## **Uplifted by God’s Love**

“Late Fragment”

And did you get what

you wanted from this life, even so?

I did.

And what did you want?

To call myself beloved, to feel myself

beloved on the earth.

Raymond Carver

All of the U.N.I.T.E.D. spiritual practices build upon and complement each other, but the foundation for them all is being Uplifted by God’s Love. Why? Because this is the practice that speaks to the core of the most fundamental of the kingdom values – love.

The sad truth is that we’re pretty hard on each other, and on ourselves.

If there is a single, core conflict between the values of the dominant culture and the Christian faith, it can be encompassed by this question: Where does a person’s worth come from? The culture around us claims that a person’s value comes primarily from three things: attributes, accomplishments, and acquisitions. The Christian faith claims that a person’s real value comes from the fact that God loves them deeply, faithfully, and unconditionally.

Attributes are the qualities or traits which often characterize a person. Usually, they relate to things that are physical; is someone attractive or unattractive? But they can also include a person’s personality, intelligence, and even spirituality.

Accomplishments are the achievements and successes to which we assign value, regardless of whether or not we have attained them. Examples of accomplishments could be a person’s level of education, employment, marital status, or even awards they have received.

Acquisitions are about what we have, or what we want to have, because we believe they make, or would make, us feel better about ourselves. This category includes things like money, accommodation, transportation, and lifestyle.

If we ascribe to the majority culture’s value system, then a person is only going to rate if they are good looking, outgoing, smart, educated, has a successful career, is married with children, drives an expensive car, lives in a large house, takes warm weather vacations, and that other people want to be able to say that they know them. While some of that might be good, we Christians believe that none of these have to do with a person’s actual worth. There is only *one* factor that gives a person worth – God’s love.

Because God loves you, you have all the worth that is needed. Since you are a beloved child of God, you have inherited the value of life that comes with having God be your parent. This includes the privilege to be able to make a difference in the world, to have your life count, and to have the potential to achieve what God asks of you. We believe the simple truth is this: When it comes to our worth as a human being, all people are created equal. No person is more worthy of respect, dignity, or love than anyone else. By accepting this truth, we can be uplifted beyond any need to search for our fundamental worth in who we are, what we own, or what we do.

Quite a difference, isn’t there? The constant messaging we get from the world around us is that our attributes, accomplishments, and acquisitions are what make us worthy and give us value. But the Christian faith says that our importance is derived solely from God’s love for all of creation, including every single person in it.

We’re not the first people to think about this. Questions of what defines our worth have been part of philosophical debates for thousands of years. So why do we work so hard trying to make ourselves look like the people in magazines? Why do we gather up awards, pad our resumes, or hoard so much stuff that we go deep into debt to provide a house in which to store it all? Is it to impress others, most of whom we don’t even know or whose opinions we don’t particularly care about?

The wider culture’s fixation on attributes, accomplishments, and acquisitions promotes an already deeply ingrained ingroup-outgroup sorting of people; a very easy and extremely seductive way of moving ourselves up the “worthiness ladder.” It’s so easy, and it gives us a strange satisfaction to compare ourselves to others and ask, “Who’s better?” But for Christians immersing themselves in the teachings of Jesus, ANY worthiness ladder is pointless because everyone’s already on the top rung. In Christ’s eyes, we should never be playing the game of “one-upmanship.” Extricating ourselves from that game, and even the desire to be part of it, is one of the spiritual disciplines associated with being “Uplifted by God’s Love.”

Another reason why most people are resistant to the notion that one’s worth comes from a free and unmerited gift from God is that it undermines the fantasy that we have control over our worth. People who fall into the “preferred categories” like to believe that they deserve and earn the higher status they have when in reality, “success” has much more to do with where you were born and the opportunities that were given to you, than it does with one’s skill or hard work.

Why do you suppose that 90 percent of CEOs are above average height?[[1]](#footnote-1) They did nothing to earn it, yet their physical attribute of height – an accident of birth – has in some way helped to move them up on the worthiness ladder. By our way of thinking, all of our innate abilities are associated with life gifts and spiritual gifts that are to be used to build up the kingdom of God. Any advantages we may have been given are never to be used to gain status or power over other people. Think about how frequently you hear Jesus or Paul talking about being a servant or a slave of others. Christ’s kingdom movement, and the value system which underlies it, is not designed to advance you in this world’s social hierarchy. We are all in it together, and no one is better, just differently gifted. As the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once said, “I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

Part of our struggle is that most of us want to be in control. It’s related to how we are tempted to treat faith as a way of working our way into God’s favour. The Protestant tradition of Christianity has held from its beginnings in the 16th century, that humans are incapable of earning their way into heaven. And yet even our tradition has fallen into the trap of believing that we have control over our final destiny. God’s grace cannot be manipulated or controlled. God’s love cannot be earned and there is nothing we can do to change that. And yet you will hear many Christians pay lip service to that basic tenet of our faith, and then turn right around and say, “The only way to get to heaven is to take Jesus as your Lord and Saviour.” While we think this is a great idea, it is important to remind ourselves that it doesn’t change the way God feels about us. Either God’s love for us is a gift, or it isn’t. We fool ourselves if we believe that something we can do, even if it is to have faith, will be able to increase God’s limitless love for us. As Pastor Ingrid Brown[[3]](#footnote-3) used to say in her benediction, “There is nothing you can do to make God love you more. There is nothing you can do to make God love you less. God just loves you. Full stop.”

In the end, when it comes to being Uplifted by God’s Love, the discipline we need to learn and practice is to accept God’s love and the inherent value it gives our lives, not strive to earn it.

So why is embracing God’s love as the foundation of human worth and value so important that it needs to be a spiritual discipline? It is because your ability to work with God to help build the kingdom is limited by how well you can adopt this bedrock value. You can pray, worship, serve, study, and foster spiritual friendships all you like, but if you are playing the comparison game and sabotaging yourself and your relationships in the process, you will struggle to mature as a disciple of Jesus Christ. If you are banking on the promises of wealth and lifestyle to give you a sense of worth, but still discount God’s limitless grace, you will never recognize that you have enough. If you are relying on your accomplishments to make you feel better about yourself, instead of using them to make a difference in the world, you will never truly love your neighbour. If you hope others will look up to you because of your status, rather than humbling yourself so you can serve them and form authentic and genuine relationships, you will never know the joy of not living for yourself. If you try to find your worth through anything other than God’s love, you’ll either give up and declare that you are not worthy and that your life has little to offer the world, or you will continue to push yourself and others until you either melt down or become a “Class A Jerk.”

Either way, you lose. So does the world that is relying on your gifts to help heal it. And so does God’s kingdom.

Here are the spiritual practices that help you become Uplifted by God’s Love.

***Spiritual practice 1 – “I have enough”***

The first has to do with possessions. Have a good look at what you’ve got and why you got it in the first place. Have a really good look at what you don’t yet have and why you want it. We live in a culture built upon dissatisfaction. We are taught day in and day out to be dissatisfied with our lives, pushing us to the sad realization that none of us is going to really enjoy our lives if we continue to long for the flashier, showier, more self-indulgent “better life.”

There are two things we can do to cut dissatisfaction off at the root. Start by saying, “to hell” with all those negative messages that have become so deeply ingrained in our world, enticing you to want just a little more. Instead, be Uplifted by God’s Love and say to yourself, “I have enough. My worth does not come from the quality and quantity of anything I accumulate. It comes from realizing and accepting that God’s love for me is all I will ever need to claim to be a full and equal partner in life. I have enough.”

***Spiritual practice 2 – “I am enough”***

The second thing we need to do is “take out the trash.” Stop the comparison game. Whenever we compare ourselves to others, we are inevitably engaging in trash-talk. Trash-talk is defined as putting down an opponent verbally by proclaiming how good you are. Isn’t that what you are doing when you size up a person you see walking down the street toward you and ask yourself, “Am I better looking, stronger, better dressed, more graceful than that person?” Simply by asking the question, you have chosen to enter the competition trap where you are either going to silently trash-talk your opponent and devalue their worth as a child of God, or you are going to trash-talk yourself and devalue your worth as God’s beloved child. Either way, you step away from creating the kingdom of God that transforms that world.

In the long run, cutting someone down is not going to make you feel better about yourself. That sort of mean-spirited behaviour eats away at your soul. So the spiritual practice is, every time you hear yourself trash-talking someone else (the driver who just completely cut you off, the person in front of who you has their shirt tucked into their underwear, the person you see when you look in the mirror) remind yourself that you don’t need to feel superior to them. You are enough just the way you are. Remind yourself that God created you for the pleasure of getting to know you, and that you have nothing to prove to either God or yourself on that matter.

Every time you find that you are trash-talking yourself or someone else say, “I am enough.”

***Spiritual practice 3 – Gratitude***

This spiritual practice needs to go further, though. It’s also about gratitude. Brené Brown’s studies show that it is not that “wholehearted people” are grateful because they live wholehearted lives, they live wholehearted lives because they are grateful.[[4]](#footnote-4) Gratitude is the antidote to the disease of comparison. We’re going to touch on Gratitude journals when we talk about prayer.

Remember, what we are doing here is helping God to change the world. The first step in changing the world is always to change yourself. So we invite you to counteract these destructive thoughts in your own head by simply being mindful of them. If you have one of our “I HAVE ENOUGH. I AM ENOUGH. bracelets, use that. If not, take a rubber band or some sort of easily removable bracelet and put it on your wrist. Every time you find yourself thinking that you need just a little bit more; every time you find yourself thinking, “I wish I had a new ’whatever’;” every time you want to build yourself up by knocking someone else down, then just pull on it a little (please be careful if you are busy operating heavy equipment). At the same time say to yourself these subversive words of gratitude: “I have enough. I am enough. Thank you, God.”

***Spiritual practice 4 – Money***

The final spiritual discipline associated with being Uplifted by God’s Love has to do specifically with money. Jesus talks an awful lot about money. Which, when you boil it down is about the importance of giving enough of your money away to disempower it as a determinate of worth.

Currently, there is much debate over whether the amount of wealth a person has correlates to their sense of satisfaction. One recent study suggests that the wealthier a person is, the more satisfied they are with their life.[[5]](#footnote-5) Other studies suggest that there is a satiation point in wealth after which a person’s satisfaction does not increase.[[6]](#footnote-6) With this lack of scientific evidence to conclusively judge whether money does, or does not improve a person’s sense of well-being, let us approach it from the question of worth. Is money a particularly important factor in determining worth? Does money have a power over our sense of worth that most other things don’t?

Jesus thought so. He warns us that if we elevate money to such a high status in our lives, we run the risk of letting it challenge God for supremacy. And if that happens, then living life by the values of kingdom will be virtually impossible.

**Mark 10:23-25**

Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, ‘How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!’ And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, ‘Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.’

That is not to say that being poor is good, and being wealthy is bad. We are just making the point that money has a very powerful and seductive ability to become THE way we confirm our worth, or lack of it.

Many congregations promote tithing (giving away 10 percent of your income) as a spiritual discipline relating to being grateful. While it is true that the 10 percent figure has biblical roots, it was not overtly related to disempowering the power of money in your life, but rather as a taxation method to support the religious institutions of the day as well as supporting the less fortunate of the society. For the purposes of being Uplifted by God’s Love, giving away your money is much more about benefiting you, rather than someone, or something else. The financial resources you give to support God’s work is a form of service and is discussed in *Developed through Service*.

The question is always, “How much money do I have to give away in order to disempower it as a measure of my worth?” Like anything of this nature, the amount will vary considerably, so count on some trial and error to determine what works for you. The main principle we have discerned is that you are starting to get close to the right amount when it starts to hurt a little. And the more committed you are to your money, the more it will have to hurt. It is the pain associated with not being able to purchase the acquisitions that boost your sense of worth, that will provide the catalyst for your growth. Personally, we find giving away 10% of our take home income does the trick. We also find that this is one of the most important spiritual disciplines we practice.

But what if you don’t have anything extra to give away? There are many reasons why that might be the case. The obvious one is that your income may be low. But even those with a healthy income find it difficult to find money to give away, most often because they have already committed themselves to debts or obligations which use up all of what they are earning. Typically, people will buy as much house and car that they can afford, leaving very little left over. If that is the case with you, then it will take some discipline to lower your expectations so that over time you can free up some resources to give away.

Of course, if you are below a certain level and you can’t buy food, clothes, housing, transportation, education, and have a little left over to play with, then you are in a tougher spot to disempower the control money has over your life. If your basic needs are being met, then you have the ability to scale back on the “toys” of life and be able to give some money away. If you don’t have anything extra to give, that may be impossible. No one, especially not Jesus, expects you to give away what you don’t have. Yet, even when you’re struggling financially, money still holds sway over your life. The false promise that the more money you have the worthier you are, has just as much power over those whose income is below the poverty level as it has over the CEO of a multinational company with their multi-million-dollar compensation package. We can only suggest that you focus more on the other spiritual practices associated with being Uplifted by God’s Love so that you don’t injure your soul by trash-talking yourself because you haven’t “made it” by our society’s standards.

If you need more motivation for practicing the spiritual discipline of giving, consider the fact that giving money away is fun! In a series of studies through the Harvard Business School, it was confirmed what many of us already knew; spending money on other people makes us feel happier than spending it on ourselves.[[7]](#footnote-7)

In many ways, what you’ve read here may feel counter-intuitive. We are so accustomed to drawing on our attributes, accomplishments, and acquisitions to assess whether or not we are worthy of love or belonging, and to set our life-goals, that it is extremely difficult to see another way. The Christian perspective is that all of these evaluative categories are irrelevant since God’s limitless and encompassing love is the only one which truly matters.

Remember, we do not earn our worth as a person. Instead, as Christians we both know and proclaim to the world that every person, everywhere, is worthy of love, belonging, and opportunity, simply by virtue of being a child of God. Once we fully understand and accept this fundamental truth, it clears the way for us to stop sabotaging ourselves and others, and to focus instead on the life-giving work of Christ’s kingdom movement.

Paul, one of the early church’s great teachers, tried to help us understand how God’s love is both permanent, and all encompassing, when he wrote:

**Romans 8:37-39**

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

1. *"Short Guys Finish Last" The world's most enduring form of discrimination*. The Economist, 23 December 1995. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Martin Luther King Jr., Letter from the Birmingham Jail [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. (Former) Pastor Ingrid Brown, Eagle Ridge United Church, Coquitlam, BC [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Brené Brown, *The Gifts of Imperfection*, 2010, pp. 77-85 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Betsey Stevenson and Justin Wolfers. 2013. "Subjective Well-Being and Income: Is There Any Evidence of Satiation?" American Economic Review, 103(3): 598-604. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Layard, Richard. Happiness: Lessons from a New Science. London: Penguin, 2005. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. To view the TED talk, search for “Michael Norton: How to buy happiness.” [↑](#footnote-ref-7)