



LOVE PEOPLE

SELF AWARENESS

The Provider

Let's consider *The Provider*.

After all he's done, *The Provider* is confounded by his daughter's statement...

"Growing up, I never thought you loved me."

Stunned, his mind rolls through all he did for her. She never missed a meal, never lacked for anything, her college was paid for; and he gave her the best opportunities money could buy.

She knew that, appreciated every bit of it, but genuinely questioned his love.

"You never listened," she quietly confessed. *"I appreciated all you did, but you never had time for me. I saw you coming; I saw you going, but I never saw you. When you were around, I feared you. One step out of line, and I'd experience a verbal lashing that left me slinking out of the room."*

The words were humbly delivered, but they still stung. In his heart of hearts he truly did love her; but he could see it. He plowed through life, and at times plowed over people. There was the rare business partner who had enough backbone to stand up to him. He simultaneously hated and admired that about these colleagues. But he didn't realize how much it came out at home. There wasn't time to reflect. He had things to do. He had to accomplish, to win, to provide. Of all the strengths and competencies he had, it was clear he lacked a critical and indispensable quality.

He lacked self-awareness.

Self-Awareness

The most consistent presence in our lives is the presence of ourselves. Even more, the bringing of ourselves is the most consistent thing we bring to each and every relationship. To one relationship, we bring the gift of humor. To another, we bring wisdom. To another, we offer a listening ear. But to all, we bring ourselves.

Which demands a critical question.

What does my presence bring?

Does my presence bring peace or anxiety, encouragement or jabs, healing or hurts? When I walk into a room to engage those who know me best, am I bringing a presence that serves them or serves me?

Am I even aware of what I bring? Do I have the needed self-awareness to love those I want to love?

It may sound odd to consider ourselves when we set out to love people. Is this not about others? Consider, though, Scripture's clearest statements on what it means to authentically love others.

Love Is...

Scripture paints a verbal picture of love...

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

(1 Corinthians 13:4-7)

Don't miss this.

When defining love, Scripture not only describes actions, but the internal dispositions underneath actions. Love is described as patient, not envious, trusting, hopeful. This emphasis on internal dispositions is boldly reinforced by the context. Directly preceding this description of love, we're told what love is not. *"If I give all I possess to the poor...but have not love, I gain nothing"* (1 Corinthians 13:3).

To put it bluntly, giving money to the poor may or may not be an act of love.

The young man who helps the elderly woman across the street...genuine love or a setup to bum a buck for smokes?

The multibillion-dollar corporation dedicating profits to fight the AIDS epidemic...genuine concern or good marketing?

The long-lost friend sending a note upon learning life has not gone as planned...true concern or hidden delight in showing her prom queen "friend" that she knows?

Which brings us back to fruit of the Spirit.

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.

(Galatians 5:22-26)

This passage on fruit of the Spirit closely resembles the just mentioned passage on love from 1 Corinthians. In one we're told, *"Love is patient."* In the other, *"patience"* is a fruit of God's Spirit. In one we're told, *"Love is kind."* In the other, *"kindness"* is a fruit of God's Spirit. We're told love *"does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud."* Envy, arrogance, and pride are contrary to the spiritual fruit of *"goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control."*

One passage is a near echo of the other.

Character matters. It matters to ourselves because we must live with ourselves. But it also matters greatly to those around us. Carry a peaceful disposition, and it impacts those around us. Carry an anxious disposition, and our anxiety impacts them as well.



Carry a patient disposition, and those closest are served by our patience. Carry an impatient disposition, and damage is inevitably done.

Put succinctly, people are loved or not loved by our self-control or addictions, our gentleness or harshness, our joy or our disgruntled attitudes.

Deception

The need for self-awareness, for a good hard look in the mirror, is only intensified when we consider the methods of our enemy.

In Scripture's final chapters we catch a glimpse of *The End*. What happens when the final scene is played and the curtain falls on human history? Many things—not the least of which is accountability for the enemy. Hear carefully what is described for the being Scripture refers to as the devil: "*And the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur*" (Revelation 20:10).

This is strong language. In the end, when all is complete, how will our enemy be described? Our enemy is described as the one "*who deceived them.*" In another place, Jesus refers to our enemy as "*a liar and the father of lies*" (John 8:44).

This is interesting, not just for clarity on the methodology of our enemy, but for clarity on what is most destructive in this world. Our enemy determines to ruin humanity. What weapon does he choose? Foundational to all he does is not violence, not sickness, not warfare, and not fear. Foundational to all he does is *deception*. He is a liar and the father of lies. If he can get us to believe things that are not true or keep us from seeing things that we really do need to see, then he can get us to do things that are destructive to ourselves and those around us.

The enemy wants to fog the mirror through which we view ourselves. He wants to keep us from self-awareness.

Scripture and Self-Awareness

Some of Scripture's most pointed words are for those who lacked self-awareness. Through Isaiah, God addressed the Israelites. Concerning their religious observances, God was very direct. "*Your New Moon feasts and your appointed festivals I hate with all my being. They have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them*" (Isaiah 1:14).

Despite the fact that the Israelites engaged their religious traditions, they lacked self-awareness of their true hearts. They were deceived. They were carrying on as if they loved God and had justifications for their love, but love was dangerously absent.

Then there are the Pharisees.

"You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness." (Matthew 23:27-28)



The Pharisees thought they had it together. They looked great to the world—and to themselves—but internally they were “full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean.”

Add to these the church in Laodicea. *“You say, ‘I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.’ But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked”* (Revelation 3:17).

Each group had their external justifications for their internal realities. The Israelites held their festivals, but their rituals were hollow and offensive. The Pharisees played the part externally, but they lacked true internal commitment. The Laodiceans believed their material wealth displayed God’s favor, but they were *“wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked.”*

Each of these thought one thing about themselves, but they lacked the self-awareness that would ground them in reality. They did not see what was truly going on.

Why? What kept them from seeing reality?

Let’s consider four broad categories: inflated view of self, inflated view of others, inflated view of _____, and innocent errors. The first two are represented by Mr. Blunt and Miss Timid.

Mr. Blunt

Mr. Blunt speaks his mind. He doesn’t care what other people think or feel. He tells it like it is. At times, such forthrightness is refreshing. His colleagues and partners are grateful to know exactly where he stands.

At other times, Mr. Blunt does damage. He fails to recognize the nuances of relating to others and consistently leaves a trail of “beat-up bodies” in his path. He may or may not intend to do this. Sometimes he doesn’t even know it’s happened. He just keeps plowing ahead.

If Mr. Blunt is on one end of a spectrum, Miss Timid on the other.

Miss Timid is highly considerate. She instinctively knows how people feel and tailors her every word to their disposition. Her colleagues and friends greatly appreciate her thoughtfulness. They seek her out. They open up to her and tell her their frustrations and struggles, their hopes and dreams.

Over time, though, her affirmations lose their power. Yes, the people around her appreciate her positive perspective. But it’s so consistently positive, they begin to doubt her authenticity. She always says kind things. She never corrects. People don’t fully know how to take her. Relationships grow a bit more distant. She doesn’t understand. Why is this happening? She wouldn’t dream of hurting anybody.

Mr. Blunt and Miss Timid. What can we learn from them? Let’s take them one at a time.

Inflated View of Self

Mr. Blunt is arrogant. It oozes from his presence. Scripture has strong words for arrogance.



To King Saul, it was said, *“For rebellion is like the sin of divination, and arrogance like the evil of idolatry”* (1 Samuel 15:23).

And concerning God’s coming judgment it is said, *“The arrogance of man will be brought low and human pride humbled; the LORD alone will be exalted in that day* (Isaiah 2:17).

In each of these statements, arrogance is disrobed and shown for what it truly is. Arrogance is more than inflated confidence. It is idolatry. When we give ourselves godlike status—idolize ourselves—we are attempting to be something we are not. We are not God.

We see no need to consider if we’re doing damage to the people around us. We’re the final authority on all things. Arrogance deafens our ears to input of others because we know best.

This thinking is dangerously flawed. Humility enriches a life not just because it’s right, but also because it is useful. When we humble ourselves, we are increasingly open to hear what we need to hear.

Surely Miss Timid fairs better.

Inflated View of Others

Miss Timid doesn’t plow over people as Mr. Blunt does, so surely she’s truly loving. And to be sure we experience her this way, at least at first.

But does she really?

Scripture is clear about the danger of people pleasing.

“Am I now trying to win the approval of people, or of God? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still trying to please people, I would not be a servant of Christ” (Galatians 1:10).

And...

“On the contrary, we speak as those approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel. We are not trying to please people but God, who tests our hearts” (1 Thessalonians 2:4).

Is Miss Timid seeking to please God? Or is Miss Timid seeking to please people? She is so outwardly kind. But gentle words of kindness may or may not be pleasing to God. What if her words are not motivated by a love for people, but a fear of people?

Mr. Blunt was deceived in his view of himself; he gave godlike status to himself. Miss Timid is deceived in her view of others; she gives godlike status to people. She is giving them an unhealthy place of power in her life.

She would never view herself as doing damage; she’s far too nice for that. To be authentically loving, though, there are times it takes far more than niceness. It takes courage to do what others neither expect nor want. Timid living is contrary to an authentic trust in Christ—so much so that Scripture lists the cowardly in an unexpected manner.

But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars—they will be consigned to the fiery



lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death.
(Revelation 21:8).

This is bold language. The cowardly are listed right alongside the vile, the murderers, and the sexually immoral. The cowardly certainly don't feel deserving of such distinction. But when we recognize that at the core of fearing others is a bowing down to people rather than to God, we realize that cowardliness is a form of rebellion against God.

Inflated View of _____

So far, a lack of self-awareness can be traced to two broad categories: an inflated view of self and an inflated view of others. It's tempting to assume everything falls into these two categories, but there are at least two other broad categories.

What about an inflated view of *stuff*? What happens when a person has an inflated view of material things, but fails to see it? They plow over people to get what they want. They hoard what they have. They overreact when their material possessions are threatened.

What about an inflated view of *calling*? It's good to live with a purpose, but what if this purpose becomes overly central in a person's life? What if it no longer is something God has asked you to do, but instead, it has become god? Let others beware. Get in the way of that cause and prepare to be steamrolled. Love of people goes out the window because love for one's calling has been threatened.

We could consider many others. An inflated view of anything—family, recreation, adventure, sex—can cause people to be terribly unloving to those they profess to love. Idolatry is often terribly deceptive. It's not as easy to discern as we would like to think it is. A lack of self-awareness concerning inflated views of anything can wreak havoc in our lives and do damage to those we love.

Let's consider a fourth category.

Innocent Errors

Sometimes we do things that are genuinely unintentional. Our hearts are in the right place. We mean well, but we consistently do something or say something that hurts those around us. We might call this category *innocent errors*.

An innocent error is the look on a wife's face when her husband describes his day. She doesn't know she's doing it. In truth, by the end of the day she's so exhausted from chasing the kids around, she doesn't know what her face is communicating. She'd adjust if she knew it; but she doesn't even know it. And he's left wondering.

An innocent error is the whirlwind the boss brings to the office. He's on a mission. He feels the pressure and is out to get things done. Yes, this could be due to an inflated view of something in his life, but maybe not. His heart may be in the right place. He just doesn't realize how his intensity affects the people around him—people he genuinely cares about.

An innocent error might be the teacher who speaks with a tone of voice that sounds condescending. She doesn't realize it. She's simply talking with the tone of voice her



mother did. Her heart is in the right place. If she could hear herself, she'd know it; but she doesn't hear herself. She goes about her day and from time to time wonders why some in her class seem put off by her presence.

You get the idea. Self-awareness may be tied to something deep, but not always. At times, we simply need to be made aware of what we're doing, and we'll gladly change.

Which leads to where we're going.

The Gift

Proverbs tells us, *"An honest answer is like a kiss on the lips"* (Proverbs 24:26).

We want the truth. We want to know how others experience us. We want this for multiple reasons. We want it because if our outward actions are tied to an idol of the heart, we want to do business with that idol. We want it gone. We don't want to have an inflated view of ourselves or others or some other aspect of life. If someone would give us an honest answer and tell us what we need to hear, even if we don't want to hear it, then we would increase our awareness of a dangerous corner of our hearts.

We want the truth about innocent errors as well. If there are little things we could adjust to help the people around us, we want the honest answer. We don't want to unintentionally ding others in ways we could avoid with simple adjustments.

What if we were intentional about increasing our self-awareness? What if, in our quest to love others, we first held up the mirror to ourselves by discovering how others experience us?

To do so will feel risky. We make ourselves vulnerable, but an honest answer is a kiss on the lips. We don't want to go through life bruising the people around us, intentionally or unintentionally. Doing what it takes to increase our self-awareness may be the greatest gift we could give those who genuinely want to love.

Consider this. What nonmaterial gift would you most like to receive from others?

No doubt the list would include many things. From some—maybe a friend who lives far away or a family member you rarely see—you'd like the gift of time. From others, as much as you love them, you'd welcome just the opposite—a little space from them. Maybe the mother of young children would welcome a quiet weekend alone or an evening out with her husband or friends. From others it's the gift of encouraging words or honest dialogue. The list could go on. But if we really think about it, one of the greatest gifts many of those close to us could give us is the gift of their own self-awareness.

How welcomed would it be if the co-worker knew—really knew—how often he spoke condescendingly to others? Or how welcomed would it be if the friend knew—really knew—how needlessly controlling she could be? Or how healing would it be if that parent knew—really knew—how often the "quiet" comments were fully heard and fully felt? What if they all really got it—they really saw what others see, knew what others know, and made genuine efforts to address these areas. This would be an act of love. Their increased self-awareness would better your life, if they took it humbly and seriously.



Which is good, very good—but this not about them. This is about us.

If we are to authentically love people, we must first address how others experience us. To do so will take courage and humility, but it will offer a profound gift that could be life-changing for ourselves and others.

The Apply exercise for this Spiritual Outcome is designed to help us do exactly that.

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