

Discipleship / Counseling Sunday School Lesson: Self-Esteem and God's Word

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In the context of this class, and for the church, the leadership here wants to affirm wholeheartedly that for the spiritual problems in the lives of Christians the Word of God is sufficient and it alone has lasting solutions. We don't need to integrate worldly wisdom or counsel of the ungodly (Freud, Skinner, Adler, Maslow, etc.) to help people in areas of spiritual life and godliness. As Psalm 1:1 says "blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the ungodly." So as you listen to Christian radio or internet or read Christian books, learn to be discerning, and listen to see if what they are saying comes from Scripture or outside it.

I would say like the Apostle Paul, "where Christ is proclaimed, I rejoice." There's a sense we can be thankful that God can and does use ministries with different philosophies and perspectives on some of the issues we've studied in this class. But the Apostle Paul also told us in 1 Thessalonians 5:21 "examine everything carefully ..." That's what we want to do today – whether you agree with me or agree with Stuart Scott or any Christian radio teacher is not most important and is not the standard – we must examine everything carefully against God's Word. Even the Apostle Paul in Acts 17:11 had those in Berea who examined everything he said against Scripture to see if it was so. That didn't make the Bereans nit-picky or narrow-minded (and I don't want to come across that way either), but Scripture says they were *noble-minded*. We should be, too.

So if the inspired Apostle Paul didn't get a pass, modern teachers don't get a pass either, and of course least of all, not me. When a Christian psychologist and author who heads a huge family-focused ministry has a book called *Hide or Seek: How to Build Self-esteem in Your Child*, my mind wants to examine that book to see if its content/premise is driven clearly from Scripture, or secular thought. He writes in that book: 'whenever the keys to low self-esteem are seemingly out of reach for a large percentage of the people, as in 20th century America, then widespread "mental illness," neuroticism, hatred, alcoholism, drug abuse, violence, and social disorder will certainly occur. Personal worth is not something human beings are free to take or leave. We must have it and when it is unattainable, everybody suffers.'¹ [underlines added for emphasis]

When self-esteem is out of reach for many, those things will certainly occur – is that true? Personal worth is something non-negotiable, it's a right that we "must have" or everyone suffers? He writes elsewhere: 'If I could write a prescription for the women of the world, it would provide each one of them with a healthy dose of self-esteem and personal worth (taken 3 times a day until the symptoms disappear.) I have no doubt that this is their greatest need.'²

With all due respect to this brother in Christ, you and I must look to the Bible as our authority to determine *if self-esteem is beyond doubt the greatest need*. If it is, wouldn't we expect God's all-Sufficient Word to address it? Do we find God speaking from heaven to boost the self-esteem of Old Testament people? When violence and social disorder and crime erupted in Genesis 6 or in the book of Judges, did God assess the root cause as being low self-esteem? Does God view our self-worth as an unalienable right? If we don't have it, will sin "most certainly occur?" Do we find Jesus telling the Pharisees that their real problem was they needed to think more highly of self? Does the Bible even mention, support, or encourage the idea of high self-esteem?

These are some of the ideas we want to consider from Scripture as Bereans, examining the Scriptures to see if some of these common assumptions assertions are so. When another family ministry (that I believe also has godly people and some good things to say) has a book come out called *Building Your Mate's Self-Esteem*, I want to look into that.

This is no small or secondary emphasis to many Christians and we don't need to single out any particular ministry or minister to do so

- a fundamentalist writer wrote in *Self-Esteem: You're Better Than You Think*, quote: "A poor self-image can destroy us."³
- listen to some book titles: *Becoming a Better You; The Sensation of Being Somebody*
- a well-respected apologist said psychology's of self-image is the greatest discovery of the 20th century.⁴
- One Christian writer argues that a high self-esteem of a woman during pregnancy is critical for her developing child in the womb,⁵ and more than one writer has argued that low self-esteem is really the root evil behind abortion
- a pastor of a huge mega-million \$ church in Southern CA writes "need for self-esteem underlies every act" and he says self-esteem's 'the single, greatest need affecting the human race today'⁶

WHAT ABOUT "NEEDS"?

What others say or what I say doesn't matter – what does Scripture say? If you do an inductive study of the word "need" with your concordance, you will find out that the word "need" appears over 100 x in the NKJV & NIV (somewhat less in other versions). I looked up each of these and what you find is that sometimes the word "need" in Scripture is a synonym for *necessary / required* (spiritually / bodily, etc.), and when it's used as a noun for a "need" it *never refers to an emotional or psychological or felt need*, in the way modern Christian literature uses the word.

How is it used? "Need" in the Bible sometimes refers to a great or desperate financial need, often to survive financially, but usually "need" refers to a physical need like food or clothing or something absolutely necessary to keep our body alive biologically:

James 2:15-16 (NASB95) If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and be filled," and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that?

Matthew 9:12-13 (NASB95) ¹² But when Jesus heard *this*, He said, "*It is* not those who are healthy who **need a physician**, but those who are sick.

That's a real need there for someone sick or dying to have a doctor. Jesus uses that as an analogy of our spiritual need for the Great Physician, our need for repentance which he came to call us to

Matthew 6:31-34 (NASB95) ³¹ "Do not worry then, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear for clothing?'" ³² "For the **Gentiles eagerly seek** all these things; for your heavenly Father knows that you **need all these things**. ³³ "But **seek first His kingdom and His righteousness**, and all these things will be added to you. ³⁴ "So **do not worry** about tomorrow; for tomorrow will care for itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

Even real physical needs we are not to worry about, or focus on self. We are to focus on the Lord which is our truly greatest need. Eagerly seeking after things less than the Lord is what marks what the pagan world seeks after – including self-esteem and many other things that start with self and put self first – but we must seek first the Lord, our need of His righteousness, looking to Him not self!

Luke 10:38-44 (NKJV) ³⁸ Now it happened as they went that He entered a certain village; and a certain woman named Martha welcomed Him into her house. ³⁹ And she had a sister called Mary, who also **sat at Jesus' feet and heard His word.** ⁴⁰ But Martha was distracted with much serving, and she approached Him and said, "Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Therefore tell her to help me." ⁴¹ And Jesus answered and said to her, "Martha, Martha, **you are worried and troubled about many things.** ⁴² **But one thing is needed, and Mary has chosen that good part,** which will not be taken away from her."

She was seeking first Christ and His Kingdom and Jesus says that is really our one need, our great need, what we are to focus on above all else. We are not to worry about or be troubled about or focus on other so-called "needs" – our real need is Christ alone.

As a theologian once replied to a child who said, "But *I need* that toy." The theologian said, "You don't *need* that toy – you *want* that toy. What you need is Christ." (That theologian is my wife Jaime).

Our kids may get tired of hearing that, but it's good for them to hear. And I think I've overheard our 6-year-old Ella correcting her siblings as to what they really need. That's good for us adults, too! It might be helpful when you read some Christian books that are psychologically-influenced to watch for that word "need" when it's used differently than Scripture and substitute the word "want / desire" (mentally or even cross it out if you like) and I think you'll then generally have a more biblically-accurate sentence.

Why is it important we use terminology biblically? This is not just an issue of semantics – I do think using words the way the Bible uses them is always best, but the far greater concern I have is not just the choice of a word but all of the baggage and unbiblical assumptions and worldviews many books bring over from psychology when they use its terms. You will read much from Christian writers about "needs" that do not come from Scripture but come straight from ungodly humanistic psychologists (some writers even admit it), and what's communicated to many readers is that if these "needs" of mine aren't met (security, significance, self-esteem, etc.) I won't be able to do these things I should.

For many it's only implicit, but some writers make it explicit:

- An example quote: "Actually, our ability to love God and to love our neighbor is limited by our ability to love ourselves."⁷
- One widely-read Christian wrote: "without self-love there can be no love for others ... You cannot love neighbor, you cannot love God unless you first love yourself." (that book is called *Love Yourself*,⁸ an interesting title in light of 2 Timothy 3:1)
- Another says: "So love yourself, Christian, as you should love others."⁹ You don't have to be a Bible scholar to recognize that turns upside-down what Jesus taught – it's the exact opposite.

Jesus understood self-love is universal and natural which is why He calls us to love *others* with such love, the strongest natural love. We should be others-focused, not self-focused.

WHAT ABOUT “SELF-ESTEEM?”

This is not as easy to do a concordance search on, because you can look up the word “self” but you won’t find the word “esteem.” I searched a website with over 10,000 hymns and there is not a single one that contains the word “self” and “esteem” together.

I did find a hymn by Wesley with the word “esteem”:

*O may we ever walk in Him, And nothing know beside;
Nothing desire, **nothing esteem, But Jesus crucified.***

Another hymn I found: “Not I, But Christ” (Fannie Bolton, 1900)

*Christ, only Christ; **no self important bearing;**
Christ, only Christ; **no trace of “I” be found.***

Contrast that with some popular modern choruses made in more recent decades, like “They’ll know we are Christians by our Love”

*We will work with each other, we will work side by side
And we’ll guard each one’s dignity and save each one’s pride*

What happened to the hymn line “pour contempt on all my pride”? One hymn-writer called self-esteem sin, ‘the essence of unbelief.’¹⁰

If the term’s not in Scripture, let’s go to the dictionary. We all know what the word “self” means. The word “esteem” is defined by *Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary, 10th edition*, as a noun meaning #1 (original archaic): “worth, value,” and it goes on to expand the modern common use is “the regard in which one is held; *especially* : high regard <the *esteem* we all feel for her>” [self-esteem then = self-worth, self-value, holding self in high regard]

Corresponding verb meaning for *esteem*: “to set a high value on : regard highly and prize accordingly.” [self-esteem then = to set a high value on self, to regard self highly and prize self]

Oxford English Dictionary defines self-esteem as “confidence in one’s own worth or abilities.” Those dictionary terms are always used in Scripture for what we are to have in our Savior God, never our self! Paul spends much of Philippians 3 urging “no confidence in the flesh” – though he of all men could have found things to esteem and be confident in himself. There are many verses that do speak of these dictionary terms, always as what we are not to do or be.

There are a number of Bible verses with the word “esteem”:

2 Samuel 6:22 (NASB95) [David says] “I will be **more lightly esteemed** than this and **will be humble in my own eyes ...**”

Isaiah 2:22 (NASB95) ²² **Stop regarding man, whose breath of life is in his nostrils; For why should he be esteemed?**

Luke 16:15 (NASB95) “...God knows your hearts; for **that which is highly esteemed among men is detestable in the sight of God.**

Nehemiah 6:15-16 (ESV) ¹⁵ So the wall was finished on the twenty-fifth day of the month Elul, in fifty-two days. ¹⁶ And when all our enemies heard of it, all the nations around us were afraid and **fell greatly in their own esteem**, for they perceived that this work had been accomplished with the help of our God.

In that passage it was clearly God's will for those sinners to fall in their esteem of themselves! Is low self-estimation a bad thing?

Did Jesus come to increase people's degrees of self-esteem, or did He come calling people to deny self and follow Him? You know the answer: the call to discipleship is an end of self; esteem Christ!

But most psychologists don't call struggling sinners to deny self and esteem Christ and lift up and focus on Scripture rather than self. One Christian professor at the Rosemead School of Psychology wrote: "Depression always has a loss of self-esteem ... Be slow to direct a depressed person to the Scriptures ... *no preaching*. I would recommend a recess from church if there is *preaching* done in the church."¹¹

Direct them to self-esteem not the Scriptures? Counsel him not to go to a church if there's preaching?

I hope it's becoming clear to you the foundation and framework of the Christian self-esteem movement doesn't come from what God or His Word says. It's extrabiblical – it's unbiblical. Don't just take my word for it; let me let a leading Christian psychologist tell you in his own words: "Under the influence of humanistic psychologists like Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow, many of us Christians have begun to see our need for self-love and self-esteem."¹²

Its theoretical base actually goes back to Alfred Adler, who was influenced by Horney. Adams writes: 'It was Adler's fundamental view that a person may realize fulfillment and satisfaction only when his needs for security and significance are met. Maslow took this idea, reshaped and amplified it, and then sold it under the heading of self-actualization.'¹³ Christian may sell it also under different terms.

Neo-Freudians/Adler/Horney

VIEW OF MAN'S GUILT: Mistakes in thinking and valuing, lack of confidence

RESOLUTION: Change thinking to feel better and behave better (i.e., power of positive thinking about self is the key)

Third Force / Carl Rogers

MAN – basically good, potential within, mature like a flower

TREATMENT – help him realize potential, solution within (i.e., self-esteem), focus on feeling (i.e., "I'm ok, you're ok")

RESOLUTION OF GUILT – Take whatever steps necessary to achieve the goal of being comfortable with oneself

PROBLEMS (*with both*) – Unbiblical anthropology (i.e., view of man, he is good so he should feel good about self), solution is within rather than in Christ (seek self rather than Christ first, self-esteem rather than Christ within, look inside rather than look up)

Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the ungodly

Back to the Bible. I did in my searches find the word “self-esteem” in one less common translation, the NRSV (probably none of you use this translation): “The lazy person is wiser in self-esteem ...” (Proverbs 26:16). The context and connotation is obviously negative, as other translations render this phrase as “own conceit” (KJV), “will think he is more intelligent” (TEV), “consider themselves smarter” (NLT), “thinks he is wiser” (NCV), “is wiser in his own eyes” (NASB, NIV), etc. The general idea is that of an inflated view of self, and the Biblical writer is showing the sinful foolishness of this “self-esteem.”

In the major English versions, only one passage has both the words “self” and “esteem” together and it is very noteworthy:

Philippians 2:3 (NKJV) “Let nothing be done through **selfish** ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each **esteem** others better than **himself**.”

J. C. Ryle in commenting on this verse wrote: ‘Let all who desire to please Christ, watch and pray against self-esteem. It is a feeling which is deeply rooted in our hearts. ... We ought often to ponder the words of Paul ... [here in] Philippians 2:3. Blessed is that man who can sincerely and gladly rejoice when others are exalted, though he himself is overlooked and passed by!’¹⁴

The Greek word translated “conceit” in Philippians 2:3 is *kenodoxia* and the Enhanced Strong’s Lexicon lists one of the definitions for this sin Paul forbids as “self-esteem.” Another standard work called *Word Studies in the Greek New Testament* defines what Strong’s calls “self-esteem” here as “empty pride.”¹⁵ Again this is something we should not pursue, or do anything with such a mindset, for that matter. Instead of having higher thoughts in our mind about ourselves, we are to have a “lowliness of mind,” and to esteem others and be focused on them and their interests (v. 4). Such a lowliness of mind or spirit is constantly commended in Scripture, which on the other hand never tells us to have higher thoughts about ourselves.

Rom. 12:3 “I say, through the grace given to me, to everyone who is among you, **not to think of himself more highly** than he ought to think ...”

This is the closest biblical verse I can find regarding thinking higher thoughts about oneself, and again it is something we are *not* to do, but instead we are to assess ourselves soberly, and if there is anything to rejoice about, God has done it (cf. 1 Cor. 4:7). Nevertheless, when certain problems come our way, most modern counselors (Christian and non-Christian) will tell you that your problem is you need to think more highly of yourself. But Paul says the problem of many is the opposite - you think you are something when in fact you are nothing (Gal. 6:3) and need to think soberly and Biblically. When Jesus launched his preaching ministry, his opening line crushed any assumption that lofty self-image is man’s top need. “Blessed are the poor in spirit” (Matthew 5:3). Spurgeon called this attitude “an absence of self-esteem.”¹⁶

The first line of the N.T. message of Jesus starts with calling us all not to recognize our self-worth but our spiritual lack of worth in ourselves! In our selves we are spiritually bankrupt, unworthy. As Romans 3:12 says of all sinful humans “together they have become worthless, there is no one who does good, not even one.”

Instead of thinking we are good and of great worth and thinking better thoughts about ourselves, we are to be “poor in spirit,” coming humbly to God as a desperate beggar wanting to esteem *Him* if He will only graciously have mercy on a wretch like me.

David said it’s not a high spirit, but “a broken spirit, a broken and contrite heart, O God you will not despise” (Psalm 51:17).

WHAT ABOUT WORD *SELF* IN THE CONCORDANCE?

The NT does speak of “self” several times - “lay aside the old self” (Eph. 4:22, Col. 3:9).

Romans 6:6 says this “self was crucified, in order that our body of sin might be done away with.” Jesus did not come to increase self-image, but to rescue from self:

“Then He said to them all, ‘If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me.’” (Luke 9:23)

Jesus is not saying deny some habit for yourself, like giving up chewing gum for lint, or giving up your daily venti Mocha at Starbuck’s for a drip coffee instead. It’s not deny something *from* yourself, He is saying you must deny *your self itself* - literally, “say no to self.” As the parallel passage in Matthew 16:24-25 explains, denying self is parallel with losing self for Christ’s sake. A parallel in John 12:25 says “he who hates his life [word can also be translated *self*] in this world shall keep it to life eternal” and Jesus warns against loving your life or loving your self, because those who do may lose their life eternally if they have never truly denied self and lost self in love for Christ.

When the original audience heard Jesus say “take up your cross daily” they understood those words meant death to an infamous criminal. Jesus is essentially saying, “You must treat yourself, with all your sinful ways, priorities, and desires, like a criminal, and put self to death daily.” It’s the end of the old self, esteem Christ!

2 Corinthians 5:15 “and He died for all, so that they who live might **no longer live for themselves**, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf.”

Romans 14:7-8 “For **not one of us lives for himself** ... for if we live, we live for the Lord, or if we die, we die for the Lord; therefore whether we live or die, we are the Lord’s.”

It’s all about Christ, not about us. The Christian says “For to me, to live is Christ” but I used to say “to me to live is self.” Christ is to take the place of self in a Christian in his esteem, focus, and love.

It may be true that many people feel insecure, and may have a negative view of themselves, a diminished sense of worth, love, or value. They may feel broken inside and their thinking can affect the way they live. Such a broken spirit that does not turn to God will invariably encounter more problems. But the solution is not to try and make yourself *feel good more*, we need to *fear God more*. True help for hurting struggling people is found in experiencing God’s satisfying love instead of our unfulfilling self-love. We must turn to God in such a broken and contrite state, recognizing that apart from Christ we *are* nothing. It is said of gravity, that what goes up must come down. From a Biblical standpoint, we could modify that statement to say whoever first goes down (and repents in humility) will be brought up.

And on the flip side, if you try and bring yourself up (through self-esteem or anything other than Christ), you will inevitably come crashing back down.

And whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted. (Matthew 23:12)

Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up (Jas 4:10)

Better to let God lift you up through humble lowliness of mind than try to lift yourself up through higher self-esteem in your mind.

HOW SHOULD WE HELP PEOPLE WHO STRUGGLE WITH WHAT THE WORLD WOULD CALL “LOW SELF-ESTEEM?”

I want to be sensitive and recognize there are hurting people out there – I just have to differ with psychologists as to what the cause is and what the cure is. In the case of someone who has grown up with what’s diagnosed as a “bad self-image,” who is affected by criticism and unfairly comparing oneself to others, I’m not denying that there are issues that need to be dealt with. But focusing on self more is not the answer, and rather than making things better, self-focus inward therapy will actually make it worse in the long run. The problem most have is too much self-esteem and self-interest, which even can drive the self-deprecating comments or complaints about ourselves because we want people to affirm our self.

It’s still all about self even though sin takes many forms – negative things and thoughts of self wouldn’t bother us if we didn’t love ourselves. If you hate Osama bin Laden, you’re not going to be real upset if people think negative thoughts or say negative things about him. The fact that you care so much what people say or think about you shows you love yourself, as Jesus affirmed. If we want to use biblical terminology and diagnosis, the problem many have is actually trying to please men, or a fear of man, and the biblical solution is fear of God. The issue may be that we are overly obsessed with what other people think of *us* rather than what God thinks (John 12:43; Gal. 1:10; 1 Thess. 2:4).

We may want the praise of man like the Pharisees. Rather than focusing on God and His glory, we may think we deserve more than we receive, and therefore feel wronged when we don’t get our high expectations of what someone of our level should get. But God says He desires that we be less self-preoccupied, not more.

Remember heart diagram past 2 weeks? SELF is the core problem, not the core solution in the biblical process of change. Self is the big problem that all the other idols / lusts / desires come from, and the biblical view of progressive salvation (last week) is the process we must be involved in putting off the old self, and putting on the new man in Christ. Self must decrease, God must increase.

Let me recommend an excellent book to help people who feel they need approval or affirmation or esteem from others or self: *When People Are Big and God is Small*, by Edward Welch. On the subject of self-esteem, there is a book called *Christ Esteem* (out of print), which I read this week, and another book I read this week is Jay Adams, *The Biblical view of self-esteem, self-love, self-image*. Also: http://www.albertmohler.com/blog_read.php?id=876

How have Christians for 2,000 years helped people with self-esteem issues before humanistic psychology came along?

The answer I see from reading saints in church history is that they sought to help people by ridding them of self-esteem. Even in the Catholic church I read a letter from a Pope in the middle ages warning against self-esteem and parallel “vain glory.”¹⁷

Those in the Reformation tradition in both England and America sought to help such people by warning of self-esteem, which Thomas Boston says will “so render the soul more unholy.”¹⁸

William Law: “self-esteem, and fleshly wisdom ... are those very works of the devil in us, which Christ came into the world to destroy ... [these] are as satanical things as any we carry about us, and most of all fix us in the highest [opposition] to that state, which our Lord affirms ...”¹⁹

In another place he explained: “All sin, death, damnation, and hell is nothing else but this kingdom of self, or the various operations of self-love, self-esteem, and self-seeking, which separate the soul from God, and end in eternal death and hell.”²⁰

Octavius Winslow said a Christian’s sanctification involves “daily discovery of indwelling corruption, inordinate affection, pride, self-esteem, instability, love of the world, and the innumerable other forms which indwelling depravity assumes.”²¹

The biblical process of change or progressive sanctification is a daily putting to death of depravity’s self-esteem and sins.

Another Puritan Richard Baxter wrote: A proud mind is high in ... self-esteem, and carnal aspiring; **a humble mind is high indeed in God’s esteem**, and in holy aspiring ... Well, then, art thou a man of **worth in thy own eyes?** ... If these symptoms be undeniably in thy heart, thou art a proud person. There is too much of hell abiding in thee ... thy soul is too like the devil ... I speak the more of it, because it is the most common and dangerous sin in morality, and most promotes the great sin of infidelity. O christian! if thou wouldst live continually in the presence of thy Lord, lie in the dust, and he will thence take thee up. ”²²

The hymn-writer of many of our hymns, Horatius Bonar wrote: “Let us fling away self-esteem and high-mindedness, for it is the very essence of unbelief ... [Be] putting away all high thoughts ... either about what we are or what we can do”²³

He adds in another book: ‘All these difficulties of yours have their root in the self esteem of our natures ... Give up these attempts to be satisfied with yourself in anything, great or small, faith, feeling, or action. The Holy Spirit’s work in convincing you of sin, is to make you dissatisfied with yourself ... why should you attempt to be satisfied with anything which will not satisfy [God]? There is but one thing with which he is entirely satisfied, - the person and work of his only begotten Son. It is with Him that he wants you to be satisfied, not with yourself. How much better would it be to take God’s way at once, and be satisfied with Christ? ... Satisfaction with yourself, even could you get it, would do nothing for you. Satisfaction with Christ would do everything; for Christ is ALL.’²⁴

J. C. Philpot wrote: ‘self-esteeming spirit, is a spirit of error. It is not the spirit of the meek and lowly Jesus ... this proud spirit lies deeply imbedded in the human heart, and is one of the most marked features of the fall. ... there is the very spirit of antichrist; there is the false spirit, the spirit of error.’²⁵

Another quote: ‘By nature, we are all prone to glory in self through those cursed principles of **self-esteem and self-exaltation**. Nothing but the mighty power of God can put down these cursed principles ... If a man has not been taught by the strong hand of God in his soul to abhor, loathe, and cry out against himself as one of the vilest wretches that crawls on God's earth—he has never learned to glory in the Lord Jesus Christ. When the Lord Jesus Christ reveals to his soul a sense of His love, and unfolds a sight of His glory before his astonished eyes, he is brought to look out of himself, and from all he has—to the Lord Jesus Christ!’²⁶

John Angell James wrote that when we bring the gospel to sinners, “we have to displace their feeling of self-esteem, by one of self-condemnation and self-abhorrence! ... to offer salvation upon terms which leave not the smallest room for self-congratulation, or the operation of pride ... all its self-love ...”²⁸

F. B. Meyer in the 19th century wrote of the “evil of self-esteem. If I want to save a man, I must cast out the spirit of self, and substitute the Lord Jesus Christ. Alpha, Omega, all in all.”²⁹

Listen to some of these things Spurgeon said (late 19th Century):

“we esteemed not Jesus ... *because we esteemed ourselves so highly*. Self-esteem naturally keeps Jesus out of the heart; and the more our self-esteem increases, the more firmly do we fasten the door against Christ. Love of self prevents love of the Savior.”³⁰

“Is not self-esteem the spring of half our sorrow? We are so wonderfully good in our own judgment.”³¹

It's interesting that self-esteem used to be seen as the source of our problems but in late 20th century self-esteem is seen as the solution for all our problems. High self-esteem used to be seen as a sin to avoid and a hindrance to godly life – nowadays low self-esteem is.

‘friend, the sword of divine grace will kill all this; and the message that God’s mercy sends to you to-day is, “Give up.” Renounce your fancied goodness and deceitful self-esteem. Oh, give up that spinning; it is a poor trade to spin cobwebs. Give it up.’³²

Spurgeon tells his students seeking ministry: “prepare yourselves for sinking lower and lower in self-esteem; prepare yourselves for self-annihilation, and pray God to expedite the process.”³³ In the 20th century, Arthur W. Pink wrote: “**self-esteem**. This is as prolific and powerful a cause of self-deception as any of those mentioned above.”³⁴ In applying conclusions to the Sermon on the Mount he writes application #2: “labour to be emptied of self-righteousness, self-esteem, and self-sufficiency. The sinner needs first to be convicted of his utter inability...”³⁵

As recent as 1942, Lewis Sperry Chaeffer wrote: ‘Scripture distinctly states that it was self-esteem, or pride, which incited [Satan] this greatest of all angels to launch out upon an independent course of action (Ezek 28:17; 1 Tim 3:6).’³⁶

Tozer in the same era wrote of “the self-sins—those hyphenated, little two-part devils that eat at the vitals of men ... self-esteem and a hundred other such self-sins that lie within man's being.”³⁷

Now fast forward to the 1980s and you have Robert Schuller defining self-esteem not as a core sin of man but the cause of sin in man by lack of self-esteem.” He writes: “Sin is any act or thought that robs myself or another human being of his or her self-esteem ... the core of sin is a lack of self-esteem ... The most serious sin is the one that causes me to say, “I am unworthy.””³⁸ This is a radical shift from what had been taught for nearly 2,000 years and it’s from psychology, not Scripture! Should we re-translate Rom. 3:23 “all have sinned by falling short in our view of ourselves”?!

Some see strong self-esteem as essential in hiring a pastor. Ex: “The healthier the self-esteem, the better the foundation upon which to build ministry.”³⁹ Is that an NT requirement for pastors?

One very famous and recognizable name in Christian publishing and research of the Christian church and its trends wrote a book that included a list of what he considered the church’s “Ten Critical, Achievable Goals ... in the 1990’s.

#9: restore people’s self-esteem

#10: focus on reaching the world for Christ”⁴⁰

On the most widely-listened-to family Christian radio show, I heard a counselor discussing a particular behavioral sin, about which she asserted categorically as fact that “The disorder is not really the problem – the real problem is self-esteem.”

At least one Study Bible for teens has a section at the end describing how eating problems victimize adolescents because of low self-esteem. A professor of mine who’s daughter read that to him said, “I used to say, “trust everything in your Bible from cover-to-cover, but now I say, trust everything from Genesis-to-Revelation!”

How did believers since the time of Genesis live fully for God before self-esteem psychology was “discovered” by modern non-Christians and later accepted in much of the church after 1950s?

Let’s take a quick tour beginning in Genesis of those God used:

Abraham: "Behold, I have taken upon myself to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes" (Genesis 18:27).

Jacob: "I am not worthy of the least of all the steadfast love and all the faithfulness which thou hast shown to thy servant, for with only my staff I crossed this Jordan; and now I have become two companies" (Genesis 32:10).

Moses: "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the sons of Israel out of Egypt? ... Oh, my Lord, I am not eloquent, either heretofore or since thou hast spoken to thy servant; but I am slow of speech and of tongue" (Ex. 3:11; 4:10).

John Piper writes: “What is the Biblical solution when a person is paralyzed by a sense of guilt or unworthiness or uselessness? I believe with all my heart that the solution is not self-esteem. God did not say to Moses, "Stop putting yourself down. You are somebody. You are eloquent." That

is not the Biblical way. What God said was, "Stop looking at your own unworthiness and uselessness and look at me. I made the mouth. I will be with you. I will help you. I will teach you what to say. Look to me and live!" [Exodus 4]. The Biblical answer to the paralysis of low self-esteem is not high self-esteem; it is sovereign grace. You can test whether you agree with this by whether you can gladly repeat the words of Isaiah 41:13, "Fear not, you worm Jacob...I will help you, says the Lord; your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel." In other words, God's way of freeing and mobilizing people who see themselves as worms is not to tell them that they are beautiful butterflies but rather to say, "I will help you. I am your redeemer... Go to Egypt now, and I will be with you."⁴¹

Job: "I had heard of thee by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees thee; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:5-6).

Isaiah: "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!" (Isaiah 6:5).

Peter: "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord" (Luke 5:8).

Paul: "I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh... O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to Jesus ..." (Roman 7:18, 24).

If Paul said this at the desk of many Christian psychologists, you can almost hear the rebukes. "Don't say that Paul, you are a good person, an Apostle for crying out loud. What I'm hearing is that you are having thoughts of low self-esteem, but you are special – you're a somebody, not a wretch or lowly sinner! That negative self-defeating talk won't do you any good. You're wonderful."

Paul would respond: "It is a trustworthy statement, deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am I am the foremost of all ... for an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life" (1 Timothy 1:15-16).

To think any higher of ourselves than the Apostle Paul himself did of himself is supreme arrogance. Notice in 1 Timothy that Paul's mindset and gracious testimony was *an example for all of us!*

John the Baptist: "A man can receive nothing unless it has been given him from heaven ... He must increase, I must decrease" (John 3:27, 30).

His ministry was all about paving the way for the Messiah, humbling self and sinners by calling for repentance, then magnifying Christ and getting self out of the way. And in reading the lives of the Hall of Faith, this common thread seems evident. The lesser their view of self, and the greater their view of God, the greater impact they had for His Kingdom.

King David: When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, The moon and the stars, which You have ordained, What is man that You are mindful of him, And the son of man that You visit him? (Psalm 8:3-4)

We don't need a better view of ourselves, we need a bigger view of God. There is significance and purpose and value in life but it's not in us, it's in God and living for His glory, which has true and eternal value. Anything less will never satisfy. God did not create us in His Image to

boost our self-image, but to focus on His image in Christ for His glory. God didn't save us because we're great but because He's infinitely greater and more fulfilling than self.

John Piper writes: "This is shocking. The love of God is not God's making much of us, but God's saving us from self-centeredness so that we can enjoy making much of him forever. And our love to others is not our making much of them, but helping them to find satisfaction in making much of God. True love aims at satisfying people in the glory of God. Any love that terminates on man is eventually destructive."⁴²

He concludes much better than I can: "Nobody stands on the edge of the Alps or the Rockies or the Grand Canyon ... to feel better about ourselves. Do you know why you go there? Because you were written to be satisfied with splendor, not self. You were created and a law written on your heart to be infinitely, eternally, fully, joyfully satisfied in a grand splendor not a great self. I plead with you lay it down. Lay down your quest for the applause of men, the approval of men, and begin to get on a quest for the one thing that will satisfy your soul -- the splendor of Jesus Christ and all that God is for you in him. I just plead with you for your own soul's infinite happiness that you will stop pursuing it in the wrong place ... We have an invincibly triumphant savior - Jesus Christ. Don't turn away from him to yourself. Don't want praise for you; give praise to him. Know him; he'll satisfy you."⁴³

The good news is not what a wonderful self we are, but what a wonderful Savior we have!

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- 36 *Bibliotheca Sacra Volume 99*, p. 394.
- 37 A. W. Tozer. *Christ the Eternal Son*.
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- 39 Don Cousins, *Mastering Church Management*, "Mastering Ministry"--Jacket. (Portland, Or.: Multnomah; Christianity Today, 1990).
- 40 George Barna, *The Frog in the Kettle*. Ventura, Calif.: Regal, 1990, p. 226.
- 41 John Piper, *Blessed Are the Poor in Spirit Who Mourn*, sermon dated February 2, 1986, available in text or audio form through Desiring God Ministries, www.desiringgod.org.
- 42 "The Goal of God's Love May Not Be What You Think It Is," *Dallas Morning News*, October 14, 2000.
- 43 Piper, "Thankful for the Love of God! Why?" November 18, 2001. Both articles available from Desiring God Ministries, www.desiringgod.org