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ANALOG CHRISTIAN

CULTIVATING CONTENTMENT, RESILIENCE,
AND WISDOM IN THE DIGITAL AGE



InterVarsity Press
ivpress.com

Taken from *Analog Christian* by Jay Y. Kim.

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Published by InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL.

www.ivpress.com.



LOVE INSTEAD OF SELF-CENTRIC DESPAIR

To die well, even for the atheist, is to believe that there is some way of dying into life rather than simply away from it, some form of survival that love makes possible.

CHRISTIAN WIMAN

MADISON KNEW ALL THE THINGS her family loved. Godiva chocolates for her dad and necklaces for her mom. Cookies for her grandparents and a few cute outfits for her newborn nephew. One January evening in 2014, she placed each item, alongside a photo of herself as a kid, on the ninth story of a parking garage in downtown Philadelphia and then leapt off the building to her death. Madison Holleran was nineteen years old when she ended her own life. She was a successful student athlete at the University of Pennsylvania, came from a loving family, and enjoyed several close and meaningful

friendships. More than six hundred people gathered to mourn at her memorial service.

From the look of her Instagram feed, one would never know she suffered from severe depression and loneliness. A journalist wrote that the life Madison projected on “her own Instagram feed was filled with shots that seemed to confirm everyone’s expectations,” that she was happily enjoying life, “very nearly the epitome of what every young girl is supposed to hope she becomes.”¹ But as we know well by now, the curated versions of our lives we present on social media are simply a new form of the glossy magazine ads of past generations—unrealistic, idealized, touched up caricatures designed to provoke envy and longing. The difference? While the magazine ads were obviously stylized commercials in print, social media narratives assert themselves as *real-life*; and though most of us know they’re not, the temptation and pressure to play along are often overwhelming and we end up projecting the glossy versions of our not-so-real lives, nonetheless.

Our willing participation in this ruse has led us down a path toward crisis. History will remember 2020 as the year of the pandemic, but long before Covid-19 shut things down, there was a different sort of pandemic on the rise. It’s what I call the *pandemic of self-centric despair*. By *self-centric*, I do not mean *self-centered*, *narcissistic*, or *arrogant*, although all of those things can and often are a part of our self-centrism. But self-centric persons are not always and necessarily full of themselves. While healthy introspection and self-awareness invite us to look inward in order to live outward for the sake of others, self-centrism is an unremitting gaze inward, an inability to see life as anything more than the comparative background to the foreground of our own thoughts, feelings, and perception of experiences.

We are all self-centric to varying degrees, but the digital age has accelerated our journey down this dead-end path. Before the

smartphone, most of our waking hours were spent engaging the world around us, tenuously navigating our connection to real people, places, and things, in real time. But in the age of the smartphone, at even the slightest hint of discomfort, awkwardness, or boredom, we shift our focus downward and inward, away from the world and toward the screen. A few years ago, Apple revealed that the average iPhone user unlocks their phone eighty times a day.² Why? Because much of life in the real world is uncomfortable, awkward, or boring, so we opt for digital escape. We increasingly prefer and default to worlds of our own making. The writer Carl Trueman suggests that the way we engage digital technologies has created “a world in which it is increasingly easy to imagine that reality is something we can manipulate according to our own wills and desires, and not something that we necessarily need to conform ourselves to.”³ But the digital world is not the real world and the screen is not a neutral party simply showing you things as they are, asking you to participate as you are. The screen is a carefully curated, algorithmically precise, active participant in the ruse. And it demands that we play along.

This is one of the reasons why so many of us live with a buzzing dissonance we can't quite identify. The eighteenth-century philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote about the potential dangers of what he called *amour-propre*, meaning “self-love.” According to Rousseau, this is the sort of self-love derived from comparing and contrasting our lives with the lives of others. If and when it seems we're doing better than the rest, we feel worthy of love. If and when it seems we're doing worse, we feel unworthy and unloved. As our sense of self becomes entangled with the constant ebb and flow of others' lives, we paradoxically lose our sense of self. Anna Lembke, the director of the Stanford Addiction Medicine Clinic, notes that “once we're curating a false image of ourselves, online or otherwise, we become alienated from ourselves . . . and not

tethered to our existence.”⁴ This is where we are in the digital age, existing in an untenable state of unceasing connection to the curated lives of others—all of their highlights, none of their low-lights. But unlike the glossy magazine ads, we can no longer just casually turn the page. Instead, we are compelled to continue scrolling and liking until finally we turn in on ourselves, wondering why our real lives don’t look, sound, and feel like others’ filtered images; even worse, we lose sense of real life, and our real selves, leading to self-centric despair.

This is at least in part what happened to Madison. She was “acutely aware that the life she was curating online was distinctly different from the one she was actually living. Yet she could not apply that same logic when she looked at the projected lives of others.”⁵ And Madison Holleran was far from alone. In 2018, nearly fifty thousand Americans ended their own lives. Suicide was, and continues to be, the leading cause of non-accidental death among those thirty-four years old and younger. For every person killed by another, there are more than two and a half people killed by themselves.⁶ The problem has gotten far worse, not better, since the rise of social media, especially among emerging generations—the demographic most likely to spend significant time on their smartphones. Between 2006 and 2016, the suicide rate for those between ages ten and seventeen rose by 70 percent.⁷ In that same time, the number of high school students who admitted having suicidal thoughts rose by 25 percent and the number of teens diagnosed with clinical depression rose by nearly 40 percent.⁸

“Social media may not be so social after all.”⁹ Recent data seems to affirm this idea and overwhelmingly so. Those who spend more than two hours a day on social media are twice as likely to experience perceived social isolation as those who spend a half hour or less. Those who visit social media sites the most—fifty-eight or

more times a week—are three times as likely to experience perceived social isolation than those who visit minimally—nine times or less a week.¹⁰ Jean Twenge writes that we are “on the brink of the worst mental-health crisis in decades,”¹¹ and that a significant responsibility can be attributed to smartphones and the ceaseless allure of social media. This crisis, fueled by perceived social isolation—the belief that we are alone in our feelings of failure and falling short of expectations—is one of the primary driving forces behind the pandemic of self-centric despair.

The digital age’s promise of a beautiful global village has been exposed as a scam. Stanford professor David Kennedy calls this the *irony of the internet*: “The internet, hailed at its birth in the 1960s as heralding an emerging ‘global village,’ instead . . . fed a resurgent isolationism.”¹² Rather than building community, we’ve been torn down to a collection of lonely individuals. Social media pits us against one another under the pretense of connection; we scroll, swipe, and like our way into the ecosystem, believing that meaningful community is at the touch of our fingertips. But we’ve come to realize our screens are not open doors but mirrors turning us away from others and toward ourselves. We linger alone and afraid behind the curtain of our seemingly mundane and ordinary lives while listening to the party happening always an unreachable distance away in the online narratives of others. So, what’s the answer? How can we free ourselves from despair’s choke hold on us?

LOVE.

By *love*, I do not mean its pop-culture renderings. I do not mean love as fleeting bursts of happy feelings or butterflies in the stomach. This is usually what our culture means by love. Music, film, and popular literature present us this version, that love is a swell of emotion that always *feels good*. We can see why love, misunderstood this way, would be simultaneously elusive

and addicting. Dopamine and oxytocin are the two bodily hormones that produce the feelings most often associated with love. When one person is attracted to another person, the brain releases dopamine and produces oxytocin. The combination is, from a chemical and biological standpoint, what gives the sensation of butterflies in the stomach. People experience an inexplicable yet undeniable surge of happiness. This physiological sensation is highly addictive. Research has shown with dopamine in particular, social media platforms leverage and take advantage of the very same neurological connections stimulated by slot machines and cocaine to keep addicts coming back for more. In other words, social media amplifies and feeds the addiction.

So again, to be clear, this pop-culture rendering of love is *not* the answer to our self-centric despair. In fact, we find ourselves in this crisis due in large part *because* of this grave fallacy. We've bought—hook, line, and sinker—this thin and shallow version of love, and as a result we believe it's something to be chased and retrieved somewhere on the distant edges of the murky milieu of society, culture, and the digital age. Inundated by images and posts of others who seem so loved and are loving it, we look inward and find our own lives apparently fall short. We're faced with an inner emptiness that must be filled with something *out there*, something to be earned or achieved. We obsess over how many people have clicked the little red hearts on our most recent posts, believing that *likes equal love*.

But this misunderstanding betrays the most important thing about us—*we are already loved*. We are loved more than we can possibly know. And in some ways, that's the point—we can't actually know, or feel for that matter, how deeply loved we truly are. There always exists a chasm between the magnitude of genuine love and the perception of the genuinely beloved.

My kids know that I love them. They believe it and they sense it—but to a limited extent. They know they’re loved but they have no idea just how much. They cannot conceptualize the distances I’d cross, the depths I’d plunge, the sacrifices I’d make, the very life I’d resolutely give on their behalf. And this is *me* we’re talking about—a flawed, selfish, self-preserving human being. If I love my kids this much, how much more does God love us?

LOVE IS THE FAMILY LIKENESS

“God is love.” These words from 1 John 4:8 have become so entrenched in the Christian psyche that they’ve lost their meaning. This identity-shaping truth has become a theological monument we pass by—song after song, sermon after sermon—forgetting what it really means that he who made us *loves* us. And love is not just simply something God *does*; love is who God *is*. This means so much, but one thing it certainly means is “that all His activity is loving activity. If He creates, He creates in love; if He rules, He rules in love; if He judges, He judges in love. All that He does is the expression of His nature which is—to love.”¹³ And how exactly does, and did, he express his nature?

“This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins” (1 John 4:9-10).

We too often forget or neglect the distances crossed, the depths plunged, the sacrifice made by God on our behalf. God gave his own Son, and in the mysterious trinitarian reality of God, God gives his own self for us. Love is not something to be chased or retrieved, and it certainly isn’t something we could ever earn or achieve. Love is who God is, not in theory but in story and history. He has proven this beyond doubt.

Our journey out of self-centric despair begins the moment we embrace this first and foremost truth. Dane Ortlund reminds us that it is this love that “brings rest, wholeness, flourishing, shalom—that existential calm that for brief, gospel-sane moments settles over you,”¹⁴ the stuff we most desperately need as lifelines out of the sinking quicksand of self-centric despair. But our journey cannot end here. If love is only a one-way exchange—God giving himself to us—we miss the point. Sons and daughters of God must remember: “Love is the family likeness.”¹⁵ Love is who God is. Love is what God gives. But this love is not ours only to receive. This love is given in order that this love might be given again. As Andrew Peterson puts it, “The Lord can redeem your impulse for self-preservation by easing you toward *love*, which is never about self.”¹⁶ But here’s the extraordinary thing: in the strangely beautiful economy of God’s kingdom, the giving of love is the very way to most fully receive it anew, time and again. In the words of John Barclay, “The self is not given *away* in love but given *into* a relationship with others, a relationship in which all parties will benefit and flourish.”¹⁷ Love comes most fully alive not as a one-sided transaction but as an effortful vocation.

LOVE AS VOCATION

In an average lifespan, the human heart will beat more than two and a half billion times. That’s about one hundred thousand beats a day. One hundred thousand times a day, the heart pumps life-giving blood throughout, in an unceasing rhythm of receiving and giving. The right atrium receives blood from the body and pumps it to the right ventricle, which then pumps the blood into the lungs in order to receive oxygen. From there the blood flows to the left atrium of the heart and pumps it through the left ventricle to the rest of the body. The body then returns blood back to the right atrium and the cycle continues, on and on. It is a

cohesive, harmonious flow of one and the same blood, constantly on the move, pulsing with life, in an endless state of receiving and giving.

Love works the same way. Love comes alive when it's on the move. When idle, it often degenerates into a shallow and superficial feeling, reverting us back to self-centric despair. But love at its best works like the human heart, in a cohesive, harmonious flow, moving, pulsing with life, receiving, giving, receiving, giving, on and on. In the paradoxical and profound words of St. Francis, "It is in giving that we receive."¹⁸ Or, as Barclay puts it, "The love of God flows within the community not just in one direction but in all."¹⁹ Self-centric despair fossilizes us in a permanent posture of receiving, hands open, palms up, awaiting morsels of warm feelings that will drip in now and then but eventually die from atrophy. But love in motion—genuine and meaningful love on the move—prevents such decay.

When a Pharisee asks Jesus,

"Which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments." (Matthew 22:36-40)

"All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments" means that, for Jesus, the entirety of the Scriptures, the story of what God has been, continues to be, and will be doing in the world, is encapsulated in this bidirectional trajectory of love—*loving God* and *loving others*. This is what Scot McKnight calls *The Jesus Creed*, of which he writes, "What you become and what I become will be different, but it will be the life we have been given to speak to others."²⁰ *Creed* is the most appropriate word

because a creed is a set of fundamental truths that exist together as the foundation for all of life. Jesus builds this foundation by combining two prominent Old Testament texts: “Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength” (Deuteronomy 6:5) and “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18).

Consider both texts against the backdrop of pop-culture renderings of love. Rather than a passive waiting fossilized in a perpetual state of receiving, in both of these verses, love is an invitation toward effortful action, requiring our focused energy and a willingness to risk. As psychiatrist and author M. Scott Peck puts it, “If an act is not one of work or courage, then it is not an act of love. There are no exceptions.”²¹ We mostly believe the way out of the deep, dark pit of self-centric despair is a rope pulling us up; in reality, the way out is a ladder, as we take single step after single step, by receiving and giving love each step of the way. This is *love as vocation*.

The other day, my kids were playing in the backyard. I was blowing bubbles for them, which they love to chase and catch before they pop. It’s magic to them. Just a few yards behind my exuberant littles stood my mother, tending to a small garden she helped us start. She was getting her hands in the dirt, removing leaves, caring for the soil and the life beneath it.

Pop-culture love is a chasing after bubbles. Love as vocation is gardening. And it is love as vocation—getting our hands in the dirt, patiently and methodically going about the work of receiving and giving love, to God and to others—that eventually and inevitably delivers us from our self-centric despair. As David Brooks reminds us, “Vocation can be a cure for self-centeredness, because to do the work well you have to pay attention to the task itself.”²² So, how seriously and how far are followers of Jesus to take this vocational calling to love? There’s no need for guesswork here. Jesus makes

it abundantly clear: “My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (John 15:12-13).

Love at its deepest is a willingness to lay down one’s own life. Aquinas’s famous line “Love is to will the good of the other” points to this. Followers of Jesus must daily ask two questions:

- Who is the other in my midst?
- What is required of me to will their good?

Answering these questions in real, embodied ways will inevitably take us to the very ends of ourselves. This is what it means to lay down our lives. My friend Nini models for me what it’s like when a follower of Jesus makes these two questions the guiding principles for daily life. A few years ago, she received word that her friend Brian was in dire straits. Nini is best friends with Brian’s daughter, and though unrelated biologically, she considers Brian’s entire family, family. For the past twenty-five years, they’ve spent every major holiday together. So, when Brian’s health started declining, Nini started asking what might be required of her. Doctors said Brian would need a kidney transplant if he was going to live a quality life. He was placed on the transplant list but because of his age, he was placed near the bottom and was told his best chances would be from a direct donation. As Nini puts it, for her “it was a no-brainer.”

After countless rounds of testing, she was approved as a donor. On a Friday in September of 2017, Nini walked herself into the operating room at 9:00 a.m. She climbed up onto the operating table, something she had to do completely on her own because of legality issues—meaning the entire process had to be demonstrably of her own volition. In that moment, she experienced the full weight of her sacrifice: “Something could go wrong. There could be complications. But I blinked away the tears, thanked God for allowing me

to help, and trusted him with it all, with myself, my husband, my kids, and Brian’s future.”

Nini and Brian are both well and thriving today with her kidney keeping him alive. She quite literally laid her life down, on an operating table, as a way of willing the good of another. Maybe your calling to lay down your life in order to will the good of the other today won’t require you to give up a kidney. But it very well may require you to give up some time, some energy, or some resources. It will most certainly require you to give up selfish motivations and ambitions. In big and small, seen and unseen ways, laying down our lives in love, to will and work for the good of others, is essential to Christian calling. It is the vocation we step into when we say yes to Jesus, receiving his love in order to give it away. And as we participate in this sacred vocational calling, we discover along the way that love is far more than good feelings; love is resurrection.

LOVE AS RESURRECTION

In one especially poignant scene from his book *Man’s Search for Meaning*, Holocaust survivor and famed psychologist Viktor Frankl describes a sort of out-of-body experience. During his time as a prisoner in a Nazi concentration camp, his thoughts would often wander to his wife, Tilly, whom he’d married a year earlier. She was imprisoned at a different location. One day, a small uproar between prisoners and soldiers interrupted Frankl’s concentration on thoughts of his beloved. He describes what happened next:

But soon my soul found its way back . . . to another world, and I resumed talk with my loved one. . . . I did not know whether my wife was alive, and I had no means of finding out . . . but at that moment it ceased to matter. There was no need for me to know; nothing could touch the strength of my love, my thoughts, and the image of my beloved.²³

If there exists a hierarchy of despair, life in a Nazi concentration camp must be in the top tier. It's hard to even begin to imagine the mental, emotional, and physical toll such an experience would have on a human being. Frankl would later discover that not only had his wife been killed in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, but his father had been killed in the Theresienstadt ghetto and both his mother and brother had been killed in Auschwitz. Despite the tremendous loss, Frankl found a way to not only endure but to learn and grow. The extreme trauma laid the groundwork for a lifetime of service toward others. While everyone around him was drowning in despair, Frankl was able to keep his head above water with love as his life jacket. On the surface, one would assume this an impossibility. What love is there to be found in concentration camps? These were places fueled by hate and ravaged by death; places where love went to die.

But Viktor Frankl discovered the truth about love at its fullest and finest. He did not find it by wandering about his dreadful circumstances in search of happy feelings or momentary reprieves from the agony. Instead, he found that love was pulsing through his veins, imbued in his blood and bones. He came to the realization that though the Nazis could take almost everything, even his very life, they could not take away his love. Love was his to receive and to give in endless supply. Love wasn't an external, circumstantial emotion hidden in the scrap heaps of pain; love was water overflowing from a bottomless well. And Frankl found a way to access this well. The threat of death could neither stop nor slow love's irresistible current. As he puts it, "Love goes far beyond the physical person of the beloved. . . . Whether or not he is actually present, whether or not he is still alive at all, ceases somehow to be of importance."²⁴ Though his life as normal had already been put to death, for Frankl love was resurrection. This is exponentially more true for followers of Jesus.

“We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love each other. Anyone who does not love remains in death” (1 John 3:14). It’s as serious and as hopeful as that. Self-centric despair fixes our gaze on the unfiltered reality of life and, in comparison to the shiny veneer of our social media feeds, what we see sometimes feels like death. At its most extreme, it can lead to literal death, as the statistics bear out. But genuine love, received and given, can pull us out of death and into life. Christopher Wright reminds us that “Christian love is a matter of life and death. . . . It’s what proves you have passed from one to the other.”²⁵ Self-centric despair kills. Love resurrects.

DO YOU LOVE ME?

Near the end of John’s Gospel, there are two stories about charcoal fires. In the first, found in John 18, Peter stands by a fire warming himself in the night when he’s asked three times about his association with Jesus. He denies knowing him three times. In the second, found in John 21, the resurrected Christ calls to Peter and several other disciples from shore. He instructs them to cast their nets once more after a fruitless night of fishing. They obey and catch more fish than they can handle. When Peter realizes it’s Jesus, he immediately swims to shore, where he is greeted by a warm fire.

Though the text doesn’t explicitly tell us so, from what we can gather of Peter’s personality throughout the Gospel narratives, it’s safe to assume he felt immense guilt for his denial of Jesus at the first fire. Just a few chapters earlier in the story, Peter emphatically declared, “I will lay down my life for you” (John 13:37). Now faced with the sobering reality of his cowardice, he was likely racked with shame. The scene at the second fire is often called “Peter’s Reinstatement.”

The First Fire:

People ask, “Aren’t you one of Jesus’ disciples?” (three times)

Peter responds, “No.” (three times)

The Second Fire:

Jesus asks, “Do you love me?” (three times)

Peter responds, “Yes.” (three times)

Peter’s thoughts and emotions would’ve rushed back and forth between the first and second fires. This was an opportunity to redeem himself from the failure of the first fire here at the second fire. But redemption was not his to attain. It was Christ’s to give. And how does Jesus give it? Three times, Jesus calls Peter to action:

“Feed my lambs” (John 21:15).

“Take care of my sheep” (John 21:16).

“Feed my sheep” (John 21:17).

This is Jesus’ way of pulling Peter out of his self-centric despair. The first fire had hurled him into a pit of guilt and shame. Sleepless nights wondering how he’d failed so miserably, the incessant hum of failure soundtracking every moment of his life. Peter was likely living with blinders on at this point, looking inward at all times, questioning himself at every turn. But at the second fire, he’s invited to receive love once again. The details of the scene—a miraculous catch of fish, a warm fire, three questions—were a summary of Peter’s three-year journey with Jesus. This was Jesus’ way of telling Peter, “Your story has been full of ups and downs, but it’s not over. My love for you has not waned, and I’ve still got work for you to do.” Peter *receives* the love of Christ anew as he is reinstated and restored. Peter is then called to *give* the love of Christ anew, as he heeds the call to feed and care for God’s people.

Receive love.

Give love.

I was rebellious in my early teenage years. I’ll spare you the details, but I caused my single mom much grief at the time. Once,

after an especially bitter argument, I screamed profanities at her, hopped on my bike, and rode about four miles down an expressway to a friend's house. This was the early '90s, before cell phones and the Find My Friend app. For hours, my mother had no idea where I was. As a parent, I can imagine the fear and anxiety I must've caused her that day. Eventually, my friend's mother came home from work and asked me when I was being picked up. I told her I wasn't. She called my mom and about thirty minutes later, she came to get me. As we drove in silence, I sat with an internal dread at the fate awaiting me once we arrived home.

As soon as we stepped in the door, I went to my room and braced myself for what was to come. My mom was furious, and I knew it. She still hadn't spoken a word. I heard noise coming from the kitchen followed by a familiar aroma. A short while later, my mom walked into my room and quietly asked me to join her at the dinner table. A meal was laid out. We sat down. Then, a simple invitation: "Eat." So, I did. The silence continued. I kept my head down and tried to ride out the tension, eating quickly and hoping I could get back to my room in one piece. My heart was pounding, and I was consumed by a sort of primal desperation for self-preservation. Then my mom spoke in Korean, her native tongue: "Jay. You are my son. No matter what you do, you will always have a seat at this table."

There was a clarity in her eyes and a warm conviction in her tears. In an instant, my desperate longing for self-preservation vanished and I found myself transported to the deep and baseline core of my identity—that of a beloved son. Self-centric despair gave way to love. I stood up, tears in my eyes, and hugged my mom. At this point, I was already a little bit taller and a little bit bigger than her. Physically, anyway. And even as my arms stretched wide around her small frame, it was her love, wider than east is to west and deeper than north is to south, that covered me.

Much of this book is about the digital age and our unique moment in history. But the love Jesus shared with Peter on that shore, which was the same love my mother shared with me at that table, is timeless. It's a love entirely contingent upon one's willingness to receive and give away and receive again. There are no "likes" to chase or "shares" to pursue. It's a love that refuses to compare and contrast with others because it is always specific to the singular gift of relationship between lover and beloved. It's a love strong enough to free us from the stranglehold of the digital age's deformational impact on our sense of self and rebuild us from its rubble. It's a love tethered to the love of God, flowing from his heart to the world, one person and one relationship at a time.

And it is yours and mine, to receive and give and receive and give . . .

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