to be their mates. They need to view their parenthood, not as a prerogative to be exploited, but as a power to be shared, even as a power to be given up so that their children may feel empowered to become mature adults themselves. This is especially the challenge for parents of adolescent children, who need for their parents to become more like friends than overseers, more like mates than masters.

**Summary**

The Gospel of God's unconditional acceptance and love of humanity and of each person I have taken to be the measure of Christian maturity. When a person truly experiences herself as the cherished object of God's steadfast love, whatever may be the ups and downs of her daily thoughts, words, and deeds, she also experiences a growing capacity to love and trust God above all else and to love her neighbor exactly because God's love has freed her to love and trust herself. Secure in the knowledge that she is loved because she is actually lovable, she doesn't need to cling to love, but is able to share it without a threat of loss or deprivation. And she will be far along the path to Christian maturity.

God's unconditional acceptance of human beings parallels the unconditional acceptance that parents will ideally give their children. Through mirroring they show their attunement to their children and admiration for them as prized persons. Through modeling they earn their children's respect and admiration and reassure their children that their childhood world will be safe and protected in their parents' strong, reliable care. By becoming their children's mates they help their children make the transition from childhood to adulthood, confident that, like their parents, they have the qualities necessary to pursue their own lives and to provide mirroring, modeling, and mating for others. The self-esteem, security, and sense of personal competence that come from this good parenting provide the basis on which we are able to experience and understand God and God's love for us, this Gospel core of Christian maturity.

Every other mark of Christian maturity derives, in my view and in the Lutheran confessional point of view, from this Gospel foundation. Christian maturity is about liberation, about freedom (Gal. 5:1).[8] The life-giving affirmation that comes from the Gospel frees us from preoccupation with ourselves, our character, and our status[9] so that we may notice the signs of God's gracious activity in ourselves and in the ordinary events of everyday life and respond with a self-forgetful appreciation, affection, and generosity.

Karen, whom I described at the beginning of this chapter, is a truly admirable woman, outstanding in her profession, devoted to husband and children, generous with church, school, and charities. The values she and her husband share motivate them to look beyond their own well-being to the needs of others. On the face of it she seems like a spiritually mature Christian and a model for others.

From the description of her that I have provided, however, we don't know what it is that fundamentally drives her and sustains her in her high level of activity. If she is driven primarily by "Law," she may be trying to prove that she is the perfect Wonderwoman, who can simultaneously juggle work, home and family, school, church, and community responsibilities without complaint or the need for self-care. Perhaps she grew up in a family that prized and celebrated its members only for their accomplishments, perhaps only for their acts of selfless service, never simply for being the precious persons they are. If so, Karen will feel unsure of her worth, unable to accept herself unless she is caught up in an endless succession of productive, noble, generous deeds on behalf of others. The clue to this possibility lies in the revelation that, despite a record of service that seems like near grounds for sainthood, Karen still feels guilty that she has not done more to help others.

By contrast, if Karen is driven by the Gospel, she knows she has nothing to "prove" to anyone. Experiencing herself as a unique and precious human being loved by God without condition and without demand, she throws herself into life with enthusiasm, zest, and selfless abandon. At the same time, she is able to recognize and acknowledge her limits, and, not needing to be "perfect," she sets priorities among competing demands for her time and energy. She chooses to do only what she can reasonably handle and saves herself the resentment and anger that she might feel if she tried to serve beyond her capacity to give. If, from time to time, she feels a twinge of guilt as she sits down to another dinner in her comfortable home, she swiftly reframes her experience so that her guilt gives way to gratitude rather than punishing and paralyzing self-reproach. She thanks God for the good life that she accepts as a gift from God. She prays for the well-being of all other human beings and for the planet itself. She prays for insight into the best and right ways for her to care for herself and others. And she then enjoys her dinner, goes to bed and, like God, sleeps well.

Like Karen, Tyrone comes across as an ideal person, every parent's dream child. But Tyrone is burdened. Despite his evident academic ability and diligence in working to supplement his generous scholarship, Tyrone suffers from the feeling that he has somehow abandoned his mother and two younger brothers by going off to college. Like many oldest children, he shows a tendency toward over-responsibility for others that makes it hard for him to accept the legitimacy of his own needs. Because he has grown up looking after his younger brothers (and probably his mother too!), he now finds it hard to look after himself. So even though it's important for Tyrone to take time off from his studies for fun with friends or quiet time alone, Tyrone interprets his need for rest and relaxation as lack of discipline. He imagines he should be able to study and work during every waking hour and believes he somehow is obligated to do so if he is to justify leaving mother and brothers for the luxury of a college education.

However much we may admire Tyrone's sense of responsibility and commitment to his family, it is sad to see how much Tyrone's feelings and behaviors come out of a burden of Law. He feels he must constantly be proving himself, defending the legitimacy of his way of life, demonstrating that he is a good and acceptable person. It is hard for Tyrone to see and accept that God loves him, appreciates and admires him exactly for the person he is—a person trying hard to make his own path through life as a unique and special individual, while at the same time remaining connected in appropriate and life-giving ways to his family, friends, and other persons who are important to him.

Psychologists talk about a person's "self-concept," the view we have of ourselves at a particular time in a particular situation. Research has shown that persons with a strong and positive self-concept have more capacity for a productive life in service to others than those with a weak, negative self-concept. Self-esteem is the foundation for both zestful living and committed caring. Care of self and care of others go together: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 22:39).[10] The Gospel message of God's love for every human being is the ultimate foundation for a strong self-concept, positive self-esteem, and a mature Christian life that balances care for self with care for others in a non-compulsive, joyful way that is the expression of Christian freedom.

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[8]Ernst Käsemann, Jesus Means Freedom. Translated by Frank Clarke. Fortress, 1970.

[9]The reformers called this fearful self-absorption being "curved in on oneself" (incurvatus in se), a vivid image.

[10]A major theme of Scripture. Cp. Lev. 19:18; Matt.19:19; Mark 12:31; Luke 10:27; Romans 13:9; Gal. 5:14; James 2:8.