

Self-Hatred and the Loving Voice of God



by TODD STRYD

Self-hatred sounds like this.

I'm a failure.

Nobody loves me. I'm way too messed up and weird.

All I ever do is make things worse.

I'll never amount to anything.

I'm a disappointment to everyone. I should just do the world a favor
and end it.

I deserve to be treated poorly.

I am weak, pathetic, and too sensitive.

I'm a piece of garbage.

For those who struggle with self-hate, these thoughts are intimately woven into the fabric of their lives. And if this is you, you probably don't have to strain your ear at all to recognize its voice.

Self-hate reveals itself in snippets and side comments. Sometimes you hear it audibly from others. Most often, it's inaudible and comes from inside your own head. For you, it may be an everyday occurrence. For others, it creeps in during times of stress and weakness. Either way, when it happens, you are your own worst enemy, and despise yourself for it. Perhaps it is frustration with how you handled a conversation: "I hurt everyone; people should stay away

from me.” Perhaps it is shame about the way you spent your time: “I’m pitiful and dull.” Perhaps it is disgust from the quantity or quality of food you ate: “I’m so gross.” Perhaps it is embarrassment because of your poor performance: “Everything I do is a disaster.”

Self-condemnation is a common human experience.¹ And if you’re in counseling ministry or a pastoral role, you also know that for some people this common human experience can become an enslaving and stubborn identity.

There is no single reason for self-hatred. An entrenched self-hate usually comes attached to social experiences, family relationships, and personal history. It follows close behind tragedy and failure, abuse or neglect, poor decisions and bad timing. And, as much as we know that self-hate is related to these, it is often complex with a mix and match of variables and reasons. Its elements are as varied as the person. For some, contempt for self is a self-given proclamation. It is the accumulation of failures, addictions, mistakes, inabilities, disabilities, and limitations. For others, self-hate is a conclusion that flows from trying to understand why certain things happened to you—for example, being placed for adoption, raped, neglected, disabled, or living in a broken family. Sometimes self-hate is a slow resigned agreement with the abusive, oppressive, demeaning voices of others—a father who berated and belittled, a mother who was removed and uninterested, a trusted adult who misused influence, a culture projecting unachievable standards. Finally, self-hate can be the product of intrusive, unwanted thoughts, a scrupulous conscience or a relentless, accusing inner voice.

People whose lives are riddled with self-condemnation populate our churches and counseling offices. Addressing it and offering help to sufferers is challenging because it is, more often than not, a complex mixture of both truth and lie. What can start out as an accurate assessment of sin (“my response was full of anger”) and posture of humility toward the righteousness of God (“I need to confess”) can quickly descend into falsehood (“God is disgusted with me”) and presumption (“God is done with me; there is no way he’ll

¹ A common experience, but not for everybody. For some, the condemning voice of self-hate is a foreign tongue and represents an experience they never will know. This shouldn’t surprise us. 1 Thessalonians 5:14 reminds us of the variation of human struggle and human transgression. The belligerent and self-righteous may not identify with this topic, but those who are faint of heart will.

keep forgiving me”). Humility and pride intertwine. Therefore, to effectively minister to those who endure self-hate and to navigate the half and partial truths, a helper needs to understand both the phenomenon of self-hate and the intricacies of the change process.

Accordingly, the purpose of this article is twofold. First, we must become familiar with the voice of self-hate. Knowing this voice will help open the door to change. Second, we’ll consider how God sets us free from self-hate.

We will start with describing self-loathing and its life-constraining rules.

The Voice and Rules of Self-Hatred

How do we pinpoint and name this enemy amidst the constant chatter of mundane conversation and small talk? Thankfully, the voice of self-hate is not subtle. Even though the sound bites of self-loathing are as unique and diverse as the individuals who speak them, self-hate betrays its identity by communicating in predictable and identifiable ways. The following are the three common forms it takes.

1. Self-hate defines your identity: “I am ____.”
 “I am bad.”
 “I am a disappointment.”
 “I am worthless.”
2. Self-hate argues for that identity: “I am not _____ enough.”
 “I am not attractive enough.”
 “I am not athletic enough.”
 “I am not spiritual enough.”
 “I am not mature enough.”
3. Self-hate says you deserve what you get: “I deserve ____.”
 “I deserve to be beaten and abused.”
 “I deserve to be bullied and left out.”
 “I deserve to be alone and depressed.”
 “I deserve to be hurt.”

Systematic and seductive, the voice of self-hate paints a skewed picture of the person. Deceived, oppressed, and stubbornly rejecting other alternatives, the self-hating individual embraces the identity that’s being proposed, parroting and agreeing with its interpretation, accusations, and rationale.

When self-hate influences a person's identity in this way, the person feels compelled to live in step with it—and the effects are life-dominating. It demands that life be organized and experienced in a prescribed way. In a sense, self-hate has rules. The rules go something like this:

- Focus on your mistakes, especially if they negatively affect other people or are blatantly sinful. Self-hate says: “Mistakes express who you are. You are not good and you don't do any good.”
- Motivate yourself with threats. Self-hate says: “Other people act out of love, but not you. Only threats, consequences, and discipline motivate you.”
- Accept blame but never credit or compliments. Self-hate says: “There's nothing to give you credit for; that's not who you are. You are fundamentally bad and a failure. Why would you take credit for something good? What is there to compliment? Just take the blame. That's the only safe and reasonable thing for you to own.”
- Apologize for every little thing and take responsibility, even if you're not sure you're at fault. Self-hate says: “In some way, even if you don't understand it, you've contributed to the problem—so apologize for it. Even things that you have no control over are still your fault (e.g., the abandonment of a parent, being touched inappropriately, having attractions you don't want, your parent's divorce). There must be some way in which you are guilty.”
- Punish yourself—do penance, feel badly, deny yourself. Self-hate says: “Someone has to pay. It's just the way things work. And we already know that it's almost certainly your fault. The next logical step after you apologize is to punish yourself.”

Through these rules, self-hate tells a story about you and builds a system to control you. The logic appears flawless. If the identity statements of the voice of self-hate are true, then the rules and prescriptions for living are consistent and understandable. But in reality, this voice is an intruder, an imposter, and a deceiver—an alternative interpretation of reality that undermines and deceives. The voice of self-hate mimics the voice of the Evil One who was a liar from the beginning. In short, self-hatred originates in Satan.

The crux of the problem is this: when self-hate is the only voice telling the story of the person's life, there is little hope for escape. Deliverance, if it's even thought possible, seems to begin and end with the capacity and resources of the self-hating person. Hope rests upon the individual's ability to conjure up a voice that is more powerful, more motivating, and more authoritative than the voice of self-hate. For the vast majority of the afflicted, any battle fought within self-hate's narrative is a losing battle. A person trapped by self-hate is disempowered, paralyzed, and finally enslaved.

How do you help those entrapped in self-hate? How does liberation happen? Contrary to our gut reaction, liberation is not achieved by the victim challenging the factual accuracy of self-hate's narrative. Its narrative is too plausible, persuasive, and experientially convincing. Liberation happens when the person entrapped by self-hate hears a different voice. This voice challenges self-hate's story and speaks the truth about identity, blame, and the rules of life. This voice is the voice of God.

The Voice of God and Deliverance from Self-Hatred

Within the storyline of self-hate, God's voice is never heard. Even though God, as the beginning and end of all things, has spoken first, authoritatively, and fully about all things, his voice is absent. And because the self-hate narrative is removed and isolated from its true context and true interpreter, it is false and filled with lies. For Christians, reality is quite different than what the voice of self-hatred would have us believe.

The full story given to us in the Scriptures begins with the voice of God. He calls things into existence and assigns their place, value, purpose and identity. Because a tragic fall comes after this good creation, Scripture then must continually remind us of the One who has the right to speak and be heard. The voice of a loving, forgiving, gracious, and personal God keeps calling out to us—and he offers an alternative understanding to the experience of the self-hater. His words about us are original, foundational, and true. They are the way of deliverance. God has not left us alone in our sin, suffering, or limitations—and neither has he left us in the clutches of an imposter's interpretation. The voice of God interjects an alternative interpretation, which is, in fact, the true interpretation. Though he accurately sees our weaknesses and sins, he defines our identity and existence differently than self-hate does.

Though self-hate offers no easy way out, God proclaims deliverance and hope. And because God is our deliverer, it's vitally important to learn what he says to the person mired in self-condemnation.

Here are just a few of the things that he says that speak directly to self-haters.

The voice of God starts with a proclamation that you belong.

"I made you." God is the creator of your every detail. Psalm 139 pronounces that you are carefully and thoughtfully "knit together" by his hands and your personhood is the culmination of creative delight and wisdom.

The voice of self-hate says: "You are an accident and a monstrosity, a creature that should never have been born."

The voice of God says: "You are my beloved creation, the bearer of my image. You are who I intended you to be."

"I want you." God cherishes you. In Deuteronomy 7, God says that Israel—and, by consequence, *you*—are his treasured possession. When God chooses the nation of Israel in order to make this people his own, he says,

"It's not because you're more numerous. It's not because you're stronger. It's not because you're more loveable. It's because I just decided to love you. I am love. I have affection for you."

The voice of God starts with a proclamation that you belong: You were unwanted, but now you are wanted. He does not love you because of your loveliness or lovableness. He loves you because he *is* love. Because of his affection and love toward his children, he gave his Son for you.

The voice of self-hate says: "You are unwanted."

The voice of God says: "You belong to me. I love you and my love does not have to be earned. It is already yours."

"I have given you a new name." God's affection toward you is the starting point and from this all other statements and blessings flow. You were adopted and brought into his family. He then gives you a new name. "For all those who

receive him he gave the right to be called children of God” (John 1:12). And, even more powerfully, “See what love the Father has given us that we should be called children of God. And that is what we are” (1 John 3:1). With a name comes a status. Our new name solidifies our status as his. It’s official now.

The voice of self-hate says: “You’re an idiot. You’re a dog. You’re worthless.”

The voice of God says: “You are a child of God. That is your true name. No other name is more true of you than the one I have given you.” His words seek to comfort—“Fear not, for I have redeemed you. I have called you by name, and you are mine” (Isa 43:1).

“I am near you.” Being near to you is consistent with God’s affection for you (Ps 145:18). In adopting you and giving you a new name, God is interested in being close to you. How do you know this? Why should you believe this? The Son of God, Jesus Christ, touched those around him. He touched people considered untouchable (Mark 8). He washed his disciples’ feet. He said, “Let the children come to me,” and he embraced them. Most profoundly, God is near to us because he sent his Spirit to live in us (Rom 8:9–11).

The voice of self-hate says: “Nobody wants to come near you. You are an untouchable. You are gross.”

The voice of God says: “I touch you. I am not afraid of you. I want to be close to you. I abide in you” (1 John 4:13).

“You are in my family.” The voice of God reminds us that, as his children, we are a part of his family. You are brought into a family story, a family identity, and a family purpose. This family has a history, a future, and a hope—and it is all yours. As a member of God’s family, you now have an inheritance and an unbreakable security.

The voice of self-hate says: “Nobody really wants you. You don’t belong here. You’re an outcast.”

The voice of God says: “You are in the body of Christ. You belong. I am your Father. You have brothers and sisters” (Eph 2:19).

“I am greater than your heart.” The voice of God tells us that he gets the final say. “When your heart condemns you, God is greater than your heart” (1 John 3:20). In other words, God gets to decide how he feels about you, whether you are wanted, the names he calls you by, whether you can or should be touched, and your inclusion in his family. You do not get to decide. Neither

do your parents or your culture or the media. Your emotions might not agree, but your emotions don't get to decide. Only God gets to decide.

This is the true landscape. The voice of God is present and active, speaking to those enslaved, deceived, and paralyzed by the voice of self-hate. To hear and consider the voice of God and the truths that he speaks about you is to walk in the way of liberation.

Which voice will you listen to?

When you become a helper to someone who is trapped in self-hate, know that you have set out on a long and difficult journey.

It is a start to even know the words of liberation! But it is another thing altogether to stay on the nitty-gritty pathway to deliverance. For those walking beside someone on the path of liberation from self-hate, let's now consider pastoral principles about how to structure your care.

Ministry Principles for Engaging Self-Hate

When you become a helper to someone who is trapped in self-hate, know that you have set out on a long and difficult journey. Keep these principles in mind as you lead.

First, notice and name self-hate. Proverbs 4:19 states that the “wicked and the foolish do not know over what they stumble.” In contrast to this characterization, the same proverb later speaks of the righteous and wise as those who “ponder the path of their feet” (4:26). In the battle for liberation from self-hate, you cannot fight something nameless. Strugglers must come to know what causes them to stumble.

A common tactic of self-hate is to convince you that you are an anomaly, an exception to the rules, and that you fall outside of the typical boundaries of the Christian life. God's kingdom, the lie says, is a two-tier kingdom with an outer circle and an inner circle. Within this paradigm, those who experience the enslavement of self-hate say, “I might be in the kingdom, but I'm in the outer circle. Everybody else is in the inner circle. Since I'm in the outer circle, the voice of God probably doesn't apply to me in the same way that it does for them.”

Scripture says something very different. There is *only* an inner circle, and it applies equally to everyone. God, in Christ, has done away with any distinctions and designations of “in” and “out.” “There is neither Jew nor Greek; there is neither slave nor free; there is no male and no female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28). The kingdom of God is not tiered. There is only one circle, and it’s the inner circle.

By noticing and naming this enemy, and by recognizing its tactics, the helper and self-hater can identify the source of self-hatred: the lies and accusations of the Evil One. We must bring the strategies of the Evil One into the light. Put his lies into words. Write down the accusations. Which rules bind? What rationale holds strongest?

Second, propose a better alternative. If there is only one tier in the kingdom of God, if there is only an inner circle, then all experiences are inner circle experiences. As you take on the role of advocate for the one-tier reality in the kingdom of God, show how this reality must change the person’s narrative. The helper’s job is to propose inner circle alternatives. This one-circle story will be a new story, radically different than what self-haters have allowed themselves to consider before.

As you propose alternatives that are based on something they have not believed and not applied to themselves, it will seem too good to be true. This inner-circle interpretation of how God sees them, cares for them, and loves them will seem far-fetched and undeserved. So you will need to be the one who holds onto the narrative for them—especially at first. Claim this improbable, inconceivable alternative on their behalf. Believe it for them and repeat it to them as their faith grows and stumbles on the journey.

Just as one walks out of the darkness of a movie theater into the blinding light of the outdoors, this process will be an uncomfortable experience for strugglers. For a time, the drastic contrast might even feel unbearable because this bright gospel alternative is so sharply different from what they have believed in the past. They may challenge you. Remind them of the truth that God speaks.

Third, testify to the liberation you see. If the person you’re working with is willing to name, notice, and consider the new narrative—even partially—he or she will begin to change. The Spirit is active in this change, and you, too,

will have to be active on the person's behalf. Notice and name the change that you see. Even if it's microscopic, train yourself to see it. Your role is to see with God's eyes and proclaim what liberation looks like. The struggler cannot see it yet. Some live in the old narrative 24/7 and won't be able to see the differences—but there will be plenty. Here are some examples of noticing and testifying:

- “I noticed that you said some different things right then as you talked about God and how you see yourself. I don't believe I've heard that before from you.”
- “I want you to know that I'm aware that you're putting into words things you wouldn't have considered speaking just a few weeks ago, let alone a year ago.”
- “The way you're asking questions is different. You're genuinely interested and open to hearing other possibilities than the typical ones in your head.”
- “It doesn't seem like you're fighting back as much when I propose a different interpretation of what God thinks about you and these situations.”

Pointing out these changes will encourage the person that God is at work.

Fourth, orient to the right kind of repentance. Repentance plays a real, significant part in the Christian life. And it plays a real, significant part when we are working toward liberation from self-hate. Yet with this particular issue, I must offer a caveat. There's primarily one type of repentance that I look for in this process of liberation: repentance from the false belief of being a Christian anomaly, a special case. More specifically, I watch for changes in the belief that he or she: 1) is unique; 2) does not deserve to be free of self-hate; 3) falls outside of the boundaries of God's grace, his promises, and his voice; and 4) exists on the outer circle of the kingdom and is only tolerated by God.

There are of course other forms of repentance, but they are not where the action is in the liberation from self-hate. So try to lead the person to repent in the ways I've just mentioned.

These principles can guide and structure the counselor's understanding of the liberation process and the construction of a new narrative in the

individual's world. Next, we will consider the enemies and obstacles that can interfere with liberation.

Help the Self-Hater Understand Why Change Is Hard

Because self-hate is a stubborn and entrenched affliction, it is pertinent that the helper communicates a realistic trajectory of growth. Doing so provides a map of sorts, and educates the individual of what the usual process of liberation will be like.

There is a difference between telling someone that counseling is going to be difficult, and telling him or her exactly why and how it will be so. When somebody understands the particulars, he or she is less likely to be surprised or ambushed by doubts and questions such as, "Is it normal to struggle to grasp these truths? Why does growth feel so elusive? Should it be this hard?" An overview of the obstacles and challenges gives the individual an opportunity to prepare for them and to persevere when they occur.

Here are three reasons why change is hard.

First, for the majority of individuals who struggle with self-hatred, a major source of challenge and difficulty is attached to their personal history. Having a history with self-hate means it's familiar and often practiced to perfection. It has been a constant companion and created a deep rut. There likely have been people in the person's life, some with great influence, who have engineered and encouraged self-hatred. Maybe it's an abuser. Maybe it's the memory of a tragedy. Maybe it's a cultural message present in the media. In light of those external voices and circumstances, someone's personal history will have a powerful authority to it. Even though the voice of God says something glorious, powerful, and liberating, it will nevertheless be unfamiliar and, therefore, open to doubt.

Second, the intense emotions infusing self-hatred make change challenging. If there's a history of self-hate, there will also be shame. Emotions like shame proclaim messages that are loud and persuasive—and oftentimes come with bodily sensations and experiences. When we feel something emotionally, it seems that much more real. And shame, over years of self-hate, feels like it speaks the truest truth. Consequently, not only is there a history that is out of step with the voice of God, there are also strong emotions like shame, that feel more accurate and true than God's voice.

Third, the instinct to pride resists the call to surrender control of our identity and accept the grace that God freely offers. We prefer to earn our way. Though this breeds a self-generated bondage characterized by comparisons (“I’m ok if I can be like so-and-so”), false standards (“It’s really important that I don’t disappoint people”), and perfectionism (“This failure cancels out everything else”), it also elevates our personal assessment of what “should be”

The intense emotions infusing self-hatred make change challenging.

and how things “should work.” Oddly, self-haters can take pride in setting their own standards even though they suffer when they fail to meet them. Ultimately though, it is hard to face pride and submit to the radical, world-upending truths spoken by the voice of God.

Faith, trust, and obedience can overcome habit, shame, and pride by God’s grace. But faith is hard and humbling work. The obstacles to change assail us from without and within. Liberation therefore means constantly living in disagreement with the story that personal history, emotions, and pride try to tell. Self-haters will need to do the hard work of disagreeing with their personal history and with what their emotions say is most real. They will have to do this repeatedly. The voice of God must be heard again, and again, and again.

This map of what to expect lays out the contours of the process of liberation in counseling. It can also preemptively address thoughts such as:

“I should be done with this by now. I thought we talked about this two weeks ago, and now we’re revisiting it. I guess this means I’m doing it wrong. I’m a failure and I should just quit counseling.”

Instead, the internal dialogue can sound more like this:

“It feels really bad to have to revisit this stuff again one week later. I’m tempted to think that I’m better than this. But I know I have to remember that slow movement and working through the pain is all part of the process. And, as hard as it is to believe, I’m going to cling to the promises of God. If

repetition and revisiting is what liberation requires, and God is delighted to give grace for it, then I can accept it.”

Over time and with repeated practice, the voice of God will brighten and lighten the heart of the one who perseveres. Sustaining this hope is key to helping the person stay the course.

The Loving Voice of God Speaks

Both self-generated and abusively imposed, the experience of self-hatred is a common human malady. Its lies are pernicious. It distorts facts and feelings and enslaves people with unattainable standards and rules. It is a seductive and challenging struggle to face.

Nevertheless, the nature and reality of this struggle does not (even slightly!) diminish the power of God to free those who are trapped by it. The loving voice of God speaks. And it is not a distant and lofty proclamation, spoken impersonally beyond the veil of heaven. Quite the contrary, the voice of God is near and personal. The voice of God is a person—Jesus Christ, the Son of God. It is Jesus who says:

“I made you”

“I want you”

“I have given you a new name, and I call you by it”

“I love you”

“You are a part of my family.”

The loving voice of God is Jesus’ voice. He speaks words of life, hope, and liberation.

Self-hate is stubborn. The false voices of world, flesh, and devil are forceful, sticky, and relentless. But lies will bow one day—fully, totally, and completely—to the voice of God. Right now, even today, God begins that good work in his people.

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