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# Self-Compassion as a Christian Spiritual Practice

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**Abstract**

One of the human dynamics that spiritual formation must address is the set of messages that play over and over in our minds. This self-talk or personal commentary frames our reactions to life and its circumstances and shapes how we relate to God and others. Often, the pattern of self-talk that we employ is negative, and in the past decade Christopher Germer and Kristin Neff have developed a series of self-compassion exercises designed to dispute this negative thinking. Their research and program of Mindful Self-Compassion have been widely reported in the mainstream media and are marketed as being secular and religiously neutral. This article explores ways in which self-compassion practices can be used as a Christian spiritual practice. This article also examines some of the implicit theological assumptions in what is presented as a religiously neutral program and considers how Christians, from a spiritual formation standpoint, might view both self-critical self-talk and its remediation through the practice of self-compassion.

**Keywords**

self-compassion, Kristin Neff, Christopher Germer, spiritual practice, spiritual discipline, self-criticism

In J. K. Rowling's world famous series, the protagonist Harry Potter comes to see that things were not quite the way he imagined. A teacher who seemed to despise him turned out to be a brave protector, and Dumbledore, his strong, wise, and resourceful mentor, is debilitated by self-loathing. In their final meeting Dumbledore expresses regret for not trusting Harry and tells him how he is wracked by guilt and shame. He tells Harry, "You cannot despise me more than I despise myself." Harry knows what Dumbledore did in the distant past, but he gently challenges his

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mentor's global negative self-assessment. As he respectfully pushes back against Dumbledore's harsh self-criticism he muses, "How odd it was to sit here . . . and defend Dumbledore from himself."[1]

## Understanding self-criticism

This intemperate self-criticism is very personal for Dumbledore, but not ultimately private because it shapes how he views others. It keeps him from trusting and makes him unduly risk averse toward Harry. What Rowling so exquisitely captured in her portrayal of this encounter is that we are often more critical toward ourselves than a good friend would ever be to us, even if they knew the full backstory that has generated our debilitating guilt and shame. The act of self-compassion is really about learning "to treat ourselves with the same kindness, caring and compassion we would show to a good friend . . . Sadly, however, there's almost no one whom we treat as badly as ourselves."[2] We allow ourselves to get away with murder when the crime is against our own soul. But don't we have a responsibility to care for our souls? Don't we need to nurture our own hearts? Don't we need to be a good and caring friend to ourselves? The stance of self-compassion toward ourselves is not about boosting our self-esteem or convincing us that we are better than average, but being empathetic and caring for ourselves as we would care for a friend.

The book of Psalms opens with a portrait of the godly person. This person does not get entangled by cynics or seek out the advice of those mired in wrongdoing. Instead, this person dwells on God's truth and leads a life of stability and fidelity. The psalmist finishes the picture by saying that this person flourishes in all he or she does. In the rest of the Psalms we are shown over and over that the righteous person has an independence of thought. The circumstances, the enemies' taunts, the cynics' jeers don't deeply affect them because they trust in God and have learned to talk to themselves, to engage in a truth-based conversation with their soul.

In Psalms 42–43 we find a writer whose world has been turned upside down. He used to lead the congregation in worship, but now feels discouraged, is the object of deceitful attacks, and is in physical agony. What a difficult place to be. He acknowledges the reality of his situation: the reversal of fortunes, the spiritual despair, and the biting personal attacks—yet he does not let these very real circumstances define him. In the midst of these rough seas he knows that God is a rock that can be trusted. He asks himself, "Why, my soul, are you downcast?" And then talks to himself: "Put your hope in God" (Ps. 42:5, NIV). He is gently firm in reminding himself to take his eyes off the overwhelming circumstances and hope in God. For many, our failures,

1. J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (New York: Scholastic Books, 2007), 713–714.
2. Kristin Neff, *Self-Compassion: Stop Beating Yourself up and Leave Insecurity Behind* (New York: William Morrow, 2011), 6.

sins, and disappointments are the triggers for speaking harshly to ourselves. Our failure stares us in the face. A range of shame-oriented emotions flood over us, and we lash out at ourselves. We don't decide to berate ourselves; it just happens. And the logic of self-attack seems impeccable—we screwed up, so we should be "corrected."

It is worth noting that a number of our spiritual heroes had moral and spiritual falls. These include such luminaries as Sarah and Abraham, David, Elijah, and Peter. Their failures include murder, loss of faith, and betrayal, but none of them turned to self-criticism when their eyes were opened and they saw what they did. This is not to say they were never self-critical, but the Bible never portrays beating ourselves up as the way to deal with sin and failure. God's gracious way comes through confession and repentance, not self-criticism. Paul is painfully aware of his own sin. He recounts that, "And when the blood of your martyr Stephen was shed, I stood there giving my approval and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him" (Acts 22:20, NIV). As Paul's relationship with Christ deepened, he became more aware of his sinfulness so that he calls himself the "worst" of sinners (1 Tim 1:15, NIV), and as he reflects on his struggle to live well, he describes himself as miserable (Rom 7:24). Yet, he does not berate himself, instead he urges his readers to follow his example by dwelling on "whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things" (Phil 4:8, NIV).[3] And he goes as far as saying he has given up self-judgment: "I do not even judge myself" (1 Cor 4:3, NIV).

David gives us a profound glimpse into his thought processes as he responds to his own failing. At first, he seemed to have successfully buried his crimes and misdemeanors, but through the word of the prophet Nathan, he came to see the vileness of his sin—the adultery, betrayal, murder, theft, and deceit. He responded to Nathan, naming his sin, with brokenness and repentance. He was deeply affected by his sense of grief. He wept, couldn't sleep, and felt isolated. In a way, David is the ideal penitent who cries out to God.

This is a man who had "sinned big" and we find in Psalm 51 that he "repented big."[4] His response was a humble brokenness before God. He writes of his transgressions, his iniquity and sin, but in this confession there is no harsh self-criticism. He has suffered greatly as a result of his sin. Not only does he bear the guilt for what he has done, but he has lost the child born of this illicit union; later the effects of this sin will manifest themselves in the tensions in his family and in his faltering reign. His suffering is of such an intensity that he feels that God "has crushed his bones" (51:8). Notice what he does not say, "You're worthless, you call yourself a king and look at the mess you made, what a loser." Instead he begins by focusing on God's generous

3. Eric L. Johnson, *Foundations for Soul Care: A Christian Psychology Proposal* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 447.

4. Nancy L. DeClaissé-Walford, Rolf A. Jacobson, and Beth LaNeel Tanner, *The Book of Psalms, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 457.

fidelity toward him and recounts his mercy, steadfast love, and abundant compassion. By contrast, a self-critical spirit begins with the self and seeks to whip oneself into shape. Christian self-compassion begins with the abundant compassion of God and speaks God's gracious words to oneself.

## Problems caused by self-criticism

The gospel calls us to be people who "clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience" (Col 3:12, NIV). And that stance of compassion and kindness should be directed both inward (self-compassion) and outward (compassion). Self-compassion is expressing the same kind of concern for our own pain and well-being as we would show for another in such a predicament. Leanne Payne directed a significant inner healing ministry for years. Her influential book, *Restoring the Christian Soul*, begins with a discussion of the virtue of self-acceptance which she saw as foundational to well-being. She referred to self-hatred as "the traitor within when temptation comes" and called our failure to accept oneself as the "first great barrier to wholeness in Christ."[5] She found through decades of ministry that self-acceptance was a virtue that needed to be cultivated for spiritual wholeness.

> If we are busy hating that soul that God loves and is in the process of straightening out, we cannot help others—our minds will be riveted on ourselves—not on Christ who is our wholeness. When we hate the self, we in fact practice the presence of the old self; we are self-conscious rather than God-conscious.[6]

This theme in Payne's writings, that a negative introspective self-focus is spiritually deleterious, is shared by many other widely respected writers in the area of pastoral care. For example, Romano Guardini emphasizes that the virtue of acceptance is foundational to spiritual growth. The maturing Christian must possess an "acceptance of what is, the acceptance of reality" which includes an "acceptance of self" and a "consent simply to be."[7] Self-criticism is seen as a refusal to acknowledge the reality of how things actually are. Adrian van Kaam in his *Formative Spirituality* writes about how self-criticism is part of the autarkic impulse which leaves one isolated and self-absorbed and supports the "'I can do it alone' mentality [that] may eat away at our interiority like corrosive acid. It weakens our reliance on Christ, leaving in its wake only a sense of our own importance."[8] Henri Nouwen extensively explored the persistence of self-rejection and observed, "These negative

5. Leanne Payne, *Restoring the Christian Soul: Overcoming Barriers to Completion in Christ through Healing Prayer* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996), 19–29.
6. Ibid., 32–33.
7. Romano Guardini, *Learning the Virtues: That Lead You to God* (Manchester, NH: Sophia Institute Press), 25–26, 31
8. Adrian van Kaam and Susan Muto, *Formation of the Christian Heart*, Formation Theology, vol. 3 (Pittsburgh: Epiphany Association, 2006), 112.

voices are so loud and so persistent it is easy to believe them . . . the trap of self-rejection . . . the greatest trap in our life is not success, popularity, or power, but self-rejection."[9] This unified voice of pastoral wisdom on the deformative power of self-criticism must be accorded a hearing as we work in this area.

In the dialogue between Harry and Dumbledore, both compassion (Harry's posture toward his mentor) and self-criticism (Dumbledore's negative internal monologue) are evident. Gilbert and Irons have suggested that self-criticism has two dimensions. The first dimension concerns the harsh self-criticism, "self-directed hostility, contempt, and self-loathing." The second dimension concerns the difficulty in directing compassion inward, "the relative inability to generate feelings of self-directed warmth, reassurance, soothing, and self-liking."[10]

From a psychological perspective self-criticism interferes with human flourishing and supports maladaptive coping strategies. "Self-criticism is destructive across clinical disorders and interpersonal relationships" and "confers risk for developing and maintaining diverse forms of psychopathology."[11] Shame, the viewing of oneself as somehow damaged or inadequate, and insecure attachments are implicated in the development of self-criticism. A spiritual formation perspective shares these concerns because our basic patterns of thought and perception affect our life with God, but we also need to be alert to the unique spiritual costs that are entailed in self-criticism. Self-criticism makes us uniquely vulnerable to Satan's accusations, interferes with God's call for us to learn to love what is lovely, hinders our resting in God's acceptance of us, and works against the Spirit-given tendency toward self-forgetfulness and often fosters an inordinate self-focus. While abundant empirical research has established that the practice of self-criticism has many negative psychological consequences, we must underscore that it is corrosive to one's soul. In the following section some of the well-established negative spiritual consequences of self-criticism are presented

## *Self-criticism and Satan's accusations*

Self-compassion helps protect us from one of Satan's great patterns of attack on believers. While Satan was defeated at the cross, "And having disarmed the powers and authorities . . . triumphing over them by the cross" (Col. 2:15, NIV), he is still active and a great cause of injury to Christians. Our opponent's strategy consists of attacks through half-truths and deceit. Jesus summed up Satan's operating strategy:

9. Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved Spiritual Living in a Secular World* (New York: Crossroad, 2002), 31.
10. Paul Gilbert and Chris Irons, "Shame, Self-criticism, and Self-compassion in Adolescence," in *Adolescent Emotional Development and the Emergence of Depressive Disorders*, ed. Nicholas B. Allen and Lisa B. Sheeber (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 209.
11. Ricks Warren, Elke Smeets, and Kristin Neff, "Self-Criticism and Self-Compassion: Risk and Resilience for Psychopathology," *Current Psychiatry* 15, no. 12 (2016): 19, 27.

"When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies" (John 8:44, NIV). So, we are up against an enemy who accuses our conscience by engaging in slanderous attacks. His Hebrew title (Satan) means "adversary" and his Greek title (devil) means accuser. Satan's stance toward us is lying accusation—he makes global negative assessments drawn from our shortcomings and perceived inadequacies (e.g., look at the mess you made of that . . . , how can you minster, when you . . . ) we need to counter this with a stance of godly self-compassion. The harsh words spoken to ourselves are not just our words, they are the messages of the Accuser, who unlike our Heavenly Father, actively hates and despises us.

## *Self-criticism disrupts our learning to love what is lovely*

Dallas Willard asserted that our primary object in spiritual formation was to "help people love what is lovely" and that we do that by "help[ing] them place their minds on the lovely thing."[12] And he suggests that "God in his glorious reality must be brought before the mind and kept there in such a way that the mind takes root and stays fixed there."[13] In a chapter entitled "Against Self-Criticism" Adam Phillips identified how repetitive and narrow the topics of self-criticism actually are. The focus is relentlessly on a negative construal of your life, it never brings you to savor the good, true, and beautiful. From his experience as a therapist, he concluded, "The self-critical part of ourselves—which Freud calls the 'superego'—is remarkably narrow-minded; it has an unusually impoverished vocabulary; and it is, like all propagandists, relentlessly repetitive. It is cruelly intimidating."[14] Habituated self-criticism does not promote the placing of one's mind on God. It is self-focused and not Godward in its focus, even when it is justified as a way of motivating one to follow God's ways more closely.

## *Self-criticism hinders resting in God's acceptance of us*

In delineating what he saw as the dynamics of spiritual renewal, Richard Lovelace documented that the American church, all across the theological and ecclesiastical spectrum, had failed to ground the Christian life in a clear sense of justification.

> Only a fraction of the present body of professing Christians are solidly appropriating the justifying work of Christ in their lives . . . Few know enough to start each day with a thoroughgoing stand upon Luther's platform: you are accepted, looking outward in faith and claiming the wholly alien righteousness of Christ as the only ground for

12. Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), 323.
13. Ibid., 324.
14. Adam Phillips, *Unforbidden Pleasures* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux), 88.

> acceptance, relaxing in that quality of trust which will produce increasing sanctification as faith is active in love and gratitude.[15]

We appear to be naturally inclined to invent religious systems where divine acceptance is conditioned on our performance. Whether that be strictness in keeping to a sanctioned diet, performing required prayers, or living up to a moral code—we seem to have a sense that we need to earn God's favor. Before sin entered the world, our first parents lived in a dynamic relationship with God that precluded a sense of favor-earning performance. And notice, after sin had entered the world, what was the first act of Adam and Eve? It was a performance aimed at affecting their relationship with God. When they sensed their shame and vulnerability—they made clothes and hid among the trees. The impulse to hide, like the act of a guilty preschooler hiding under a table, is universal. This is our default response—when we feel estranged from God we hide and switch on the performance mode. It seems that we are wired to relate to God on the basis of earning. We often are more concerned with our self-generated righteousness than with the grace and love of God. We have to learn to continually preach the gospel to ourselves and ground ourselves in "the gospel foundation of freedom from self-condemnation."[16] Then we can effectively counter this default performance orientation. Self-criticism actively undermines belief in the gospel and our reconciliation through Christ.

## *Self-criticism works against the Spirit-given tendency toward self-forgetfulness*

One of the most effective ways of calming our self-criticism is to practice self-compassion. We acknowledge the hurt we experience, speak words of care to ourselves, and remind ourselves that our experience is part of common humanity. That can keep us from having puffed-up and touchy egos and can help us become more and more self-forgetful. That is part of what the Bible means by a person being humble. William Temple captured the essence of humility so well: "Humility does not mean thinking less of yourself than of other people, nor does it mean having a low opinion of your own gifts. It means freedom from thinking about yourself one way or the other at all."[17] Humility is not a denigration of oneself, but a trained turning away from oneself to God, others, and the true and noble. Tim Keller put it this way: "Gospel-humility is not needing to think about myself. Not needing to connect things with myself... The freedom of self-forgetfulness. The blessed rest

15. Richard F. Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1979), 101.
16. Glynn Harrison, *Ego Trip: Rediscovering Grace in a Culture of Self-Esteem* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan), 2299–2312, Kindle.
17. William Temple, *Christ in His Church: A Charge Delivered by the Right Rev. William, Lord Bishop of Manchester, at His Primary Visitation, 1924* (London: Macmillan, 1925), 145.

that only self-forgetfulness brings."[18] Through spiritual disciplines we can learn to "set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God" (Col 3:1 NIV) and from that grow in self-forgetfulness. Self-criticism, however, works to keep us in the center of the spotlight.

Self-criticism is a widely employed strategy for motivating change and addressing personal shortcomings and perceived inadequacies, but research has shown it is not effective as a motivator for change and does not support psychological flourishing.[19] The wisdom of pastoral care suggests that self-criticism is spiritually deforming and that it encourages listening to one's inner critic rather than God. The Psalms and the imagistic writing of the Bible seek to capture one's imagination and through it direct our trust and attention to God. Self-criticism is a misuse of the imagination and sets our minds on our problems and shortcomings in a graceless manner. In so doing it plays right into the enemy's strategy: "The devil's favorite wrestling-place is precisely our imagination; through it he draws us to further intercourse with him, to consent and action."[20]

## Fostering self-compassion

A number of interventions have been developed to address the self-critical mindset. The one that has received the most widespread attention, Mindful Self-Compassion (MSC), was developed by Kristin Neff and Christopher Germer.[21] They developed an eight-week course to facilitate the development of the skill of self-compassion for the general populace. The structure of MSC is modeled on the well-established

18. Timothy Keller, *The Freedom of Self Forgetfulness* (Youngstown, OH: 10Publishing), 280–283, Kindle.
19. The following review articles show the evidence in favor of self-compassion as a life orientation and in doing so review the negative impact of self-critical thinking. Laura K. Barnard and John F. Curry, "Self-Compassion: Conceptualizations, Correlates, & Interventions," *Review of General Psychology* 15, no. 4 (2011) and Kristin Neff and Christopher Germer, "Self-Compassion and Psychological Well-Being," in *The Oxford Handbook of Compassion Science*, ed. Emma Seppala et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 371–386 (this article more directly discusses the negative aspects of self-criticism). Gilbert and Irons, "Shame, Self-criticism, and Self-compassion in Adolescence." The following study of college students documents the negative effects of self-criticism as a life management strategy: David M. Dunkley, David C. Zuroff, and Kirk R. Blankstein, "Self-Critical Perfectionism and Daily Affect: Dispositional and Situational Influences on Stress and Coping," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 84, no. 1 (2003).
20. Tito Colliander, *Way of the Ascetics*, trans. Katherine Ferré (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's, 1985), 74.
21. Christopher Germer, *The Mindful Path to Self-Compassion: Freeing Yourself from Destructive Thoughts and Emotions* (New York: Guilford Press, 2009); Kristin Neff, *Self-Compassion: Stop Beating Yourself Up and Leave Insecurity Behind* (New York: Morrow, 2011). The Center for Mindful Self-Compassion (www.centerformsc.org), founded in 2012, provides training and certification in their program designed to cultivate the life skill of self-compassion. The author has participated in two MSC programs led by Germer and Neff and in a week-long MSC Teacher Training program.

Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction program, with weekly two hours and forty-five minute sessions, a half-day retreat and home practice assignments.[22] The efficacy of the program has been shown in several studies.[23]

The MSC program is a therapeutic program where the majority of the time is given to practicing self-compassion skills. There is a limited amount of direct instruction on the nature of self-compassion and the limitations of self-critical strategies. A major assumption of the course is that participants value compassion and are inclined toward an empathetic and compassionate response to others. This assumption is well summarized in the tagline for Kristin Neff's website: "With self-compassion, we give ourselves the same kindness and care we'd give to a good friend."[24] Part of the training is designed to enable participants to direct the compassion they naturally extend to others toward themselves and their difficulties.

The program is designed to teach skills which support the three elements of self-compassion: self-kindness vs. self-judgment; common humanity vs. isolation; mindfulness vs. over-identification. The first element involves a stance of being warm and understanding toward ourselves when we fail or sense our inadequacy rather than attacking ourselves for these difficulties. The second element, common humanity, means "feeling connected with others in the experience of life rather than feeling isolated and alienated by our suffering."[25] Our common humanity means we are mortal, vulnerable, and imperfect and that pain and sorrow are part of our shared journey. The third element, mindfulness, runs through the entire curriculum for MSC. Mindfulness is understood as a way of cultivating a third-person perspective toward one's thoughts, noticing and observing what one is thinking instead of being overly identified with them, and to help one become less reactive.

The participants are taught several formal and informal practices that can be used to cultivate self-compassion. An example of one practice that is introduced early on is the self-compassion break. This is designed to "Provide a quick and efficient self-compassion practice that can be applied throughout the day whenever suffering is encountered."[26] As shown in the exercise below, the self-compassion break utilizes

22. John Kabat-Zinn, "An Outpatient Program in Behavioral Medicine for Chronic Pain Patients Based On the Practice of Mindfulness Meditation: Theoretical Considerations and Preliminary Results," *General Hospital Psychiatry* 4, no. 1 (1982).
23. R. J. Davidson and J. Kabat-Zinn, "Alterations in Brain and Immune Function Produced by Mindfulness Meditation: Three Caveats—Response," *Psychosomatic Medicine* 66, no. 1 (2004); J. Kabat-Zinn et al., "Influence of a Mindfulness Meditation-Based Stress Reduction Intervention on Rates of Skin Clearing in Patients with Moderate to Severe Psoriasis Undergoing Phototherapy (Uvb) and Photochemotherapy (Puva)," *Psychosomatic Medicine* 60, no. 5 (1998); Kabat-Zinn, "An Outpatient Program in Behavioral Medicine for Chronic Pain Patients."
24. Kristin Neff, "Self-Compassion." Self-Compassion. Accessed on Feb. 27, 2018. www.self-compassion.org.
25. Kristin Neff, *Self-Compassion*, 41.
26. Christopher Germer and Kristin Neff, *Mindful Self-Compassion Teacher Guide* (San Diego, CA: Center for Mindful Self-Compassion, 2017), 45.

phrases designed to employ the three elements of self-compassion, plus soothing touch, as an expression of self-kindness. A person experienced with this practice should be able to complete it in about a minute.

> When you notice that you're feeling stress or emotional discomfort, see if you can find the discomfort in your body. Where do you feel it the most? Make contact with the sensations as they arise in your body.
>
> Now, say to yourself, slowly:
>
> "This is a moment of suffering." That's *mindfulness.*
>
> "Suffering is part of living." That's *common humanity.*
>
> "May I be kind to myself." That's *self-kindness.*
>
> If you are having difficulty finding the right words, imagine that a dear friend or loved one is having the same problem as you. What would you say to this person, heart-to-heart? If your friends were to hold just a few of your words in their mind, what would you like them to be? What message would you like to deliver? (pause) Now, see if you offer the same message to yourself.[27]

This practice is introduced early in the MSC program and is featured in Neff's writing and video presentations, and this practice may be regarded as paradigmatic of the MSC practices. The practice is carefully constructed with evocative and somewhat open language so that persons with a range of experiences of self-criticism can employ it. This is in keeping with the description of MSC as being therapeutic, not therapy. The assumption is that the participants are functioning well enough to be able to adapt the scripts to fit their particular situation.

The MSC practices take very seriously the somatic manifestation of the triggering uncomfortable feeling. Participants are invited to identify where in their body they are feeling the emotion and are taught gestures to bring a "soothing touch" to the affected area. There is specific training and practice time in which participants explore various self-soothing options (e.g., hands placed over one's heart, a gentle hug) to find one that evokes a sense of care and comfort.

The MSC practices are designed to encourage the participants to adopt a self-compassionate inner voice. In place of self-criticism one learns to say something along the lines of, "Oh poor thing, this is really hard, it is embarrassing to let people down like that." Self-compassion does not mean excusing, but accountability delivered in a compassionate and respectful way. The assumption is that self-talk is part of the human condition and that it needs to be rehabilitated in a way that builds one up rather than fueling our feelings of anger, fear, guilt, and hopelessness.

Earlier we noted Gilbert and Iron's contention that self-criticism has two dimensions: self-attack and the inability to direct compassion inward. The MSC practices are designed to address both dimensions. The MSC training addresses the self-attack

27. Adapted from: Christopher Germer and Kristin Neff, *Mindful Self-Compassion Handout Booklet* (San Diego, CA: Center for Mindful Self-Compassion, 2017), 35.

piece by direct instruction on the negative effects of self-criticism, its ineffectiveness as a motivating and self-regulating strategy, and by training participants in new patterns of self-talk. Learning to direct compassion inward is accomplished through several embodied practices like "affectionate breathing" that provide simple embodied practices for directing compassion toward oneself.

Implicit in the MSC program is an understanding that humans are social animals who function best with the support and challenge of community. The MSC program is designed as a secular program, but the poems and some of the practice prompts reveal a sympathy toward a syncretistic "spiritual but not religious" orientation. The "Ethical Guidelines for MSC Teachers" calls for the teacher to be "ideologically neutral" and asks teachers to make the following commitment: "Teaching MSC I refrain from political or religious indoctrination. I may, of course, discuss the background of MSC or my own practice if asked."[28] As we review self-compassion as a Christian spiritual practice it must be noted that the manualized MSC protocol is designed to be thoroughly secular; therefore Christian resources like the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the wisdom of Scripture, and the reorienting power of prayer are not included. In the next section the question of whether this "religious neutrality" precludes Christian adaptation will be explored.[29]

## Understanding self-compassion as a Christian spiritual discipline

The question to be addressed in this section is whether the practice of self-compassion can properly be considered a Christian spiritual discipline for those Christians who are negatively affected by self-critical self-talk and who possess the personal resources necessary to practice self-compassion.[30] We understand spiritual disciplines to be means of grace to deepen our life with God and include such classical practices as solitude, fasting, prayer, and meditation. The practice of self-compassion is not mentioned in lists of traditional spiritual disciplines.[31] Yet,

28. Center for Mindful Self-Compassion, *MSC Teacher Training: Teacher Handbook* (San Diego: Center for Mindful Self-Compassion, 2017), 28.
29. Germer and Neff credit Buddhist sources for some of their insights into compassion and self-compassion, but they assert that their approach is grounded in clinical practice and empirical studies. The nature and extent of the influence of Buddhist teaching on this treatment protocol must be ascertained by Christians seeking to use MSC. Based on a thorough review of the documents, I believe MSC can be seen as a secular intervention. I judge its greatest spiritual challenge to Christianity is its implicit secular humanism and its robust promises of well-being through human effort alone.
30. The sage advice of John Climacus who suggested that spiritual treatments must be tailored to each person because "the same cure cannot be offered for all" must always be followed in considering the appropriateness of someone undertaking a spiritual practice.
31. See, Evan B. Howard, *A Guide to Christian Spiritual Formation: How Scripture, Spirit, Community, and Mission Shape Our Souls* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018), 109. A comprehensive listing of what evangelicals have historically viewed as spiritual disciplines can be found in: Tom

these lists are not intended to be comprehensive, thus its absence does not automatically disqualify it.

Self-compassion may be best understood as a kind of hybrid discipline that incorporates features of several traditional disciplines. For example, there are significant points of connection between self-compassion and the disciplines of "Confession and Self-Examination" and "Prayer of Recollection" found in Adele Calhoun's comprehensive list of spiritual disciplines.[32] The prayer of examen has a significant self-compassionate dimension to it; for example, Gallagher writes that in the examen we encounter the love of God and our hearts "are set free from self-accusation."[33] We can find significant elements of the practice of self-compassion in several historic spiritual disciplines, but self-compassion does not directly map onto any of one these disciplines. So, the question of whether self-compassion can be properly construed to be a spiritual discipline cannot be answered simply by consulting a list of spiritual disciplines in either the Bible or Christian devotional literature. The task requires a more careful look at what constitutes a spiritual discipline.

Dallas Willard understood spiritual disciplines to be "activities of mind and body purposefully undertaken, to bring our personality and total being into effective cooperation with the divine order."[34]And Henri Nouwen writes, "Spiritual disciplines are nothing more and nothing less than ways to create room where Christ can invite us to feast with him at the table of abundance."[35] These broad definitions see spiritual practices as intentional ways of spiritually engaging with Christ. By these definitions one can imagine that self-compassion practices, for a sincere Christian who uses them to redirect their thinking, could be construed as a way to "feast with him at the table of abundance."

However, such broad definitions run the risk of promoting "eye of the beholder definitions" where an individual can claim any activity as a spiritual discipline (e.g., watching TV, playing pool, or family vacations) because they are seen as ways of "cooperation with the divine order." To address a complex practice like self-compassion, a more analytic definition like the one proposed by Howard will be helpful. He suggests spiritual disciplines to be "the act or habit of intentionally constraining one's own human experience in the context of God's active presence to achieve spiritual ends."[36]

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Schwanda, "Evangelical Spiritual Disciplines: Practices for Knowing God," *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care* 10, no. 2 (2017): 220–236.

32. Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices That Transform Us* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 91–94, 249–252.
33. Timothy M. Gallagher, *The Examen Prayer: Ignatian Wisdom for Our Lives Today* (New York: Crossroad, 2006), 92.
34. Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1988), 68.
35. Henri J. M. Nouwen, "Foreword," in *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), x.
36. Howard, *A Guide to Christian Spiritual Formation*, 108.

In discussing his definition, Howard highlights the following key elements in it. First, he sees constraint upon experience as a way that spiritual disciplines affect human experience. MSC constrains one's experience by encouraging one to dispute habitual patterns of thought and by cultivating habits of self-compassion. Second, these disciplines are seen in terms of a particular act or habit. A spiritual discipline then is more specific than simply "patterns of godly living." Here self-compassion is atypical from many disciplines (e.g., intercessory prayer or Bible reading) that are more one-dimensional, in that it involves a range of physical and mental activities, but such diversity can be found in classic disciplines like *lectio divina*. Third, he identifies the discipline's object as one's own human experience. MSC is designed to have persons focus on their own experience and to challenge the view that they are a victim in this situation. Fourth, the practice of the discipline is predominantly intentional. "Practices that are compelled are not really ascetical in the proper sense."[37] MSC is taught in an eight-week program and requires a signed consent from participants; it is structured to foster a sense of personal ownership and intentionality. Fifth, the discipline is performed in the broader context of God's active presence. "Christian asceticism, as Christian, is never simply a matter of self-improvement or cultural interaction."[38] As has been mentioned, the manualized version of MSC is explicitly secular and consequently does not include the "context of God's active presence." It would seem that MSC could be seen as analogous for a Christian to something like exercise which has many well-documented benefits, but is not a spiritual discipline per se. In that MSC addresses many issues that touch the spiritual life it is worth looking for the connections that naturally occur between the gospel and MSC and examining possible appropriate enhancements to the traditional secular self-compassion training which could ground it in the Christian gospel.

## Gospel connections with self-compassion training

As we consider self-compassion as a spiritual discipline we will do well to consider again how the Bible depicts speaking to our hearts. The psalmist addresses his soul, "Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me?" (Ps 42:5, NIV). It is a question of genuine concern spoken with compassion. David calls his soul to attend to God, rather than the fear of Saul's pursuit, with the stirring words, "Awake, my soul!" (Ps 57:8, NIV). With the joy of deliverance one can say, "Return to your rest, my soul, for the LORD has been good to you" (Ps 116:7, NIV). In the victory song of Deborah and Barak, they exhort their hearts with the call, "March on, my soul; be strong!" (Jgs 5:21, NIV). The self-talk in the Bible reflects a level of

37. Evan B. Howard, *Dying to Live: Reflections on Asceticism, Spiritual Disciplines and Everyday Life Part One: Asceticism Summarized*, http://spiritualityshoppe.org/dying-live-asceticism-summarized (accessed March 5, 2018).

38. Howard, *Dying to Live*.

self-acceptance, it contains a positive call to seek after God and do the good; the speakers never browbeat themselves or speak words of self-condemnation.

Self-compassion is fulfilling your relational responsibility to yourself—respecting your value as being created in the image of God, honoring your gifts and God-given uniquenesses, and responding with empathy for the difficulties you face. To fully express self-compassion to yourself it should include: (1) an empathetic and caring word; (2) a physical action that quiets and comforts; (3) a recognition that what I am experiencing is common to humanity. This message is really not unfamiliar to Christians. What MSC provides is an awareness of the bodily nature of our self-criticism and a concrete way of disputing our self-criticism and learning to show ourselves compassion.

In examining self-compassion we must see this as a means of opening ourselves to God's compassion. The Christian expresses compassion toward oneself that ultimately comes from God, the origin of all blessings: "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights" (Jas 1:17, NIV). Through the ministry of the Spirit, our hearts are changed so we can express compassion toward ourselves and others, and we have the new identity in Christ that gives us the confidence to express compassion. Because of God's comfort to us we are enabled to be compassionate: "the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God" (2 Cor 1:3–4, NIV). The practice of self-compassion is one way we open our hearts to receive the love of God more fully.

## *Opening one's heart through MSC*

The practice of self-criticism tends to leave us spiritually closed. The constant harangue of self-criticism saps our spiritual vitality and closes our heart to God's grace. Self-criticism is all about "me" and subtly any sense of partnering with God is lost. Under the tutelage of this obnoxious complaining and critical companion, I become driven and live as if my flourishing depends entirely on my own efforts. I tend to look down and in, not up and out toward God.

Self-compassion training helps one break away from this down and in fixation. The second pillar of "common humanity" helps fight against this isolating and catastrophizing tendency. It reminds us that we are not alone in our suffering, that many people are experiencing the pain of loneliness, for example. At this point the gospel can be a remarkable resource for the person learning self-compassion. MSC trains you to see your suffering as a common experience. The Christian sees that, but also sees suffering as part of sin and brokenness, and realizes that this is not how God intended the world to be and that grace, not just our self-compassion, is available to soothe, heal, and restore. To receive this grace we must have an open heart.

### *Deeply appropriating truth through MSC*

The problem of the disconnect between what we say and what we do is a perennial problem in discipleship. Jesus aptly captures this in his question, "Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not what I say?" (Luke 6:46, NIV). It is far easier to say that God loves you than to live as if this is true. MSC can contribute to letting a truth like "There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1, NIV) sink deeply into one's being. When a person practices self-criticism, they are actively practicing condemnation toward themselves and are not deeply receptive to the gospel truth of "no condemnation."

### *Placing our suffering in a framework of God's providential care*

Through its emphasis on mindfulness, MSC places an emphasis on noticing what is actually going on. The training program encourages emotional and interpersonal awareness. This emphasis on awareness and acceptance of one's actual experience is done entirely on the horizontal level. While one is experiencing the pain of social isolation, Christians are taught to recognize that God can use this pain for a greater end. Consequently, James reminds us, "Consider it joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything" (James 1:2, 3, NIV).

In the first step of MSC when one acknowledges that this is a moment of suffering, the Christian can rest in the acknowledgement that the suffering is not pointless. God in his providential love has allowed it; this does not reduce the pain, but changes its significance, for I recognize that I can now use this to grow in my character through responding well to this trial.

### *MSC as a gesture of surrender*

The simple gesture of MSC can be construed as an important act of spiritual surrender—here understood as the realization that I am not able to run my life to bring about the kind of life I desire. It is not so much giving up, but joining the other team.

Through self-criticism and/or denial of our suffering we thought we had a way forward, but we realize we were wrong. We surrender that strategy through the humbling act of surrender, a dying to self and living for God. Even in MSC's secular form the act of spiritual surrender can be practiced by a Christian.

### *Self-compassion and the virtue of self-acceptance*

An important adaptation to self-compassion training is to frame it as a way of growing in virtue. When we conceive of growth in self-compassion as a means of establishing the Christian virtue of self-acceptance we have radically shaped the nature of the self-compassion project. We begin to see it interconnected with other

virtues, and we see the role of grace and the enabling power of the Holy Spirit. There is a place for the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and the forgiveness offered in the gospel has much to say about our practice.

Christian self-acceptance is a virtue that includes deeply perceiving and coming to terms with one's vulnerability and brokenness, appreciating the unique gifts and traits one possesses, and seeing oneself as a beloved child of God. This self-acceptance must never be seen as merely an affirmation of my "Okay-ness." Such forms of self-righteousness lead to blindness that as Niebuhr taught us is deeply destructive: "The whole history of racial, national, religious and other struggles is a commentary on the objective wickedness and social miseries which result from self-righteousness."[39] The virtue of self-acceptance must include the biblical twofold emphasis: "Cheer up! You are worse than you think" and "Cheer up! God loves you more than you know!"[40] And this knowledge must be deep and enduring so that "I come to know viscerally and steadily that I am destined for death and subject to moral failure, and in one way or another I become reconciled to this fact.[41] This deep and stable tacit knowledge about myself and God comes through training and habituation, and the embodied exercises of Christian self-compassion hold promise for helping to do this. James K. A. Smith reminds us that setting aside a habit like self-criticism requires a whole-person engagement:

> You won't be liberated from deformation by new information. God doesn't deliver us from the deformative habit-forming power of tactile rival liturgies by merely giving us a book. Instead, he invites us into a different embodied liturgy that not only is suffused by the biblical story but also, via those practices, inscribes the story into our hearts as our erotic calibration, bending the needle of our loves toward Christ, our magnetic north.[42]

It is important that self-compassion training be placed in a larger framework of growth in virtues. This connects it with the Christian virtue tradition and helps give a more significant telos for self-compassion than personal happiness.

## *Self-criticism and self-compassion as part of our everyday liturgy*

A theme in Paul's writing is the call for Christians to be constantly praying . He wrote about this to four different communities—the Romans, Ephesians, Colossians,

39. Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation*, Vol. 1 *Human Nature* (New York: Scribner, 1964), 200; *Nature and Destiny*, 1:200.
40. C. John Miller, *Saving Grace: Daily Devotions from Jack Miller* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2014), xv.
41. Robert C. Roberts, *Spiritual Emotions: A Psychology of Christian Virtues* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 184.
42. James K. A. Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2016), 83–84.

and Thessalonians. In fact he says praying always is God's will for you. "Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus" (1 Thess 5:16–18, NIV). God's will, his desire for us, is that we have lives marked with gratitude, rejoicing, and prayer. We catch a glimpse of Paul's own practice when he says he is "always offering prayer with joy" for the Philippian church (Phil 1:4, NASB), and he reminds the Colossians that he is "praying always for you" (Col. 1:3, NASB) as he did for his friend Philemon: "I thank my God always, making mention of you in my prayers" (Philemon 4, NRSV).

Henri Nouwen, who is greatly concerned about the problems of self-criticism, insightfully writes about how introspection, the basis of so much self-criticism, is in competition with prayer.

> To pray unceasingly is to channel our thoughts out of their fearful isolation into a fearless conversation with God . . . prayer asks us to break out of our monologue with ourselves and to imitate Jesus by turning our lives into an unceasing conversation with the One we call God . . . Prayer, therefore, is not introspection . . . Prayer is the presentation of our thoughts . . . to the One who receives them, sees them in the light of unconditional love, and responds to them with divine compassion.[43]

Our self-criticism is far more than just a negative and unproductive way of thinking. It can become the daily liturgy of our life where hour after hour we confess our foolishness, despise our gifts, deny our unique strengths, and fail to speak truth in love to ourselves. We are shaped by our liturgies, formed by those patterns that we repeat again and again. Paul urges his readers to have a daily liturgy that is marked by constant and faithful other-oriented prayer.

To be clear, MSC is not a form of prayer, but it often takes people to a place where they find it easier to look up and out to God than when they were lost in a bout of self-criticism. MSC has been shown to increase empathy and lessen self-focus, both of which support prayer. To the extent self-compassion frees one from incessant self-criticism it clears the ground so that prayer may grow where the weeds of self-criticism flourished.

## Conclusion: insights from MSC

In reviewing the benefits of MSC as a Christian practice it seems wise to emphasize that one has reason to hope that self-compassion would be an outcome of a well-formed disciple of Christ even without formal self-compassion training. The emphasis in growth in love and learning to see God as a God of compassion should result in a natural growth in self-compassion. As the gospel takes deep root in one's heart the message of our brokenness and the boundless grace of God should seep into our

43. Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Clowning in Rome: Reflections on Solitude, Celibacy, Prayer, and Contemplation* (New York: Image Books, 1979), 68–69.

thinking about ourselves. Hopefully, spiritual formation should result in an increasing self-forgetfulness. In that sense self-compassion, from a Christian perspective, is a wise and helpful path toward growth in humility where the self is not on center stage and where compassion is expressed to all, even oneself, in a spirit of equanimity allowed by compassionate self-forgetfulness. However, for many of us the journey to self-forgetfulness is greatly facilitated by the tools of self-compassion.[44]

There is much for spiritual formation practitioners to learn from the well-developed practices that are part of MSC. The evangelical tradition has long favored exhortation over specific skill training when it comes to encouraging spiritual practices. Many of us have experienced sermon series on spiritual disciplines like prayer which were presented as if learning about prayer is all that is entailed in teaching the practice of prayer. The blend of rich conceptual teaching, along with training in concrete practices found in MSC, provides a model for those interested in teaching spiritual disciplines.

MSC recognized the difficulty of habit change and has this practice-oriented curriculum stretched over two months, including a brief mini-retreat. There is a recognition that just because something is true (e.g., self-compassion is a better motivator than self-criticism) does not make it substantially easier to build that habit. Habit formation takes time and practice, and in habit formation the brain is blind to the fact that this is a "good habit." The emphasis on experimentation and personalization of the practices in MSC reduces barriers and invites people to find patterns of practice that fit their life situation. The content and practices of self-compassion are vital for spiritual formation and this multifaceted approach to training has much to teach us about formation.

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44. Self-forgetfulness here is conceived as a virtue which means that it is understood as a middle position between self-preoccupation and mindless absorption in distracting activities. A classic empirical presentation can be found in Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper & Row, 1990). An overview of the Christian concept of self-forgetfulness can be found in Glynn Harrison, *Ego Trip: Rediscovering Grace* and Timothy Keller, *The Freedom of Self Forgetfulness.*

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