

# The Inner Critic Trap: Self-Compassion as Sacred Care

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Date: 06 April 2025

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[ 0 : 00 ] So there is a song lyric that I encounter with Outfill at least once a year.! It's from a song that I barely know, and from an artist that I know almost nothing about.

! Yet if I were to really think about it, I could probably predict with a decent amount of accuracy the spaces in which I would most likely see or hear these words.

Ring the bells that still can ring, the song lyric encourages. Forget your perfect offering. There is a crack, a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in.

After encountering that for so many times, I know that those words are found in a song called Anthem by Leonard Cohen, the same person who wrote Hallelujah.

If he's an amazing artist that I should definitely deeply know. I'm sorry, I apologize. Ring the bells that still can ring. Forget your perfect offering. There is a crack, a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in.

[ 1 : 18 ] Now, every single time I hear those lines, I have to be really honest. I usually hear them in mostly white progressive spaces. And every time I hear it, I kind of have to suppress an eye roll. And that's...

I'm still working on my holiness. But I just... there's something in me that always rises up in me. And, you know, I understand the intent of the words. I get it. But I can never escape the feeling of being kind of unsatisfied with what they imply.

I always experience them as cliché. I experience them as like this kind of glib commentary on the world. This kind of this like, hey, like, the world is on fire. Things are messed up. People are suffering. But that's how the light gets in.

This feels overly simplistic to me. But I keep encountering those lyrics. So lately I've been trying to hold them. And to hold them with curiosity.

When thinking about the cracks that Cohen names in the song, I've been intrigued to learn that artists, Indigenous artists, Native American artists, they sometimes intentionally create imperfections in their work.

[ 2 : 38 ] Weavers, for example, might create an alteration in what is an otherwise perfectly symmetrical pattern. That might be like a thread that disrupts the dominant color scheme.

Or they might leave a thread loose or kind of unwoven. And some say that that allows the spirit to escape from the object.

Almost as if an over-identification with the created object would be harmful. Others say that introducing imperfection is a reminder to remember that the creator is the only one who is perfect. And that imperfection is a natural part of the human condition and the beauty of the world. These Indigenous crafts people create cracks as a way of interacting with God and interacting with the world in a healthy way.

As a way for truth and wisdom to get in. Considering those practices, I've been rethinking Cohen's lines and trying to examine them and seeing them anew with a kind of rugged, that they contain this kind of rugged beauty.

[ 3 : 54 ] And as I've been thinking about how to wrap up our current sermon series on sacred self-care. I've been wondering whether those lines might have some wisdom for us when it comes to the calling to love ourselves and to take care of ourselves.

Over the past few weeks, given the state of this country, we've turned toward exploring the practices we need to simply take care of ourselves.



Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is mature, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle. If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. Or look at ships. Though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, yet they are guided by a very small rudder, wherever the will of the pilot directs.

So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits. How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire.

And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity. It stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of life, and is itself set on fire by hell.

[ 11 : 16 ] For every species of beast and bird, reptile and sea creature can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species. But no one can tame the tongue.

A restless evil full of deadly poison. With it, we bless the Lord and Father, and with it, we curse people made in the likeness of God.

From the same mouth comes a blessing and a curse. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so. Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water?

Can a fig tree my brothers and sisters yield olives or grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh. So in this passage, the author of the book of James takes as his main topic the idea of self-control when it comes to speech.

In the book of James, proper speech comes up a number of different times as the author directs general instruction to a variety of churches in his world.

[ 12 : 30 ] The writer chooses this very elegant style in the book and in this passage overall. And it's so elegant, in fact, that scholars actually struggle to make sense of some of the language that James uses, some of the terms of phrase.

What is clear is that James is actually more pessimistic about the ability of human beings to use speech righteously than many of the moralists and ethicists of his time.

Speech was a common thing to talk about for ancient moralists. Some of you may know, for example, the wisdom literature is full, if you go to Proverbs, of instructions about right speaking. Think Proverbs 18, 21. Death and life are in the power of the tongue and those who love it will eat its fruits. While ancient literature has phrases like that littered through it.

But the writer of James comes across as even more pessimistic than that. The passage begins with this warning to religious teachers. Because teachers use language frequently and because they have influence over their students, they're subject to these temptations of the tongue.

[ 13 : 48 ] Things like flattery and deceit. Things like arrogance and control and frustration at being contradicted or slander of perceived rivals.

Because words have so much power, religious teachers, James says, are especially at risk. For James, self-control in language is a sign of maturing.

But from the rest of the passage, we can tell that the writer sees that the kind of maturity that he's talking about is extremely hard to obtain.

The tongue is compared to this bit that would be in a horse's mouth to guide it or the rudder of a ship. In the scheme of things, the idea is that something very, very small can control so much.

He says the tongue is a fire. It is something that can contaminate. It can ruin, now James is very pessimistic, it can ruin the course of life.

[ 14 : 55 ] James gives the tongue almost like cosmic powers to spread evil. And then in the last few verses of the passage, James invites the hearers into the framework of Genesis creation.

And draws the hearer to remember the story of God using language to create and then giving humans made in her likeness the power to name.

Here's how one scholar puts this, who writes about the book of James, this is Luke Timothy Johnson. When we realize that language is a world creating capacity, then we begin to apprehend James's cosmic imagery in describing its power and its peril.

The real peril of the tongue is not found in passing the angry word or the incidental oath or the petty bit of slander. It is found in the creation of distorted worlds of meaning within which the word of truth is suppressed.

Now, there is so much that is worthy to consider about and examine about what James has to say about the use of language.

[ 16 : 13 ] But today, as we close this series on sacred self-care, I want us to consider not how we use words when it comes to others.

I want us to consider how we use words when it comes to ourselves. How do we talk about ourselves to ourselves?  
How do we talk about ourselves in the cracks of life? How do your words about yourself support or detract from your self-care?  
How skilled are we at self-compassion? If you are a person who seeks justice and beauty and the common good, if you are following the radical and prophetic Christ, in this world, your critics, they're only going to multiply.  
So how are you becoming your own best ally? Now, I'm going to be honest here.  
[ 17 : 27 ] This is the point of honesty. As I was reading through the work of Dr. Kristen Naft, who's probably the foremost expert on talking about self-compassion in the U.S., I intentionally did not take her self-assessment before I wrote the sermon because I was like, I might not even be able to get up there and preach about this if I go in because I know I really struggle with this, right?  
This has definitely been one of those series that's like, woo, we all have a long way to go on a lot of these things. I'm going to take that assessment tomorrow. It's on her website and I would encourage all of us to take it together.  
Strength the numbers, y'all. Strength the numbers, all right? So let's take that. Yeah, I'm a person, I struggle to talk about myself kindly. I struggle not to shrink myself, which is really ironic because I'm a pastor and a preacher.  
My temptation is to apologize for everything, every single crack. Like it is like automatic. I apologize for the missteps, for all the things that I could have done, for all the things that I don't know, for anything that has even a whiff of taking up too much space.  
And yet I realize that in our current political crisis, over-apologizing won't help me or anyone else. When we read this warning from James's pen to be careful with our tongue, maybe we're able to take it in stride in terms of discipleship when we think about applying it to other people.  
[ 19 : 04 ] But when James's warnings turn from external talk to internal walk, we talk, we are in a whole different ballgame in terms of level of difficulty.  
Basically, many of us talk to ourselves in ways that we would never, ever talk to anybody else, ever. Sometimes that self-talk sounds like somebody from our past.  
We allow our self-talk to create worlds in our heads which distort the truth about who God has named us and what God wants for us.  
And here's how Dr. Walker Barnes boils that down in her book. Think about it, she says. If we were to treat other people as we treat ourselves, that might look less like kindness and more like keeping constant judgment and criticism upon them, burdening them with excessive responsibility, using demeaning language toward them and demanding that they neglect their health.  
For me, not being self-controlled in my internal language usually comes in one of two forms. Either my inner critic pops up and I obsessively analyze past actions or I'm going to call it my should monster pops up and I hyper-focus on all the present and future things that I should be doing.  
[ 20 : 37 ] In both cases, I use language toward myself that props up the idea that there should be no cracks in life, none. Instead of attempting to become sinfully subhuman, which is what all the Christian teachers of my past warned me against, I attempt to become sinfully superhuman, which far too few of them ever named as a temptation.  
Instead of remembering that I am created both from God and from earth, I try to dust the dust of existence off of my shoulders in order to become more heavenly.  
There's a story that I really like in a book called Radical Friendship, which is by Buddhist teacher Kate Johnson, wherein she talks about naming her inner critic.  
She actually names her inner critic Jabba the Hutt because she feels like it's always jabbing her. She's like, I never even watched Star Wars, so maybe it doesn't fit, but she calls it Jabba the Hutt. And she realized that she needed to finally confront and befriend her inner critic when she went on this silent meditation retreat.  
And here's what she says about it. This story, I feel like it's so, it captures what many of us in religious spaces go through when it comes to internal, the inner critic and in terms of our shoulds.  
[ 22 : 14 ] Here's what she says. She had quietly decided before, she goes on this silent meditation retreat, and she writes that she quietly decided before she goes that she would do the retreat the hard way, which meant acting on a subtle belief that being mentally brutal with herself was the best way to swiftly spur herself toward enlightenment.

She says, at the end of each day, I felt mentally fatigued and physically sore. After one particularly long and uncompromising day of following the silent retreat schedule to the minute and cramming in extra meditation sessions during mealtimes, I was crossing the threshold from the meditation room to the hallway when I heard an inner voice comment, not good enough.

It felt like a tiny jab. In the short walk from the meditation hall to the dormitory, I noticed that voice chiming in at least half a dozen times, walking, not slow enough, stopping on the way to my room to get some tea, not focused enough.

Every action I took seemed to provoke the harsh inner commentary, putting honey into the tea, not hardcore enough. I realized that the internal criticisms that had been coming up for quite some time, they had been coming up for quite some time, but they were subtle and so familiar that she says she didn't even notice them.

I heard them, she says, but they appeared in my mind as if they were simply truth. Each comment only hurt a bit, like a pinprick. But at the end of the day, being pricked, every few minutes, I was aching and full of holes.

[ 24 : 11 ] Aching and full of holes. That is an apt way of describing the way our inner monologues leave us, even when we are doing our very best, even when we are doing our very best in pursuit of God and in pursuit of justice.

Yet the book of James reminds us that both our external talk and our internal talk are connected to our spiritual maturity. Both, both affect the course of our lives.

And researchers are now learning that self-compassion is the antidote to self-criticism.

Self-compassion is simply recognizing your suffering, like basically the pain points in your life, and attempting to alleviate them just like you would do for somebody else.

And that's the key, like you would do for somebody else that you care about. Kind gestures, loving words, touch. Showing those things to yourself.

Dr. Neff, the researcher that I mentioned earlier, she points out that self-compassion is not the same as high self-esteem. This is important to know because self-esteem often relies on basically doing well.

[ 25 : 24 ] And so that when you're not doing well, it crumbles. Self-compassion is not the same as never feeling guilty about anything because, you know, we do need to sometimes be critical of behavior, but that's different from being critical of who we are.

To practice self-compassion is to root ourselves in the reality that we are human, that we fail, that there will be cracks. And it is to take the hopeful posture that such things make way for light and for real life.

There are a few different reasons that I could name why I think self-compassion is critical to self-care. But perhaps it's just enough to repeat something I heard.

Dr. Lori Sento, she does the Happiness Lab podcast. She's a researcher at Harvard. She says this in the conversation, Kristen Neff, the other person I was talking about. She says self-flagellation.

Self-flagellation is self-defeating. Everything that social sciences know about self-compassion refutes, I think, what is a common idea for us.

[ 26 : 37 ] Basically that we need to be self-critical and to talk to ourselves in certain ways to be motivated. But that's actually not true. There's nothing that supports that.

We don't get better by beating ourselves up. We get better by becoming our best ally because then we are more likely to learn from our mistakes. And at a time when the world is absolutely on fire, I hope that we remember that.

That we will need to take care of ourselves in the days ahead in order to learn and to grow and for all of us to survive together. For me, lately, I've been reading through the book of Exodus and thinking about this wilderness that we're also now clearly in.

And one thing that has landed deeply in my heart is this simple question that God asked Moses. As God invites Moses into God's work of liberating the Hebrew people from slavery, Moses protests that he's not good enough.

It shouldn't be him. His speech disability qualifies him, he thinks. I wonder what Moses' self-talk had been like for all those years in the wilderness.

[ 28 : 00 ] How had he been talking to himself about himself? Yet God asked a simple question of him that cuts through his false perceptions about himself.

What is that in your hand? And what's in his hand turns out to be this old staff that he's always had with him that he regularly carries.

And yet it's that old staff that plays a role in nearly every miracle that God worked through Moses.

This is a moment when God is asking us what is in our hands?

What are those everyday skills and talents and gifts and things that we carry that can play a role, role in the liberation that God wants to work in our world in this wilderness season?

Will our self-talk, will it help us recognize the good thing that we uniquely carry in this moment? Or will it lead us to shrink back, to waste time objecting to God's call?

[ 29 : 18 ] James is right. The language that we use can and indeed does affect the course of our lives and the course of our world.

Y'all, we started this sermon series because so many of us were and are very much moving through stages of grief. grief. And during moments of grief, the tendency is to neglect ourselves.

We started it because there will be plenty of moments for the holy work of protests and organizing ahead, but those will not be sustained for very long without sacred self-care.

Next week is Palm Sunday. And as we turn to considering the cross, don't forget that we follow a God who was most revealed in weakness at the cross.

Who was most revealed in this moment of incredible vulnerability. And because of that, we can do what Leonard Cohen suggests, we can forget our perfect offering.

[ 30 : 32 ] If God could let the light in that most subversive of ways, in that most subversive of moments, through vulnerability and weakness, so can we.

Pastor Anthony in a second, somewhere, is going to come up and close us with a song. And as he does that, I invite you to contemplate your own weakness and vulnerability, to contemplate the ways that you might over identify with your imperfections.

I invite you to contemplate the cracks in the world so that we might renew faith in our God, the God who is revealed in weakness. Amen.