Put Off the Old Self

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On Colossians 3, the Statistics That Reveal the Hidden Self-Harm of Our Age, and the Relationship That Makes Us Want to Be Better

The Self-Care Meme

An earlier teaching this week brought up something I want to expand on this morning. We live inside a pervasive cultural meme right now that says the primary thing you need to focus on is loving yourself. Self-care. Self-love. Self-affirmation.

And the meme is not against Scripture, exactly. The Scripture does say "love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:39). There is a love-of-self that is presupposed in the second great commandment; Jesus does not condemn it; he uses it as the measure for the love-of-neighbor he is commanding. But what has happened in our contemporary moment is that the second half of the formula, "as yourself," has been amputated from the first half, and the surrounding culture is now organized almost entirely around the loving-yourself component without the corresponding love-of-neighbor that the original commandment held in tension with it.

There is a book I read a few years ago, recommended by Bill Gates and written by a Swedish public-health researcher named Hans Rosling, called Factfulness. Rosling spent his career documenting the actual statistics of human well-being across decades, against the perceived statistics that the surrounding media environment generates. And the underlying

observation is striking: the world is, by most measurable indicators, getting better. Less violent. Less murderous. Less abusive toward women and children. Less afflicted by extreme poverty. We perceive that the world is becoming a more dangerous and fearful place because of how media operates, but the actual numbers tell a different story. We are killing each other less. Domestic violence is down. Murder rates in most cities (Chicago aside) are declining. Children are surviving childhood at unprecedented rates. A great deal of good has been happening that the surrounding news cycle does not feature.

The Statistic That Has Gotten Worse

But there is one statistic that has gotten dramatically worse during exactly the same period. And it is the statistic that is most directly relevant to what this chapter is going to argue.

We are hurting each other less. But we are hurting ourselves more. Suicide rates are at historic highs. Self-harm rates among adolescents are off the charts. Depression rates, anxiety rates, eating disorders, addiction: across nearly every category of self-directed harm, the indicators have spiked dramatically, especially in the years before and through the COVID pandemic. The self-harm being inflicted by individuals on themselves is profound in our present moment.

And here is the central paradox that the chapter wants to address. In an age that has organized itself around the cultural meme of self-love and self-care, the actual self-treatment of millions of people has gotten dramatically more destructive. We are saturated with messages about loving ourselves. We are simultaneously, by every measurable indicator, hating ourselves more than at almost any previous moment in modern human history. The self-love prescription is not producing self-love. The prescription is, somehow, producing the opposite of what it advertises.

Ken Enough

And the 2023 Barbie film captured this paradox in one of its closing visual moments. The Ryan Gosling character, Ken, spends the entire movie trying to be enough. Enough for Barbie. Enough for the surrounding world. Enough for some internal standard he cannot quite articulate. And the film closes with Ken wearing a T-shirt that reads, “I am Ken-enough.” The pun is, in its way, brilliant. Ken has finally arrived at sufficiency. He is enough. He has stopped trying to be more than he was. He has accepted himself.

And the message of the T-shirt is the surrounding culture’s contemporary gospel. I am enough. You are enough. We are all enough. Stop striving. Stop trying to become more than you currently are. Embrace yourself as you are.

The songs we sing together as the people of God are saying something contrary to that message. We are not gathering to sing “I am enough.” We are gathering to sing that we are not enough: that we are broken, dependent, in need of a Savior, and that the One we worship is sufficient where we are not. The cultural T-shirt and the assembly’s worship are pointed in opposite directions. And this chapter is going to argue that the assembly’s direction is the one that actually addresses the underlying self-harm crisis the T-shirt’s direction has been unable to reach.

Self-Indulgence Is Not Self-Care

And the self-care meme has produced, on inspection, not actual self-care but a particular kind of self-indulgence that takes different forms in different personalities. Some people respond to the meme by buying themselves things: “I deserve this. I deserve that. I deserve the next thing.” Others respond by hoarding: accumulating resources they never spend on others, building protective walls against need, treating the accumulation as the self-care. And others (and I am,

full disclosure, more in this category) respond by spending compulsively on the next thing that promises to fill some small interior void. “I cannot live without this. I cannot live without that.”

I do not know what your particular pattern is. But you have one. The spectrum runs from compulsive accumulation to compulsive spending to compulsive consumption to compulsive self-protection, and somewhere on the spectrum is the form your particular old self has taken. The Scripture’s category for what we are diagnosing here is the old man. The old human. And the New Testament address to the problem is not “love yourself more.” The New Testament address is “put off the old self entirely, and put on the new self that has been authorized for you in Christ.”

Colossians 3

Listen to how Paul develops this in Colossians 3:

> If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth. For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory. (Colossians 3:1–4)

If you have been raised with Christ. That is the conditional clause. Paul is not addressing the general population. He is addressing the people who have already undergone the baptismal death-and-resurrection that he detailed in chapter 2. And to those who have been raised with Christ, the instruction is: seek the things above. Set your mind on things above. Recognize that your actual life is hidden with Christ in God, and that the appearing of Christ at the consummation will be the appearing of you with him in glory.

This is one of the most disorienting things Paul says. Your life is hidden with Christ in God. Whatever you see when you look in the mirror is not your actual life. Whatever the

surrounding world sees when it looks at you is not your actual life. Your actual life is hidden (concealed, kept safe, stored) in Christ, and Christ is in God. And only at the consummation will the hidden reality of your life be made visible to the surrounding creation.

So whoever the surrounding cultural meme says you ought to be, whoever your Ken-enough T-shirt says you have arrived at, is not actually the question. The question is whether the hidden life that is yours in Christ is being lived into, or whether the surface life that is visible to the surrounding world is the only life you are running. And those are very different questions.

And Paul continues with the operational instructions:

> Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. Because of these things the wrath of God is coming upon the sons of disobedience, in which you yourselves once walked when you lived in them. But now you yourselves are to put off all these: anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy language out of your mouth. Do not lie to one another, since you have put off the old man with his deeds, and have put on the new man who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him. (Colossians 3:5–10)

Put off the old man. Put on the new man. And the new man is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him. Notice the continual verbs. Paul does not say the new man has been renewed once and is now finished. He says the new man is being renewed, present continuous tense in the Greek, as an ongoing process that does not arrive at a finished state in this present age.

The old self continues to age and decay. The new self continues to be renewed. Both processes are continuous. The believer's life across decades is the slow exchange of the aging

old self for the being-renewed new self. And the renewal is shaped according to the image of the Creator: meaning that we are being conformed, gradually and continuously, to the divine likeness for which humanity was originally created (Genesis 1:26-27).

The Brokenness That Underlies Both Old and New

And let me bring my own father's testimony into this for a moment Harvey Massey, my father, has been the poster child in my own family for the put-off-the-old-self pattern Paul is describing in Colossians 3.

Before he came to Christ, my dad was a bouncer in a bar. He had just enough physical strength and just enough situational toughness to make the kind of living his pre-conversion life required. He was the man who handled the problem-customers, escorted them out, dealt with the messes that the surrounding bar environment generated regularly. He was, by every measurable standard, the old self that Paul is describing in Colossians 3:5-9. Anger, occasional wrath, the kind of speech that the work environment selected for and rewarded.

And then he met my mother. And his father had just before that spoken some short, decisive words to him, the kind of words that have a redirecting effect across an entire life. Both events worked on him. Across fifty-six years of marriage at this point, my mother has continued to work on him to bring him to be the man he is today. And the result, by my own observation as his son, is one of the more thoroughgoing put-off-the-old-self transformations I have personally witnessed. Some people are raised with a comfortable Christian upbringing where the categories are familiar and the practices are routine. My dad was not raised that way. He came in late, after considerable years of operating in a very different register, and the conversion required a substantial dismantling of what had been built up by the prior decades.

And as a boy growing up in his home, he had just enough of an edge to make God seem cool. Some preachers' kids, and there is a substantive preachers'-kid testimony in our own assembly, grow up around Christian practice that has become so routinized for the parents that the kid finds it tedious or hypocritical. My dad knew where he had come from and never forgot. The conversion-distance from bouncer-in-a-bar to faithful father was vivid enough in his own memory that he never let it become routine for his children. He preserved the edge. The edge made the gospel feel real to me as a child in a way that comfortable Christianity might not have.

I was saved at five years old and grew up through the church environment, getting acclimated to the substance of it without ever quite catching the fire. It was not until much later, well into adulthood, that I caught a passion for living for God in a way that became transformative in my own life. The conversion experience at five and the transformative-passion experience at adult age were not the same event. The first was real. The second was much more comprehensive. And the second is the kind of put-off-the-old-self / put-on-the-new-self event Colossians 3 is describing.

A Different Kind of Courage

And the put-on-the-new-self life requires a particular kind of courage that the surrounding culture has often misnamed. We have, across the twentieth century, tied courage to war and to country. World War I, World War II, and the wars that followed all tied the virtues of courage to the practice of warfare. After the atrocities of the wars, God somehow got mixed up in the murder and bombing and killing, the courage of the soldier was conflated with the courage of the saint.

But the Scriptures recognize a different kind of courage. Listen to 1 Peter 2:

"Who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously" (1 Peter 2:23).

When He was reviled, He did not revile in return. When He suffered, He did not threaten. That is the Jesus-courage. And it is a different kind of courage than the bar-bouncer courage my dad was operating in before his conversion. The bar-bouncer courage is real; it takes something to physically remove a troublemaker from a hostile establishment. That kind of courage is the courage the surrounding world recognizes and rewards. It is the in-your-face, in-your-grill, take-care-of-problems-and-wipe-up-the-mess kind of courage.

But there is another kind of courage that stands in the face of power without resort to violence. When the Sanhedrin Council in Acts 5 arrested the apostles after they had been preaching in the temple, the religious leaders ordered them to stop:

> Now when they had brought them, they set them before the council. And the high priest asked them, saying, "Did we not strictly command you not to teach in this name? And look, you have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine, and intend to bring this Man's blood on us!" But Peter and the other apostles answered and said: "We ought to obey God rather than men." (Acts 5:27–29)

And Luke notes something striking about how the council perceived these men:

"Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated and untrained men, they marveled. And they realized that they had been with Jesus" (Acts 4:13).

Uneducated and untrained men. The unlearned and the ignorant, in the council's appraisal, and yet these uneducated men stood in the presence of the most educated and powerful officials in their nation and refused to back down. That is the new courage. The courage of

unlearned people standing strong in the face of the educated power-structures that surround them, because the standing-strong is not based on the person's own credentials but on the credentials of the One they are speaking for.

And the new courage operates at a different register than the old courage. The old courage is reckless: willing to use violence to address problems, easy to convert into bar-fights and physical altercations. The cowardice that is the opposite of the old courage is the milquetoast cowardice that runs in the face of danger, never speaks against evil, never disrupts the surrounding comfort. Neither extreme is the new courage.

The new courage is Jesus. Jesus, who stands up in the face of persecution and trouble and suffering, who does not yield to violence, who does not fill the air with words, but who says exactly enough to prick the hearts of his accusers, exactly enough to let them know they are standing not before another man but before God himself with their actions. That is the courage Colossians 3 is calling us to put on. And it does not come naturally. It comes through the put-off-the-old-self / put-on-the-new-self exchange Paul is describing.

The Gift of God's Presence

And the central gift that makes the new courage possible is the indwelling presence of God himself. The Spirit-presence Israel sought in the wilderness (the cloud by day, the fire by night, the divine guidance that distinguished Israel from every surrounding nation) is now available, after Pentecost, as the indwelling reality of every believer.

Moses understood this when Israel was at Sinai:

> Then he said to Him, "If Your Presence does not go with us, do not bring us up from here. For how then will it be known that Your people and I have found grace in Your

> sight, except You go with us? So we shall be separate, Your people and I, from all the people who are upon the face of the earth." (Exodus 33:15–16)

If Your Presence does not go with us, do not bring us up from here. Moses recognized that without the actual divine presence, the wilderness journey was doomed. The forty years of wandering were not principally a logistical or geographical challenge. They were a question of whether the divine presence would actually accompany the people across the wilderness, and Moses understood that without that presence, the journey was impossible.

And what was once available only intermittently to particular individuals (Moses on Sinai, the prophets at moments of inspiration, the high priest once a year in the holy of holies) has now, after Pentecost, been made available continuously to every believer. Jesus said it in John 7:

> On the last day, that great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried out, saying, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water." But this He spoke concerning the Spirit, whom those believing in Him would receive; for the Holy Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified. (John 7:37–39)

Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water. The Greek verb for "flow" in John 7:38 is continuous tense, out of the believer's heart shall continuously flow rivers of living water. Once the Spirit is received, the flow is not a one-time event. It is the continuous out-flowing of life from the interior into the surrounding world.

And the disciples received this very Spirit at Pentecost. Fifty days before Pentecost, these were frightened people hiding in rooms. Fifty days later, the same people were spilling out into the courtyards of the Jerusalem temple, overflowing with visitors from around the entire known

world, declaring the wonderful works of God in every language the surrounding visitors spoke. That is the new courage. That is what the gift of God's presence produces. And it is not available outside of God himself coming and being present with us.

The Uneasiness of Being Human

And let me name something I think all of us recognize honestly, even if we do not usually articulate it. There is a uneasiness that sits with every human being, the recognition that we ourselves violate our own principles.

This is not principally about objectively judging other people's principles. I am not the one who decides what someone else's principles ought to be. I am talking about the recognition each of us has, somewhere in our own interior, that we have violated even what we ourselves understand as right and wrong.

Has anyone in this room never violated their own principles? Anyone? Not by my objective standard, not by some external standard you might reject, but by your own internal standard, the principles you yourself acknowledge as right. Has anyone never done that?

Of course not. Every one of us has. Probably on a daily basis. We catch ourselves thinking; I probably should have said that differently. I probably should not have done that. I probably should not have acted that way. Why did I project my own words into someone else's mouth? Why am I such a storyteller that I cannot help embellishing for the sake of the storyline? The internal recognition is constant. And it is the universal experience of being human.

Now, what happens in a surrounding culture where nobody ever sees the need for that recognition? Where there is no such thing as sin? Where there is no need for repentance? Where there is no need for self-improvement or for depending on anything external to your own resources? Listen, the spirit of humanity itself is the thing that is broken. The spirit that operates

in each of us individually is, by the universal diagnostic, fractured. There is a small broken piece in every one of us. That is why we need the Spirit of God to come and fill what is missing.

Get my fractured spirit together with your fractured spirit, and that group of fractured spirits coordinates into a political party, a denomination, a cultural movement, a national identity. Republican Party. Democratic Party. Progressives. Communists. Socialists. Conservatives. And every one of those groups is acting out of what they internally experience as righteousness. Nobody is out there saying, "I want to be ugly and do bad things today. Let us create mayhem just because." Even Antifa, the contemporary anarchist movement, thinks what it is doing is an act of righteousness. They believe they are exposing the bad stuff of society, tearing down structures that need to be torn down. They have nothing concrete to replace what they tear down with. But the tearing-down is, in their self-conception, righteous action.

And the closer any human collective gets to operating from this fractured-spirit-plus-fractured-spirit dynamic without the Spirit of God to fill what is missing, the further the collective drifts from the actual righteousness it imagines it is pursuing. The farther any kingdom of man gets from being guided by the Spirit of God, the more depraved that kingdom becomes and the more its citizens suffer under the abuse of the powerful within it. We have seen enough twentieth-century history to know what that pattern looks like when it runs its full course.

Anger That Saves and Anger That Destroys

And let me say something about anger specifically, because the Colossians 3 list includes anger, wrath, and malice as things to be put off. But not all anger is the same.

Some anger is good. Sometimes it is important to be angry enough to generate action. A brother in our assembly was deeply affected by the 2023 film Sound of Freedom, a film about human-trafficking rescue operations, and his response to the film generated an active

engagement with anti-trafficking work that has continued since. That is anger turned into redemptive action. That is the kind of anger that prophets in the Old Testament displayed when they confronted injustice. That is the anger Jesus exhibited when he overturned the tables of the moneychangers in the temple.

But the anger Paul is asking us to put off is a different kind of anger. The anger that simmers as resentment. The anger that produces malice, the desire to see harm come to someone who has offended us. The anger that produces slander, the active deployment of speech to damage someone's reputation. The anger that generates outbursts of wrath that scar the people around us. Those forms of anger are not redemptive. They are corrosive. And they are the forms of anger that the surrounding culture's self-care meme either ignores or rationalizes, "I am only setting boundaries; I am only expressing my truth; I am only doing what self-care requires."

The uneasiness every honest human being carries is the recognition that we have, at moments, deployed our anger in the corrosive form rather than the redemptive form. And the put-off-the-old-self / put-on-the-new-self exchange Paul describes is the slow exchange of one form of anger for the other: corrosive anger gradually displaced by redemptive anger, malice gradually displaced by compassion, slander gradually displaced by truth-telling that builds rather than tears down.

The Sword of Damocles

And let me make a personal admission about how I myself used to mishandle the put-off-the-old-self exchange. I was raised with religious expectations hovering over my head like the sword of Damocles. The slightest failure on my part, in my own self-perception, would mean the thread holding the sword would break and my head would be cut off.

And nobody was actually putting that on me. I was putting it on myself. Something about how I was hearing the words preached, something about how I was watching the lifestyles around me, produced in my own interior a continual condemnation that I could not shake. Every failure stayed with me. Every shortfall replayed in my interior for days, weeks, sometimes years. I would never let myself up. The internal monologue was relentless.

And one of the most transformative things in my Christian experience has been learning to handle the put-off-the-old-self exchange differently. Now, when I recognize that I have failed or sinned or missed the mark, I do what one of the songs we sing today gestures at: I just say, "Cancel, Lord. You are my Savior. I am recognizing again my need of a Savior." And the cancellation does not deny the failure. It just refuses to let the failure define me. The failure is real. The Savior who covers the failure is more real. The recognition of the second reality lets the first reality be acknowledged without being internalized as the permanent verdict on my life.

And here is the transferable effect. Once you have learned to receive mercy on yourself when you fail, you become capable of extending mercy to other people when they fail. The internal exchange between Savior and confessing sinner becomes the operating pattern for every other relationship in the surrounding world. I can extend to my wife what I have been extended. I can extend to my children what I have been extended. I can extend to my colleagues what I have been extended. The mercy that flowed into me flows outward (gradually, continuously) into every other relationship the surrounding life has given me.

And that (not the self-care meme, not the Ken-enough T-shirt) is the actual address to the underlying self-harm crisis the surrounding culture is suffering from. People who learn to receive mercy on themselves stop hating themselves. The self-hatred dissolves not through self-

affirmation but through divine forgiveness, which is the only force in the universe strong enough to actually dissolve self-hatred when it has settled deep into the interior.

The Centrifugal Force

And let me bring in a physics analogy that I find useful for thinking about how the indwelling Spirit actually changes the operating dynamics of our interior life.

Take a bucket and fill it with water. Hold it upside down: what happens? The water spills out and floods onto the ground. Gravity pulls it where gravity always pulls it. That is the natural state of liquid in an inverted container.

Now take the same bucket, fill it with water, grab the handle, and start to spin in a circle with all your strength. What happens to the water? The water stays in the bucket, even when the bucket is upside down at the top of each rotation. The centrifugal force generated by the spinning overcomes the gravity that would otherwise pull the water out. Same water. Same bucket. Same gravity. Different operating dynamic, because a second force has been introduced that exceeds the original force.

And the same structural principle operates when the Spirit of God takes up residence in a human interior. The natural pull of the flesh, what Paul calls the gravity of the old self, keeps pulling us toward the patterns of behavior we have been pulled toward all our lives. The pull is real. The pull does not go away when we are converted. The pull is the gravity of being human in a fallen world.

But when the Spirit takes up residence, a second force is introduced (a centrifugal force, you might say) that exceeds the gravity that would otherwise pull us downward. The ability to walk a straight line in this life is not produced by greater willpower against the gravity. It is

produced by the introduction of a second force that exceeds the gravity. And that second force is the indwelling Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead and now operates in the believer's interior.

Have you ever felt the gravity pulling you down? Of course you have. Drugs, alcohol, sex, pornography, the addictive scrolling that consumes hours of your life without producing anything you can name: the gravity is real, and the surrounding world has structured itself to amplify the gravity at every turn. Have you opened up a social-media feed and gotten lost in the algorithmic scrolling? One video after another, after another, after another. An hour and a half disappears. You do not feel better. Nothing has been achieved. You have not taken a step toward the journey God has called you to. The gravity has pulled you exactly where the gravity always pulls.

And the only force that exceeds that gravity is the centrifugal force of the indwelling Spirit operating through the conscious practice of abiding in the Vine.

Abide in the Vine

Listen to what Jesus says in John 15, on the night before his crucifixion:

> I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser . . . Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing. (John 15:1, 4–5)

I am the vine. You are the branches. Abide in Me. The Greek verb for "abide" (menō) means to dwell, to remain, to settle in. It is the language of taking up residence rather than visiting occasionally. And the branch that abides in the vine is the branch that draws its nourishment continuously from the vine, with the result that fruit is produced naturally, not

through the branch's strenuous effort, but through the vine's life flowing through the branch into visible production at the branch's extremities.

The fruit is the vine's fruit, expressed through the branch's particular geography. And the branch's job is not principally to produce fruit through effort. The branch's job is to stay attached to the vine, so that the vine's life can produce its natural fruit through the branch's specific position in the surrounding garden.

That is the put-on-the-new-self life in its operational form. Continuous abiding in the source of nourishment, with the resulting fruit being the natural expression of the abiding rather than the strenuous achievement of human willpower. And the centrifugal force of the indwelling Spirit is the mechanism by which the abiding produces what mere willpower could not produce. The Vine's life, flowing through the branch, exceeds the surrounding gravity that would otherwise pull the branch away from its source.

The Twelve Notes

Let me offer one more analogy, drawn from music, that captures something about how the abiding life produces beauty in a way that mere effort cannot produce.

There are twelve tones in the Western musical scale. Every song that has ever been sung anywhere by anyone has struck some combination of those same twelve tones. The infinite variety of human music (across centuries, across cultures, across genres) has been generated entirely from the same twelve foundational tones.

Now suppose I (with my limited musical ability, capable of producing exactly one chord on the piano) were to sit down at a piano and just hit the keys indiscriminately. What would result? Discordance. We have a specific word for it. Discordant. The keys sound bad together when no organizing principle governs which keys are struck in which sequence.

Now suppose someone with actual musical skill sits down at the same piano and plays a piece of music. Same keys. Same twelve tones. Entirely different result. The skilled player draws out, from the exact same available tones, a beauty that I could not produce by my own effort because I lack the relationship with the instrument that the skilled player has cultivated across decades.

And the analogy to our spiritual lives is direct. Each of us is a particular note: an individual in this world with a particular sound to make, a particular vocation to play, a particular position in the surrounding garden where we have been planted. When I try to play my note by my own effort, slamming keys randomly the way the surrounding culture's chaotic energy slams them, the result is discordant.

But when the Spirit of God comes in and plays, using my particular note alongside everyone else's particular notes, something beautiful emerges that none of us could have produced individually. The variations are infinite. The combinations are inexhaustible. The Spirit is the skilled player drawing music from the available tones, and the available tones include the particular position each of us occupies in the surrounding garden. The garden plays as music when the Spirit conducts. The garden plays as noise when each branch tries to play solo.

Better Through Relationship

And here is what I have come to understand about how a human being actually becomes a better person. I used to think the path to becoming a better person ran through discipline. Through willpower. Through the strenuous application of principles to my own behavior across long periods of effort. And the discipline-based approach to self-improvement produced, in my own experience, exactly the religious sword-of-Damocles condition I described earlier: endless

condemnation when the discipline failed, endless self-flagellation when the willpower could not sustain itself across the surrounding gravity.

The actual path to becoming a better person turned out to be relational rather than disciplinary. In the 1997 film As Good as It Gets, Jack Nicholson's character (Melvin Udall, an obsessive-compulsive misanthrope who has alienated nearly everyone in his life) finds himself in a relationship with a woman named Carol (played by Helen Hunt) who keeps pressing him to say something genuine about why he wants to be in a relationship with her at all. He cannot quite get the words out. And finally, when he is being pressed for some statement that justifies her continuing to engage with him, he says:

"You make me want to be a better man."

You make me want to be a better man. That is the relational diagnostic. Not, "I have applied the discipline of self-improvement and have therefore become better." Not, "I have read the right books and adjusted my behavior accordingly." The diagnostic is, "the relationship with you is producing in me a desire to become better than I have been."

And the same diagnostic operates in our relationship with the Lord. When we enter into actual relationship with him, when we abide in the Vine rather than just admire the Vine from a distance, something happens in our interior that the disciplinary approach could not produce. The relationship itself becomes the engine of transformation. Love is the motivator. Love is the engine. Love produces the desire to become better than we have been, in a way that disciplined effort never quite could.

And we sing the song, "the love that drew salvation's plan." That love. The love that drew salvation's plan included Immanuel, God with us, being incarnate, tabernacling among us, connecting with us so that we could connect with him. That kind of connection is the kind of

connection that makes a human being want to be a better man. Or a better woman. Or a better person. The transformation is the natural result of the relationship rather than the strenuous achievement of self-improvement.

Closing

So let us be better people through relationship. Let us seek the things that are above. Let us abide in the Vine. Let us put off the old self with its corrosive forms of anger and malice and slander. And let us put on the new self that is being continuously renewed in knowledge according to the image of the One who created us.

Let the Lord be the dominant force in our lives. Not the Lord plus something else, not the Lord plus self-affirmation, not the Lord plus career success, not the Lord plus the surrounding culture's various enhancement supplements. Let him be the dominant force. And let the centrifugal force of his indwelling Spirit overcome the gravity of the surrounding patterns that have pulled at us for so long.

The cultural meme of self-love is not strong enough to address the self-harm crisis it is supposedly designed to remedy. Only the divine love that drew salvation's plan, the love that makes us want to be better than we have been, is strong enough to address what is actually fractured in the human interior. Let us cling to that love. Let us abide in that Vine. Let us play our particular note while the Spirit conducts the surrounding orchestra. And let us watch what beauty the Lord brings out of the garden across the years that remain to us. Amen.