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## Loving Thyself and Well-being: What Does God Have to Do with It?

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## Loving Thyself and Well-being: What Does God Have to Do with It?

### Cover Page Footnote

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### Loving Thyself and Well-being: What Does God Have to Do with It?

“You can’t love others unless you first love yourself” is a common mantra in many books, blogs, and even religious sermons on well-being. However, from a Christian standpoint, the concept of *self-love* is controversial because of the warnings apparent in the New Testament. For example, Brownback (1982) and Adams (1986) both cited 2 Timothy 3:2 as a caveat to the self-esteem movement of humanistic theorists and evangelicals who emphasize the importance of feeling-good-about-self (Watson, Morris, & Hood, 1989). According to the Apostle Paul, in the last days, the apparently condemned will be “lovers of their own selves” as opposed to others and God (2 TIM 3:2-4). Both Brownback (1982) and Adams (1986) convincingly argued that the idea of self-love is not explicitly promoted in the New Testament but rather has been implied by many individuals from the command to “love your neighbor as yourself” (e.g., Mathew 22:39, Mark 12:29-31, Luke 10:27).

Although the self-love implication derived from the biblical command to “love your neighbor as yourself” is still currently debatable from a biblical context, there is no debate among Christians regarding the Great Command to love God first. Pope (1991) discussed Thomas Aquinas’ concept of “proper self-love” as a process of genuine love based on loving God first as opposed to “improper self-love” which is associated with “loving God as a secondary good” (p. 387). The idea of proper self-love can be likened to the process of sanctification, which considers human flourishing from a God-focused perspective as opposed to a self-focused one (Hackney, 2010; Hall, Langer, & McMartin, 2010; Murphy, 2005). The simple implication derived from Pope’s thinking is that there is a “right” and “wrong” way of loving oneself. A less value-laden way of thinking about his concept is to distinguish between an adaptive form of self-love compared to a less adaptive, or even maladaptive one.

The current paper attempts to distinguish between potential positive and negative aspects of self-love in light of the warnings set forth in 2 Timothy 3, which clearly refers to a negative form of self-love:

You should know this, Timothy, that in the last days there will be very difficult times. For people will love only themselves and their money. They will be boastful and proud, scoffing at God, disobedient to their parents, and ungrateful. They will consider nothing sacred. They will be unloving and unforgiving; they will slander others and have no self-control. They will be cruel and hate what is good. They will betray their friends, be reckless, be puffed up with pride, and love pleasure rather than God. They will act religious, but they will reject the power that could make them godly. Stay away from people like that. (2 Timothy 3:1-5 NLT)

If a concept of adaptive self-love is to be operationally defined from a Christian standpoint, then clearly, it will be very different than the maladaptive form of self-love suggested by 2 Timothy 3. Moreover, it should be duly emphasized here that different religions will have different interpretations of well-being based on the particular sacred texts under consideration. As a Christian researcher, I feel uncomfortable speculating how other religions might define different versions of adaptive to less adaptive forms of self-love and how they might be associated with well-being measures. However, I do believe other faith-based research efforts could shed much light on important similarities and differences amongst disparate approaches to faith which could hopefully lead to a mutual respect amongst groups and better understanding of the psychological processes associated with growing closer to God. This paper serves as one attempt of defining “adaptive self-love” from a Christian perspective and should be considered exploratory in nature. The degree to which Christians might differ in measures of character, societal values, and well-being, depending on whether or not they rank God as the most important factor to happiness, are central areas of interest.

Since the initiation of the positive psychology movement by Martin Seligman in the late 1990's, much research has been conducted in the area of character and happiness. Peterson and Seligman (2004) developed a classification of twenty-four character strengths that are purported to be valued globally and are associated with psychological well-being (Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004). It has been emphasized that although many of the character strengths that Peterson and Seligman (2004) identified overlap with biblical characteristics of love (1 Corinthians 13, Hall et al., 2010), the study and interpretation of character will continue to differ with secular and Christian psychologists (Hackney, 2010; Hall et al., 2010; Murphy, 2005). For example, Nancey Murphy (2005), strongly influenced by MacIntyre's (1984) conception of ethics, emphasized the importance of distinguishing between "ungraced" human character relative to ideal character developed through obedience to God. Although *religiousness* is listed as one of the twenty-four character strengths established by Peterson and Seligman (2004), the concept of graced versus ungraced human nature is certainly not a topic of the secular positive psychology movement.

The current study considers Murphy's (2005) three questions regarding graced versus ungraced character development: "1. What is the character of untutored and ungraced human nature, 2. (w)hat is the character of ideal human existence, (and) 3. (w)hat are the means by which the transition can be made?" (p. 56). Simply stated, it is hypothesized that believers who do not perceive God as the most important factor to happiness will not value and develop character, as defined by Christian qualities of love (1 Corinthians 13), to the same degree as those who love God first. More specifically, "God-first" Christians learn (via grace/experience) to value biblical character qualities more than Christians who although believe in God, believe some other factor is more important in the

pursuit of happiness. Additionally, “God-first” individuals ultimately become more “Christ-like” in behavior towards others (e.g., patience and kindness) than their ungraced counterparts, moving them closer to ideal human existence (i.e., Murphy’s second question), which would be characterized by a society that values (and behaves in line with) the virtue of serving others ahead of oneself. Conversely, it is argued that ungraced individuals are more apt to develop tendencies such as those depicted by 2 Timothy 3 (e.g., ungrateful, love pleasure, money, etc.), and would be more likely to be self-serving in nature. Touching on Murphy’s (2005) third question, the beginning and/or transition towards ideal human existence must begin with the understanding that God must be the center of a person's being (i.e., first in priority). Without this factor in its proper order, individuals will not be privy to the manifestation of inner promptings suggested by the New Testament (John 14:21).

In the current investigation, a questionnaire was developed to measure character qualities that overlap, either explicitly or implicitly, with the Apostle Paul’s characterization of love (1 Corinthians 13) and many of the twenty-four character strengths identified by Peterson and Seligman (2004). An example of an explicitly overlapping character quality is kindness (e.g., “love is kind” 1 Corinthians 13:4); however, most of the identified character strengths are more implicitly associated. For example, the opposite of “(l)ove is not...boastful or proud” (1 Corinthians 13:4) can be associated with the character strength of *humility* (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Similarly, Poelker, Gibbons, Hughes, and Powlishta (2016) suggested that envy and gratitude could be opposite ends of the same spectrum and cited (p. 291) Roberts’ (2004) influential quote: “(T)he deeply grateful person will participate less, or

even not at all, in the miseries of envy” (p. 75). Below is 1 Corinthians 13:4-7 (NLT) with parentheses included with the proposed associated character strength.

"Love is patient (1. self-regulation) and kind (2. kindness). Love is not jealous (3. gratitude) or boastful (4. humility) or proud (humility again) or rude (kindness again). Love does not demand its own way (5. open-mindedness). Love is not irritable (self-regulation again), and it keeps no record of when it has been wronged (6. forgiveness). It is never glad about injustice (7. fairness), but rejoices whenever the truth (8. authenticity) wins out. Love never gives up (9. persistence), never loses faith (10. religiousness), is always hopeful (11. hope), and endures (12. bravery and/or 13. resilience, and/or 14. hardiness) through every circumstance."

Twelve of the fourteen character strengths listed above are among the twenty-four identified by Peterson and Seligman (2004). *Resilience* and *hardiness* were included (in addition to *bravery*) because "endures through every circumstance" suggests a quality that implies more than just bravery. Resiliency generally refers to the process of individuals thriving in the face of adversity (Werner, 1982), while hardiness is more specific to finding meaning through trials (Kobasa, 1979). It has been suggested by Christian scholars (Hackney, 2010; Hall et al., 2010) that the character taxonomy of Peterson and Seligman (2004) is limited because it does not adequately assess character qualities that are associated with life trials. Therefore, resilience and hardiness were included as pilot measures of "endurance." By conceptualizing character qualities as characteristic of love, particularly as applied to loving others ahead of oneself, it becomes possible to measure character differences (and other well-being measures) between individuals who believe God must be first place, with respect to the concept of happiness, compared to those who do not.

## Methods

### Participants

Six hundred and fifty-three college students from an ethnically diverse (Hispanic: 50%, African-American: 21%, White: 15%, Asian: 10%, Other: 4%) public university in the state of Texas participated in the study. Final participant inclusion was based on a demographic question that acknowledged belief in Christianity (72% of initial sample, 467 of 653, Mean Age = 24.32 yrs., SD = 7.70; Female = 76%, Male = 24%). No distinction was made amongst Christian denominations. Participants answered an online questionnaire via SurveyMonkey consisting of statements related to validated measures of life satisfaction (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985) and orientation to happiness (Peterson et al., 2005), as well as pilot questions measuring character and societal values as they pertain to self and others. Additionally, a distinguishing open-ended question concerning happiness (i.e., perceived, most important factor) served to divide the two comparison groups.

## Measures

**Type I (“God-first”) vs. type II Christians - classification question.** One open-ended question was asked that was designed to classify participants into two groups: 1) Type I (“God-first”), and 2) Type II participants. The question asked participants to list the most important component to happiness. Participants that made any reference to a connection with God as the most important factor to happiness were classified as *Type I* participants (n = 133, 28.4%), while *Type II* participants (n = 336, 71.6%) listed some other factor as most important. The top five variables listed by Type II participants were: 1) Family (48%, n=159), 2) Wellness (16%, n=54), 3) Significant-other relationships (11%, n=36), 4) Financial/educational/occupational

**Satisfaction with life scale (SWLS).** The SWLS (Diener et al., 1985) measures an individual's general level of life satisfaction with 5 questions: "1) In most ways my life is close to my ideal, 2) The conditions of my life are excellent, 3) I am satisfied with my life, 4) So far I have got the



important things I want in life, 5) If I could live my life over I would change almost nothing" (p. 72). Each question is scored from 1 (low satisfaction) to 7 (high satisfaction), and the five questions are totaled. Means and standard deviations of the current sample ( $M=23.58$ ,  $SD=6.69$ ) were very similar to those established in the Diener et al. (1985) study with college students ( $M=23.50$ ,  $SD=6.43$ ). The psychometric properties of the SWLS have been reported to be acceptable (Diener, 1994; Diener et al., 1985). Whether or not Type I and II participants differed in perceptions of life satisfaction was explored.

**Orientation to happiness.** The Orientation to Happiness (Peterson, Parks, & Seligman, 2005) measure consists of three sub-scales (life of meaning, life of pleasure, and life of engagement) consisting of six questions each (18 total questions), with questions scored from 5 (very much like me) to 1 (very much unlike me). The three scales were designed to measure three possible orientations to happiness (Seligman, 2002), and contain content such as: "1) Regardless of what I am doing, time passes very quickly (engagement), 2) My life serves a higher purpose (meaning), and 3) Life is too short to postpone the pleasures it can provide (pleasure)" (Peterson et al., 2005, p. 31). According to Peterson et al. (2005), the three sub-scales are correlated but distinguishable, and each scale has acceptable psychometric properties. This measure was used because it has a pleasure sub-scale (i.e., 2 Timothy 3:4); it was hypothesized that Type II participants would score higher on the pleasure scale than their Type I counterparts. Whether or not differences between the two groups were evident with the meaning and engagement sub-scales was also of interest.

**Pilot questionnaire: character statements.** Forty-two Likert-scaled (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree) statements were assessed concerning twelve of the twenty-four character strengths identified by Peterson and Seligman (2004), plus resiliency

(Werner, 1982) and hardiness (Kobasa, 1979). Three statements for each identified character strength, were created to measure both value and action (towards others and self) aspects of the particular character strength in question. For example, regarding the character strength of kindness, participants first responded to the question, "I value the character trait of kindness" (i.e., value). Next, they answered two experientially-worded questions, 1) "I regularly make the effort to be kind to others" (i.e., character *other-action*), and 2) "I regularly make the effort to be kind to myself" (i.e., character *self-action*). The character statements (aside from resiliency and hardiness) were based primarily on summary definitions provided by Peterson (2006). In fact, one parenthetical definition (i.e., value: hopefulness) was verbatim to Peterson's (2006) definition of hope (p. 145). On the other hand, the character strength of self-regulation was adjusted to be more representative of the biblical implication. For example, Peterson (2006) defined self-regulation as "regulating what one feels and does, being disciplined; controlling one's appetites and emotions" (p. 144). The value statement in the current survey was more specific to "patience" and "irritability" referred to in 1 Corinthians 13:4-5 (i.e., "i.e., the ability to regulate one's own emotions, such as not becoming easily irritated, or being patient").

Regarding character directed towards others, the majority of the character (self-regulation, kindness, gratitude, humility, open-mindedness, forgiveness, fairness, authenticity, and persistence) statements were worded in terms of expressing the particular character quality towards others (e.g., I regularly make the effort to *forgive* other people when they have hurt me). However, several of the character (hope, bravery, resilience, and hardiness) statements were difficult to word as an expression of the particular character quality towards others and therefore were worded as helping others discover their own character strength (e.g., I regularly

do my best to help other people be more *hopeful*). Religiousness was the only character question that did not have an “other-action” question, as it was challenging to word religiousness directed toward others.

The primary hypotheses of the pilot questionnaire were as follows: 1) The Type I participants would value the character measures more than the Type II group and would 2) also have higher scores regarding character directed towards others (i.e., character *other-action*). Whether or not the groups would differ in character directed towards self (i.e., character *self-action*) was exploratory.

**Pilot questionnaire: societal-values statements.** In addition to the statements pertaining to character, several societal values were also addressed with statements assessing both the level of the particular value in question as well as its associated prevalence (i.e., self-action). The values selected purportedly benefit the individual, at least by U.S. cultural standards (i.e., TV commercials, see Cheng & Schweitzer, 1996; Gram, 2007), but have biblical warnings associated with overvaluing them (e.g., the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, 1 Timothy 6:10). Money, material goods, physical appearance and skill/competence were assessed, with both *value* and *self-action* questions. For example, regarding money, the value question read, “I value money,” followed by the related self-action question, “I regularly engage in activities that increase the chances of me having money.”

## Results

### Life Satisfaction (SWLS) and Orientation to Happiness

T-test analyses on the SWLS (Diener et al., 1985) and Orientation to Happiness (Peterson et al., 2005) questionnaires revealed that Type I participants had significantly higher levels of life-satisfaction ( $t = 3.45, p < .01$ ), meaning ( $t = 7.24, p < .001$ ), and engagement ( $t =$

3.36,  $p < .01$ ) compared to the Type II participants. Although not statistically significant, the pleasure measure of the Orientation to Happiness questionnaire (Peterson et al., 2005) indicated a trend ( $p = .11$ ) with God-first participants scoring lower with this sub-scale (see Table 1).

Table 1

*Group Comparison Means for Life Satisfaction, Meaning, Engagement, and Pleasure.*

Groups	Life Satisfaction	Meaning	Engagement	Pleasure
Type I Participants (n=133)	*25.28 (6.61)	*24.32 (4.14)	*19.05 (3.66)	19.58 (5.18)
Type II Participants	22.96 (6.52)	21.24 (4.14)	17.86 (3.39)	~20.37 (4.61)
TOTAL Participants	23.62 (6.62)	22.12 (4.37)	18.20 (3.51)	20.14 (4.79)

### Character and Societal Values

Statistically significant differences existed between Type I and Type II participants with a number of the character statements; in fact, several revealed statistical significance for each of the of the character measures (value, other-action, and self-action). Again, *value* represented the degree to which the character strength in question was valued, while *other-action* measured character directed towards other people. Finally, *self-action* concerned character directed towards oneself. T-test analyses revealed higher values for God-first participants for each of the three character measures for humility (value:  $t = 4.63$ ,  $p < .001$ , other-action:  $t = 4.35$ ,  $p < .001$ , self-action:  $t = 4.23$ ,  $p < .001$ ), forgiveness (value:  $t = 3.86$ ,  $p < .001$ , other-action:  $t = 5.83$ ,  $p < .001$ , self-action:  $t = 3.67$ ,  $p < .001$ ), gratitude (value:  $t = 2.90$ ,  $p < .01$ , other-action:  $t = 2.10$ ,  $p < .05$ , self-action:  $t = 4.71$ ,  $p < .001$ ), hardiness (value:  $t = 3.98$ ,  $p < .001$ , other-

action:  $t = 2.71, p < .01$ , self-action:  $t = 2.19, p < .05$ ), and resilience (value:  $t = 2.14, p < .05$ , other-action:  $t = 3.87, p < .001$ , self-action:  $t = 3.01, p < .01$ , see Table 2).

Table 2

*Comparisons of Type I and Type II Character Values*

Character Values	Degree of Character Value		Action of Character Towards Others		Action of Character Towards Self	
	Type I	Type II	Type I	Type II	Type I	Type II
Humility	**6.27 (.95)	5.78 (1.20)	**6.01 (1.08)	5.49 (1.30)	**5.93 (1.14)	5.42 (1.19)
Forgiveness	**6.17 (1.02)	5.73 (1.29)	**5.86 (1.08)	5.13 (1.52)	**5.45 (1.43)	4.87 (1.61)
Gratitude	**6.47 (.74)	6.23 (.83)	*6.39 (.98)	6.17 (1.06)	**5.87 (1.21)	5.35 (1.44)
Hardiness	**6.20 (.93)	5.79 (1.15)	**5.99 (1.07)	5.69 (1.12)	*5.59 (1.38)	5.28 (1.37)
Resilience	*6.19 (.96)	5.97 (.97)	** 6.05 (.94)	5.65 (1.16)	**5.75 (1.10)	5.37 (1.26)
Religiousness	**6.65 (.71)	5.90 (1.13)	N/A	N/A	**5.94 (1.24)	4.45 (1.60)
Hope	**6.36 (.87)	6.17 (.91)	**6.20 (8.33)	5.77 (1.18)	6.24 (1.00)	6.03 (1.09)
Self-Regulation	5.89 (1.17)	5.75 (1.18)	*5.93 (1.14)	5.61 (1.27)	5.62 (1.39)	5.52 (1.27)
Authenticity	6.33 (.78)	6.17 (.89)	6.12 (.99)	5.95 (1.03)	*6.24 (1.02)	5.97 (1.03)
<b>Non-significant Means</b>						
Persistence	~6.19 (.95)	5.99 (1.00)	5.86 (1.21)	5.76 (1.12)	~6.16 (.98)	5.94 (1.14)
Kindness	6.34 (.88)	6.30 (.85)	6.26 (.82)	6.20 (.85)	5.85 (1.29)	5.72 (1.22)
Fairness	6.23 (.96)	6.15 (.87)	~6.23 (.81)	6.06 (.89)	5.29 (1.48)	5.10 (1.53)
Open-mindedness	5.92 (1.22)	6.09 (.91)	5.86 (1.17)	5.90 (1.14)	5.81 (1.18)	5.81 (1.20)
Bravery	5.92 (1.02)	5.87 (1.04)	5.65 (1.12)	5.46 (1.21)	5.60 (1.09)	5.47 (1.17)
** = $p < .01$ * = $p < .05$ ~ = $p > .05 < .10$ (parentheses indicates standard deviations) Comparisons are between "God-first" Type I (n=133) and Type II (n=334)						

Additionally, Type I participants scored higher with measures of religiousness for value ( $t = 8.72, p < .001$ ) and self-action ( $t = 10.72, p < .001$ ), and hope for value ( $t = 2.07, p < .05$ ) and other-action ( $t = 4.47, p < .001$ ). Type I participants also scored higher for other-action with self-regulation ( $t = 2.54, p < .05$ ) and self-action with authenticity ( $t = 2.59, p < .05$ ). Interestingly however, regarding the societal-value questions, Type I participants had significantly lower values for money ( $t = 4.02, p < .001$ ) and a trending lower value for material goods ( $t = 1.88, p = .06$ , see Table 3).

Table 3

*Group Comparison for Money, Material Goods, Physical Appearance, and Skill/Competence.*

Group	Money		Material Goods		Physical Appearance		Skill/Competence	
	Value	Action	Value	Action	Value	Action	Value	Action
Type I Participants	5.18 (1.50)	5.05 (1.61)	5.62 (1.25)	4.94 (1.74)	5.72 (1.23)	4.98 (1.57)	6.26 (.83)	5.65 (1.35)
Type II Participants	*5.77 (1.26)	5.24 (1.47)	~5.85 (1.16)	5.21 (1.68)	5.65 (1.25)	4.93 (1.50)	6.25 (.84)	5.64 (1.18)
* = $p < .001$ ~ $p = .06$ (parentheses indicates standard deviations)								

It was also of interest to determine which of all of the character and societal-value questions correlated most strongly with life-satisfaction. It should be emphasized that the strongest correlations were with character questions for the self-action measure. The top five correlations were: 1) Gratitude, self-action:  $r = .37, p < .01$  (other-action:  $r = .29, p < .01$ , value:  $r = .21, p < .01$ ), 2) Kindness, self-action:  $r = .34, p < .01$  (other-action:  $r = .12, p < .01$ , value:  $r = .13, p < .01$ ), 3) Hope, self-action:  $r = .32, p < .01$  (other-action:  $r = .10, p > .05$ , value:  $r = .11, p > .05$ ), 4) Self-Regulation, self-action:  $r = .29, p < .01$  (other-action:  $r = .13, p < .01$ , value:  $r = .13, p < .01$ ), and 5) Forgiveness, self-action:  $r = .28, p < .01$  (other-action:  $r = .19, p < .01$ , value:  $r = .11, p > .05$ ). Regarding the societal-value statements, the

correlations were as follows: 1) Physical Appearance, self-action:  $r = .20$ ,  $p < .01$  (value:  $r = .13$ ,  $p < .01$ ), 2) Skill/Competence, self-action:  $r = .17$ ,  $p < .01$  (value:  $r = .06$ ,  $p > .05$ ), 3) Material Goods, self-action:  $r = .01$ ,  $p > .05$  (value:  $r = .05$ ,  $p > .05$ ), and 4) Money, self-action:  $r = .01$ ,  $p > .05$  (value:  $r = -.06$ ,  $p > .05$ ).

### **Potential Moderating Variable Addressed: Age**

Because Type I (age:  $M = 25.77$ ,  $SD = 8.64$ ) participants were significantly ( $t = 2.46$ ,  $p < .05$ ) older than Type II (age:  $M = 23.82$ ,  $SD = 7.35$ ) participants, age was considered a potential moderating variable to the aforementioned results. The character and societal-value statements were re-evaluated with age as a covariate; however, no changes in the initial statistically significant findings were demonstrated. Therefore, potential within group differences with age as an independent variable was investigated for both of the Type I and Type II groups. For each group, approximately a fifth of the participants (central to the mean age of each respective group) were removed in order to better establish two separate homogenous groups. Type I participants aged 22, 23, and 24 years-old were removed (21% of total Type I participants) resulting in statistically significant ( $t = -11.02$ ,  $p < .001$ ) differences between the younger ( $n = 52$ , age:  $M = 19.48$ ,  $SD = 1.09$ ) and older ( $n = 54$ , age:  $M = 33.30$ ,  $SD = 9.15$ ) Type I participants. Regarding the Type II group, participants aged 20, 21, and 22 years-old were removed (23% of total Type II participants) resulting in statistically significant ( $t = -17.86$ ,  $p < .001$ ) differences between the younger ( $n = 122$ , age:  $M = 18.48$ ,  $SD = .52$ ) and older ( $n = 136$ , age:  $M = 30.5$ ,  $SD = 7.83$ ) participants of the Type II group.

Concerning the Type I group, statistically-significant within-group differences were demonstrated with several of the character measures; older participants had greater scores for each of the three measures for resilience (value:  $t = -2.61$ ,  $p < .05$ , other-action:  $t = -$

2.14,  $p < .05$ , self-action:  $t = -2.54$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and hardiness (value:  $t = -2.42$ ,  $p < .05$ , other-action:  $t = -2.83$ ,  $p < .01$ , self-action:  $t = -3.24$ ,  $p < .01$ ), for two of the measures for open-mindedness (value:  $t = -2.67$ ,  $p < .01$ , other-action:  $t = -2.41$ ,  $p < .05$ ), and for one of the measures for emotional-regulation (other-action:  $t = -2.02$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and fairness (other-action:  $t = -2.11$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Statistical significance for the societal-value questions was only found with the skill/competence question (action:  $t = -2.33$ ,  $p < .01$ ), with older Type I participants demonstrating higher scores than their younger counterparts. No statistically significant within group differences were found with Type I participants for measures of life satisfaction (SWLS; Diener et al., 1985), nor with any of the three Orientation to Happiness (Peterson et al., 2005) measures.

Several statistically-significant within-group differences were also found for several of the character questions for the Type II group; older participants had greater scores for each of the three measures for gratitude (value:  $t = -2.81$ ,  $p < .01$ , other-action:  $t = -2.16$ ,  $p < .05$ , self-action:  $t = -3.94$ ,  $p < .001$ ), for two of the measures for resilience (value:  $t = -2.68$ ,  $p < .01$ , self-action:  $t = -3.38$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and for one of the forgiveness (value:  $t = -2.17$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and hardiness (value:  $t = -1.98$ ,  $p < .05$ ) measures. No statistically significant differences were found within the Type II group for any of the societal-value questions, measures of life satisfaction (SWLS; Diener et al., 1985), nor with the meaning and engagement sub-scales of the Orientation to Happiness (Peterson et al., 2005) measures. However, the pleasure sub-scale demonstrated statistically significant results ( $t = 4.52$ ,  $p < .001$ ) with the younger Type II participants scoring higher on pleasure ( $M = 21.66$ ,  $SD = 4.20$ ) than older Type II participants ( $M = 19.13$ ,  $SD = 4.75$ ).

## Discussion



The results of this study clearly demonstrate character differences between “Type I” (God-first) and “Type II” Christians with both the exploratory questionnaire and well-being measures. Again, Type I Christians perceived God to be the most important factor to happiness, while Type II Christians listed some other factor as more important. Type I participants valued the character qualities of humility, gratitude, forgiveness, hardiness, and resilience more than the Type II group, and also demonstrated more character action towards others (and self) with each of them. Additionally, Type I participants valued religiousness and hope more, and were more apt to make the effort to effectively regulate their emotions directed towards others. They were also more likely to be true to themselves (i.e., self-authenticity) and encourage others to be hopeful. In addition to the differences in the exploratory measures of character, Type I participants also scored higher with engagement and life-satisfaction. Interestingly, the only statistically significant difference between the participants, in which the Type II group had larger numbers, was with the value of money. It is also important to note that the Type II group also had greater trending means for the value of material goods and an orientation towards pleasure.

Because the psychometric properties of the character/societal-values questionnaire have not been established, caution should be exercised before generalizing the results of the current study too prematurely, particularly the character data. Nevertheless, these preliminary findings can be considered in light of Nancey Murphy’s (2005) questions (influenced by MacIntyre, 1984) concerning character development as well as the warnings set forth in 2 Timothy 3. Regarding Murphy’s question concerning the nature of “ungraced” human nature, a life lacking (or at the very least limited) in character value and positive actions directed towards others is a good starting point. Extreme cases of “bad” character (i.e., tail end of the Type II distribution), would be blatantly self-serving, unforgiving, ungrateful, and would love money and pleasure,

etc. more so than their better-than-average “ungraced” counterparts, and even more so relative to the seemingly “graced” side of the two distributions (i.e., very high character scores from Type I participants).

Individuals with the largest “ungraced” (2 Timothy 3) profile could be categorized as “loving” themselves ineffectively (i.e., least adaptive form of self-love of the sample), even though they purport to be Christian. The mindset and behaviors of such individuals could be likened to aspects of maladaptive narcissism, characterized by a myriad of self-serving tendencies (see Watson et al., 1989; Campbell, Foster, & Finkel, 2002). Although generally, the Type II participants in the current study would surely not be representative a severe condition of maladaptive self-love, they could still be considered “ungraced” to some degree, as they were less character-oriented towards others (i.e., less humility, gratitude, forgiveness, hope, hardiness, resilience, and self-regulation) relative to the Type I (God-first) participants. 2 Timothy 3:5 indicates that the apparently condemned may “act religious,” but “will reject the power that could make them godly;” this Scripture suggests a percentage of people that may even claim to believe in God, but nevertheless, are not living optimally.

Contrary to the “maladaptive self-love” implications of the Type II results, the data of the Type I participants can be considered within the concept of “adaptive self-love” as well as from the context of Murphy’s (2005) second question: “What is the character of ideal human existence?” (p. 56). From a Christian standpoint, any concept of adaptive self-love and/or ideal human existence must be based on the two great commandments (i.e., 1. to love God, and 2. to love others, i.e., Mathew 22:37-40, Mark 12:29-31, Luke 10:27). Simply stated from a Christian perspective, if an individual believes in salvation and Jesus Christ as savior, then it is in his/her best interest to value and focus on loving God and others as the top priorities in life.

From this standpoint, an argument could easily be made that individuals who effectively implement the two great commandments as life's dual-priority are actually loving themselves, irrespective of the prevalence of outcomes related to societal values (e.g., money), positive emotions, and life satisfaction, to name a few. For example, Mother Teresa might be considered by some as an extreme positive example of exemplifying this "dual-priority" even though she was not wealthy and reportedly wrestled with seasons of emotional turmoil. If a person intentionally sacrifices her own self-interests for the sake of God and others (with godly obedience assumed), then biblically speaking the more she gains for herself (e.g., Mathew 10:39, 16:35; Mark 8:35; Luke 9:24, 17:33). The data from the current study lines up with this idea as Type I participants not only valued character more (relative to Type II participants), but also were more likely to "love" (i.e., forgive, be kind, etc.) others; additionally, they had higher levels of meaning, engagement, and life-satisfaction (i.e., common positive psychology measures).

It has been argued that a Christian positive psychology will be very different from mainstream positive psychology (Hackney, 2010; Hall et al., 2010; Murphy, 2005). Murphy (2005) contended that the "hard core" of any Christian research program should be based on "non-negotiable theories" of human "telos" (purpose/goals) that are biblically based. It is likely that there would not be very much disagreement (if at all) amongst Christian circles regarding the imperative necessity of life's primary telos to 1) love God first, and 2) to love others as self (Mathew 22:39, Mark 12:29-31, Luke 10:27). These two great commandments should be the "core" of any Christian definition of adaptive self-love. What is less clear concerns how character directed towards self is conceptualized, and operationally connected to the "adaptive self-love" core. For example, the act of forgiving oneself has been a topic of much research

(McConahay & Hough, 1973; Tangney, Boone, & Dearing, 2005; Thompson & Synder, 2003; Toussaint & Williams, 2008; Watson et al., 1989; Wohl, DeShea, & Wahkinney, 2008); however, whether or not self-forgiveness should be considered virtuous from a Christian standpoint could be considered debatable (e.g., don't forgive self before asking God for forgiveness). Interestingly, in the current study, self-forgiveness was more strongly correlated with life-satisfaction than forgiveness directed towards others. In fact, the strongest correlations with life-satisfaction were with the character measures (gratitude, kindness, hope, self-regulation, and forgiveness) directed towards self. I suspect that from a secular positive psychology perspective, these findings might be interpreted from the viewpoint that being kind to oneself, forgiving oneself, etc. is necessary to facilitate happiness and perhaps requisite for maximizing the potential to love others. A more skeptical approach might liken Marxist ideas of religion (i.e., "opium of the people") (Cline, 2019) to the "self-character" processes of self-forgiveness, etc. Notwithstanding these or other differing viewpoints, the contention of the current paper is that self-character should be considered a tertiary component to adaptive self-love, with its degree of value contingent on the dual-priority core.

Pursuant to the previous statement, consider the concept of an *adaptive self-love model* within the context of a value/motive system pertaining to the importance of: 1) God, 2) other-character, and 3) self-character (and possibly, 4. positive societal values/outcomes, in this order). Regarding self-character, and from a Christian standpoint, whether or not the particular character quality is valuable/virtuous depends on how it lines up with the core of adaptive self-love – again, the priority to love 1) God and 2) others. For example, consider the Apostle Paul's "self-hope" in the often quoted scriptural quote, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13, NKJV). Here, he has belief in self, but the character quality

is virtuous because it is connected to the core; therefore, in this case, self-hope could/should be considered a tertiary component of “adaptive self-love,” a necessary trait for him to fulfill his specific purpose (i.e., spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles). However, consider the individual whose primary goal in life is to make a lot of money and be the best at some particular area of competence (without godly focus/guidance). For argument sake, let us assume this person achieves her/his goal and exhibits exceptionally high self-hope and commensurate levels of perceived life-satisfaction, self-esteem, etc. However, suppose this individual is very indifferent to loving others, in spite of regular church attendance and outward claim to be a Christian. In this case, the self-character strength (hope) is ostensibly less ideal than in the previous example because it is connected primarily to societal values as opposed to the core. With Christian values in mind, this person has deviated from his primary “telos” - to love God and others as the dual-priority. Certainly, being highly competent in some domain and reaping monetary benefits from one’s skillset is valued globally. However, from a faith-based viewpoint, overvaluing societal values can have detrimental effects. With the Apostle Paul’s warnings in mind (2 Timothy 3), a less adaptive (to maladaptive) model of self-love, to be wary of, could be conceptualized as a value/motive system that prioritizes as follows: 1) societal values/outcomes, 2) self-character, 3) other-oriented character, and 4) God (optional).

In line with Hackney’s (2010) sentiments regarding character, conceptualizing the role of self-character and its role in the flourishing life should be unique from a Christian-positive-psychology perspective. It is likely that secular approaches will continue to be influenced by Aristotelian concepts of eudaimonia/human-excellence and definitions of self-love, based on the notion that “human beings strive for their own good and perfection” (Rocha & Ghoshal,

2006, p. 585). However, Christian models of self-love should be other-oriented, in line with Murphy's (2005) contention that "(h)umans reach their highest goal in developing the capacity to renounce their own lesser goods for the sake of others" (p. 59). From Murphy's perspective, any model of human flourishing that leaves out God's role in carrying out this love for others fosters "ungraced" lives, irrespective of how self-character may influence human excellence. Therefore, the utility of self-character should be considered as potentially part of adaptive self-love, depending on its relationship to the motive system.

From a Christian perspective, it could be argued that the transition from living an "ungraced" life towards a more ideal one (i.e., Murphy/MacIntre's third question) begins with an understanding that God must be kept first place in one's conceptualization of happiness. The more a person fosters a genuine relationship with Jesus Christ (i.e., while continually keeping Him first place) and grows in spiritual maturity, the more she/he becomes convinced (via grace/experience) that service to others is more virtuous than any self-serving pursuit (see John 13:34). Although preliminary in status, the findings of the current study lend support to both of these propositions (i.e., God-first and maturation) as Type I participants, in addition to their higher character scores, were older on average than the Type II group. Interestingly, older participants in both groups had significantly higher within group averages with a variety of character measures relative to their younger counterparts. Additionally, a noteworthy statistically significant difference was found for the Type II group with one of the orientation to happiness measures (Peterson et al., 2005), pleasure; younger participants in this group had significantly higher pleasure scores relative to in-group older participants.

It is possible that younger Christians, who believe some factor other than God is most important to happiness, may be more at-risk to developing a "2 Timothy 3" character profile

(i.e., maladaptive self-love). For example, one participant in the study, who had a very high pleasure score (and scored low with meaning and engagement), believed that money was the most important factor to happiness. Additionally, this participant's societal value means were each higher than the character averages. Sadly, but not too surprisingly, this nineteen year-old scored very low on the life-satisfaction measure. Although research generally demonstrates positive outcomes for believing adolescents and emerging adults (Yonker, Schnabelrauch, & Dettaan, 2012), more research is needed comparing character values and actions of faith-based individuals. Future research with Christians (and other populations) should continue to investigate age, orientation to pleasure, societal values, and other potential moderating variables in order to better understand the nature of change from living a less graced life to a more ideal one (MacIntyre, 1984; Murphy, 2005), characterized by more meaning, engagement, life-satisfaction and underlying joy.

Regarding basic societal values such as competence, money, and appearance, to name a few, this area will undoubtedly be the most controversial topic related to self-love discourse, particularly since the "prosperity movement" within evangelical churches has become commercialized to some extent in Western culture (Watson & Scalen, 2011). An adequate discussion of this controversy is beyond the purview of the current paper, but simply stated, the historical backdrop of the controversy is likely due, in large part, to a conflating of concepts related to the notion of self-love. For example, self-love was the same as narcissism for Calvin (1928), a severe state of selfishness, and he suggested dropping the term (Fromm, 1956). Fromm disagreed and believed that self-love was actually the opposite of selfishness and stated that "my own self must be as much an object of my love as another person" and if a person "can love only others, he cannot love at all" (p. 50). Certainly, operationally defining adaptive

to maladaptive concepts of self-love will continue to be controversial on some level. With Christian priorities in mind, I suggest conceptualizing adaptive self-love as a genuine “heart/soul/mind” value and action priority for 1) God, 2) other-character (with 1 & 2 as the core to self-love), and 3) self-character, based on the notion of being obedient to God through the sanctification process (Hackney, 2010).

Actions associated with societal values/outcomes could be considered potentially positive or negative depending on the value/motive system of the individual. Consider the societal-value data of the current study at least briefly within the context of the previous statement. As discussed earlier, the value of money was the only statistically significant finding between the Type I and Type II participants, which should raise some concern. Of course, all of the participants valued (and pursued) each of the societal values measured to some degree; however, collectively speaking, these measures were not as high as the character means, suggesting that the societal values were not overvalued. Interestingly, the only societal-value areas that were positively correlated with life-satisfaction were self-action measures for physical appearance and skill-competence, but the correlations were smaller than the majority of self-character measures. Although these societal values may increase life-satisfaction (and self-esteem, positive emotions, etc.), a positive psychology perspective endorsed by Christians should assess any societal aspect of life from a stewardship standpoint with indicators that measure the underlying motive to bring glory to Christ.

Without addressing where (and how) societal values fall on the “adaptive self-love” continuum (if at all) could potentially foster uncertainty about how to most effectively conceptualize and approach life in a way that is more spiritually based than worldly (Romans 8). Biblical sermons about “dying to the flesh” versus “name it and claim it” approaches can be



challenging to make sense of without frameworks that distinguish between potentially positive versus maladaptive approaches to the “good-life.” Obviously, self-character as it relates to outcomes associated with areas such as one’s health and job (i.e., competence and money) plays a large role in society, and understanding how biblical principles can be applied to everyday areas are certainly welcomed endeavors (de la Peña, 2004). However, from a Christian biblical context, the significant areas of life have to do with loving God and others, and therefore, societal values should be kept in proper perspective. It could be argued that obedience to God by loving others results in more joy, whereas satisfying societal values/outcomes influences more happiness (a less significant positive emotion) – a sentiment often preached in Sunday sermons. Faith-based researchers and practitioners are encouraged to distinguish between the two potential states of mind with sound theory, precise operational definitions, data, and practical frameworks that can help facilitate well-being.

### **Limitations**

It is important to acknowledge that there are a number of factors that limit the generalizability of the current study. First, the demographics should be considered a limitation as about 75% of participants were female and 50% Hispanic, which is not representative of the U.S. in general or world at large. Additionally, no socioeconomic measures such as income or family background were measured. More research is needed with disparate populations while controlling for socioeconomic status in order to better generalize the results. Another shortcoming concerns the assumptions and definitions associated with the character measures. Each character measure had only three statements per measure - one statement that addressed the value, one for character directed towards others, and one for character directed towards self. Unfortunately, popular character measures generally do not measure character directed towards

both self and others. However, Thompson and Snyder's (2003) Heartland Forgiveness Scale does provide six questions for both self and others subscales (as well as for a situational subscale); including this validated scale would have enhanced the validity of the current study (at least the forgiveness component), particularly since the psychometric properties of the derived statements (both character and societal values) were not established.

Another weakness of the current study concerns the possibility that too much attention was focused on using character measures that overlap with established character strengths established in the positive psychology literature and Scripture. Perhaps more attention should have been devoted to establishing character measures that are biblically based (irrespective of the secular literature). For example, religiousness was used a measure of faith, but faith from a Christian standpoint is more than just "belief in a higher power, having regular practices of spirituality" as it was defined in the pilot questionnaire (i.e., defined from Peterson, 2006). Additionally, there was no measure of "penitence" (Hackney, 2010) in the current study, which may be one of the (and perhaps the) most important character strengths a Christian can possess, particularly with respect to human error. Hackney (2010) defined penitence as "a dispositional tendency to feel sorrow when one has sinned, to turn again toward God, and to seek atonement and make reparation, a tendency that individuals can possess at lower or higher levels" (p. 202). As Hackney (2010) asserted, there are no virtues in Peterson and Seligman's (2004) *Character Strengths and Virtues* that consider "guilt-proneness" as part of human flourishing (Hall et al., 2010). Perhaps penitence is the key character strength that distinguishes a person living a life with adaptive self-love, compared to a "less adaptive" self-loving path. A measure of penitence would have certainly added value to the current study.

Finally, the way Type I and II participants were classified assumes much. It would have improved the study if a precise measure concerning current level of spiritual growth was assessed, such as the four levels (1. Exploring Christ, 2. Growing in Christ, 3. Close to Christ, and 4. Christ Centered) researched with the REVEAL studies (Hawkins & Parkinson, 2011). Clearly, a person may understand that God needs to be first place in one's life in order to be happy but may not actually keep God first as much as the next person who also declares God first place. It would have strengthened the study to have been able to further differentiate Type I participants based on whether they were truly "Christ Centered." Factors such as time spent studying Scripture, beliefs as they pertain to salvation by grace, and identity in Christ, are just a few of the REVEAL variables that could have shed light on the character measures assessed in the current study.

### **Conclusion**

Notwithstanding the limitations of the current investigation, the results clearly demonstrate character differences between Christians who consider God as the most important factor to happiness (i.e., Type I group) compared to those who view some other factor as more crucial (i.e., Type II group). In addition to higher character scores directed towards others and self, Type I participants also had higher life-satisfaction as well as more meaning and engagement in life. The degree of variance between the two groups could be considered within the context of differing value/motive systems pertaining to the conceptualization of God's role with happiness. Although the idea of self-love as it relates to happiness has generally had negative connotations associated with it, the current paper offers a potential positive framework of the concept based on a dual-priority for God and others with the value and utility of self-character contingent on the self-love core (i.e., God and others).

It is likely that the controversy surrounding the concept of self-love concerns a conflating of terms that have to do with self-character and societal values/outcomes. For example, self-hope associated with earning money to build a God-inspired orphanage is different than self-hope related to buying a vacation home. Establishing the role of self-character as it pertains to “God-first” priorities relative to societal-based objectives may facilitate the understanding of a variety of approaches to the “good life” influenced by theology, secular tradition and/or a combination of the two. As research in mainstream positive psychology continues to investigate virtue ethics from Aristotelian/eudaimonic standpoints, with newer versions of “self-love” likely forthcoming, I contend that a Christian positive psychology should offer its version(s) based on a biblical interpretation of human telos (Hackney, 2010; Hall et al., 2010; Murphy, 2005). If a concept of adaptive self-love is ever to be adopted into Christian academics, then simply stated, it must be based around the imperative dual-priority of keeping God first place and loving our neighbors as ourselves.

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