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SELF-ESTEEM

What Does The Bible Say?

Some believe self-esteem and the Bible don't mix. Others are convinced there is no better place to find self-respect and self-acceptance.

The truth is that self-esteem can be pursued with pride or with humility. It can be cultivated within the boundaries of biblical wisdom or without it.

The following pages have been written with the confidence that no one has more potential for self-respect and dignity than those who learn to see themselves from heaven's point of view. No one has a more healthy and realistic opinion of themselves than those who believe they can do anything God enables them to do.

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WHY IS SELF-ESTEEM SO IMPORTANT?

They sat next to each other in high-school biology. Yet they lived worlds apart. He seemed to have everything going for him. She had a lot to overcome.

He came from a family of good looks, grew up in an expensive neighborhood, and had many of the social privileges usually associated with wealth and success. She was plain in appearance, came from a working-class family, and had to work hard to make passing grades.

There was also another way they were different. He was full of self-doubt, didn't like the way he looked, and suspected that others paid attention to him only because of his family's money. She was amazingly

happy, well-adjusted, and though aware of her limitations was determined to go further in life than others thought she could.

They were two people with two different ways of looking at themselves. What he had in material advantage, she had in self-esteem and self-respect. What he had in appearance she had in self-acceptance. Together they remind us that we all have a way of looking at ourselves that influences whether we feel adequate or inadequate, likeable or unlikeable, valuable or worthless.

What might seem hard to understand is that the way we feel about ourselves doesn't just depend on our appearance or abilities. Much more important, our opinion of ourselves depends largely on how we have learned to think about ourselves from the important people in our

lives. If the “significant others” in our life have helped us to feel important and loved, we will be inclined to have a healthy opinion of ourselves. If they have given us reason to feel

Why is it that the way we feel about ourselves is not always determined by the cards we've been dealt?

inadequate and unneeded, we are apt to find ourselves thinking:

- “There’s something wrong with me.”
- “I don’t belong here.”
- “I don’t like myself.”
- “I don’t have what it takes.”
- “I don’t compare well.”
- “I want to hide.”

Bad self-esteem is a curse. More and more people are realizing that

if you *feel* as if you have nothing to offer, you’ll *act* as if you have nothing to offer. If you *think* poorly of yourself, you will tend to *act* poorly. If you have a low image of yourself, you will be inclined to back away from relationships and challenges. If you are sure you’re going to fail, then chances are you will. Low self-esteem is like self-fulfilling prophecy. If you believe you don’t have what it takes to win at life, you are apt to confirm your own prediction.

By contrast, good self-esteem is a blessing. Those who believe they have something to offer are more likely to make a positive difference in other people’s lives. People who have a healthy sense of self-respect are more likely to pursue relationships and challenges. Those who think well of themselves are more likely to fulfill

their own expectations.

There is, however, a downside to self-esteem. Even as we acknowledge that healthy self-respect is an advantage, we need to acknowledge that there are dangers to the kind of positive thinking that is often encouraged in education, media, and even in religious circles. In an effort to help others shed feelings of self-contempt and self-rejection, many have promoted false hope.

Healthy self-esteem needs to be realistic. It's *not* a self-confidence that says:

- “I can be anything I want to be.”
- “I deserve more.”
- “I don't need anyone else's help.”
- “I don't have any regrets.”
- “I don't have any fears.”

Instead, the right kind of self-respect rests on a fair assessment of our real strengths and weaknesses.

A healthy self-esteem expresses itself with a confidence that says:

- “My life has a purpose.”
- “I belong here.”
- “I can love and be loved.”
- “I need others as they need me.”
- “I will seek forgiveness for my wrongs.”
- “I can be anything God enables me to be.”

Thinking more of ourselves than we ought to think is just as self-defeating as a low self-image. Self-conceit can

Healthy self-esteem needs to be realistic.

cause us to make unfair demands of others. It can lead us to believe we are entitled to what we don't have. It can prompt us to ignore our need of God and others.

WHERE DOES A BAD SELF-IMAGE COME FROM?

The way we think about ourselves can sometimes be traced back to our parents. Long ago, Moses, the human author of the first five books of the Bible, described how “the sins of the parents” can have negative consequences in the lives of their children (Ex. 20:5).

Today, the personal stories of adults who as children were exposed to parental rejection, neglect, alcoholism, drug addiction, and physical and emotional abuse illustrate the point. As resilient and forgiving as children are, they do not easily escape the effects of a parent who ignored their needs for love and respect. Physically mature men and women who experienced rejection in their early years

often struggle for the rest of their lives trying to feel good about themselves.

Children who have not been loved sometimes spend the rest of their lives, consciously or unconsciously, doing all kinds of things to avoid being hurt again. It is common for people who fear further rejection to retreat into the darkness of depression, chemical dependency, sexual promiscuity, or unreasonable fears. Some run from emotional intimacy and meaningful relationships for fear of being rejected again. In each case, however, the pain of running causes them to feel worse about themselves. Their self-esteem sinks lower and lower. They feel bad and act worse. Then they feel worse yet about what they've done.

HOW SHOULD WE FEEL ABOUT OURSELVES?

There is an interesting comment about self-esteem in the ancient apocryphal book of Sirach. In the New American Bible we find these words:

My son, with humility have self-esteem; prize yourself as you deserve. Who will acquit him who condemns himself? Who will honor him who discredits himself? (Sirach 10:27-28).

For some people, this statement will resonate with practical wisdom. Many have found that if they don't believe in themselves, other people are not likely to believe in them either. The book of Sirach, however, while included in some versions of the Bible, is not recognized by the whole church as inspired

and authoritative.

We therefore need to do with this quote what we do with other thoughts and ideas. We need to see whether the rest of the Bible supports the idea that it is good to have self-esteem with humility.

As we might expect, teachings about humility are not hard to find in Scripture. At first look, the Bible seems to be more concerned about those who have an excessively high opinion of themselves than with those who struggle with a low self-image. For instance, in his letter to the Romans the apostle Paul wrote:

For 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, but to think soberly, as God has dealt to each one a measure of faith (12:3).

But what did Paul mean

when he said we are “to think soberly [about ourselves] as God has dealt to each one a measure of faith”? To answer that question, it’s important to see the meaning of those words in their original context. When we read on we find, first of all, that Paul wanted his readers to think of themselves as people who were mutually reliant on one another’s strengths (12:4-8).

***It’s important
to have a healthy
self-image that
reflects our
dependence
on God.***

Second, when Paul used the word *soberly* he was discouraging his readers from believing that they could do anything they wanted to do, or that they could be anything they

wanted to be. Instead, Paul encouraged them to have a sobriety about themselves that was rooted in realism and self-control.

Third, even though Paul advocated self-control, he asked his readers to think of themselves as people who understood their dependence on one another and God.

In another letter, Paul showed by his own example that, in matters beyond his understanding, he put his confidence in God. With the conviction that God alone understands the purpose and character of our lives, Paul wrote:

We do not dare to classify or compare ourselves with some who commend themselves.

When they measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves, they are not wise. . . . For it is not the one who commends

*himself who is approved,
but the one whom the
Lord commends
(2 Cor. 10:12,18 NIV).*

When these words are read in context, they draw a picture of an apostle who wrote with both humility and the dignity of self-respect. While being committed to be gentle and helpful toward others (10:1), he also saw himself as being able to do whatever God wanted him to do (10:2-6). Paul's confidence was in God, not in himself or in the opinion of others.

MEASURED BY HUMAN STANDARDS

Although the Bible encourages an awareness of self-worth that has its origin in God, educational or community-based programs often find it necessary to encourage individual self-worth and self-respect without bringing God and

religion into the picture. Whether the purpose is to keep children in school, avoid teen pregnancies, or escape the self-destructive habits of drugs, gangs, or alcohol, many programs are based on the belief that good self-esteem can be promoted as the most common and foundational of human values.

Without appealing to religious or spiritual authority, educators and motivational speakers encourage young people to believe, "You're not junk. You're special. Don't let yourself be used by others. Be yourself. Love yourself. Trust yourself and follow your own heart. Be all that you can be. Look out for yourself; because if you don't, no one else will."

Such attempts to promote a positive self-image have merit. There is no doubt that many young people have been

SELF-IMAGE	
MAN	GOD
Love yourself	Love others as yourself
Promote yourself	Humble yourself
Live for yourself	Die to yourself

motivated to stay in school and make something of their lives because someone believed in them, or at least taught them to believe in themselves.

At the same time, much that is taught in the name of self-esteem carries a subtle spirituality that can be misleading. Saying that people can be whatever they want to be is true only up to a point. Saying there is no reason to feel bad about what we've done is often not true. Encouraging no fear, no guilt, no regret, and no ultimate accountability to anyone

but ourselves is only a short-term fix. In the long run, efforts to make people feel better at the expense of the truth is advice that ends in lasting regret and despair.

MEASURED BY HEAVEN'S STANDARDS

The Bible teaches us to see the value of our lives by adding God's perspective to our own. The path to this kind of eventual self-esteem, however, is challenging. The Scriptures do more than acknowledge the importance of loving ourselves. They also attach our ultimate well-being and happiness to whether we are willing to see the long-term benefits of knowing when to think negatively and regretfully about ourselves.

At this point you may be wondering whether you want to continue reading. Please don't stop now. Don't be afraid. The happiness

and inner emotional health God offers is infinitely and eternally better than anything you stand to lose in the process. Rightly understood, the question is not whether you can afford to pursue a spiritually based self-esteem. The question is whether you can afford putting off the only kind of self-respect and dignity that will be important 100 years from now.

So please, keep reading—not only for your own sake but for those who are influenced by your life. At first, the Bible’s approach to self-esteem will seem to go against all of your own instincts. But that’s because God sees everything more clearly than we do. He knows that we will eventually be happy only if we learn to see the importance of loving, hating, and dying to ourselves. Let’s look at each one of these.

Loving Ourselves

Ironically, the Bible assumes that we already love ourselves. Jesus seemed to acknowledge this when He said, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Mt. 22:39).

The apostle Paul, while giving marital counsel to couples, made a more direct statement about our natural inclination to love ourselves:

Husbands ought to love their own wives as their own bodies; he who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as the Lord does the church (Eph. 5:28-29).

Our own experience will probably bear this out. We habitually look after our own bodies by feeding, clothing, and protecting them. We naturally look after our own rights and are inclined to become

frustrated or angry if others try to take advantage of us. We care for ourselves so much that when we don't measure up to either our own expectations or those of others, we can become very unhappy with others and even angry with ourselves.

If we didn't already love ourselves, we wouldn't care whether or not we felt good about ourselves.

What we sometimes miss, however, is that the only reason we are dissatisfied with our appearance or discouraged by our failures is that we naturally care about ourselves. If we didn't, we wouldn't care what we looked like. We wouldn't care what others thought of us. We wouldn't care

whether we were hurting inside. We wouldn't spend time with the image we see in the mirror. If we didn't love ourselves, we wouldn't even entertain thoughts of whether we'd be better off dead.

But now comes the real mind-stretcher. According to the Bible, if you really love yourself, you will also hate yourself.

Hating Ourselves

What does the Bible say about hating ourselves? One thing is clear. God doesn't tell us to hate our big ears, crooked nose, or short legs. He doesn't ask us to focus our contempt on complexion, unmanageable hair, or even a troubling case of bad memory or clumsiness. What He wants us to despise is something far more serious and dangerous to our health—the stubborn self-centeredness of our fallen

human nature. Paul recognized this internal tendency when he wrote:

*I find this law at work:
When I want to do good,
evil is right there with me.
For in my inner being I
delight in God's law; but
I see another law at work
in the members of my
body, waging war against
the law of my mind and
making me a prisoner of
the law of sin at work
within my members.
What a wretched man I
am! Who will rescue me
from this body of death?
(Rom. 7:21-24 NIV).*

Paul's frustration with himself might seem like a poor choice for a discussion on self-esteem. But his willingness to despise that part of him that is spiritually unprofitable has parallels in everyday life. By learning to see the weakness and failures of his own human nature, Paul is like the builder who has to tear down

a condemned building before he can put up a new house on the same plot of land. He is like the coach who finds it necessary to tear down his players' self-confidence before they are willing to play his kind of ball.

In a similar way, the Lord finds it necessary to show us that we really don't have a reason to feel good about ourselves as long as we are determined to live for ourselves and rely on ourselves. We need to hate this tendency so much that we, like Paul, will cry out to God for deliverance from it. In the process, we find ourselves ready for another necessary but disconcerting step.

Dying To Ourselves

Before we can begin to make significant progress in our spiritual growth and achieve a mature and satisfying self-esteem, the Bible tells us we also have

to learn to die to ourselves. Again, it sounds all wrong—to gain self-esteem by dying to ourselves! But it's true.

Jesus said:

If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple. And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple (Lk. 14:26-27).

We need to be willing to put Jesus ahead of every other relationship (see Jn. 12:25). For our own happiness, we need to give up on all other trusts and sources of life. Just as a seed must die to produce a plant, so we need to bury our confidence in all other hopes before we can discover the ultimate blessedness of finding our life and dignity and self-acceptance through a

complete reliance on God.

All of this may sound unnecessarily severe and self-defeating. But if we could see ourselves and our future from the window of eternity, we would see that any confidence or hope that competes with God for control of our lives is a threat to our well-being. We

We need to die to our own efforts of protecting our self-image and sense of well-being.

were made to serve our Creator. We were created to feel good—to feel great—about the privilege of being His servants. In addition, we were designed to feel empty and unfulfilled if we try to serve anyone or anything other than God Himself (see Eccl. 12:9-14).

BY WHAT VALUES DO WE SEE OURSELVES?

At this point it should be apparent that our Father in heaven, like all loving parents, wants us to feel good about ourselves. But He wants it to be on His terms, not ours. That might sound like bad news. But it isn't. Heaven's values are so much richer and more meaningful than the short-lived values that tend to catch our eye.

MEASURED BY HUMAN STANDARDS

Our natural inclination is to think that our well-being and ability to feel good about ourselves lies in values variously described as:

- Beauty
- Brains
- Bucks
- Brawn
- Appearance
- Aptitude

- Affluence
- Ability
- Pleasure
- Prominence
- Possessions
- Power

If these are our values, we are in trouble. Regardless of how they are described, they are superficial, short-lived, and misleading. Our net worth is not equal to the sum total of our appearance, our abilities, and our affluence.

It's a lousy lie that convinces us to feel bad about ourselves because we don't compare well with others when it comes to beauty, brains, bucks, or brawn. It's a lie of unbelievable proportions that causes us to think that real value is found in a handsome face, a well-dressed body, a quick mind, or a fat bank account.

Yet the children of the world are nurtured or neglected, pampered or put off, largely on the basis of the bone structure and fat deposits of their bodies, the

alertness of their minds, or the social status of their parents. Children are raised to feel good or bad about themselves depending on how they fit into the selfish, ever-changing mold of the world around them.

***What we value
will determine
how we feel
about ourselves—
and how long that
feeling will last.***

Does this mean we should always despise these other values? No, they have their place. We need to cultivate and appreciate wealth, appearance, ability, and influence whenever higher values show us that it is appropriate to do so. We need to do the best we can with what the Lord has given us. Being a well-groomed, color-coordinated person has

its place. And in a limited sense, this can help us to feel better about ourselves.

But when it comes to the real basis of self-esteem, we need to build on the truth of what the Lord said to the prophet Samuel while showing him the next king of Israel. Of one “hot prospect” the Lord said:

Do not look at his appearance or at the height of his stature, because I have refused him. For the Lord does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart
(1 Sam. 16:7).

After recording the importance of God’s “inner view,” however, the same chapter describes David, the Lord’s anointed, as being “ruddy, with bright eyes, and good-looking” (1 Sam. 16:12). Apparently, the Lord Himself sees the practical significance of

human considerations while making it plain that His eye is on the heart.

Then there was Jeremiah the prophet. He declared to his troubled, dying world:

Thus says the Lord: "Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, let not the mighty man glory in his might, nor let the rich man glory in his riches; but let him who glories glory in this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the Lord" (Jer. 9:23-24).

MEASURED BY HEAVEN'S STANDARDS

Are we more driven by the dollar or by our integrity? Are we more concerned about looking good or in doing good? Are we primarily concerned with what we can get out of others or what we can give? Do we merely reflect our circumstances or do we rise

VALUES		
MAN	GOD	
Looks	Character	0
Brains	Attitude	1
Wealth	Generosity	2
Talent	Faithfulness	3

above our circumstances as people of inner direction, purpose, and principle? Such issues of character can make an enormous difference in whether we end up feeling good about ourselves. But the character that is developed within us by God Himself makes the greatest difference of all.

What do we need to do to develop such character? There are a number of ways of answering that question. The apostle Paul's letter to the Romans is helpful because it links the quality of our relationship to God with a healthy opinion of

ourselves. In the 12th chapter Paul described three steps that will accompany the kind of self-esteem God is looking for. According to Paul: (1) We need to give up our own rights, trusting God for whatever He wants to do with us. (2) We need to resist social pressure to conform to materialistic values. (3) We need to renew our minds with the words and thoughts of God.

Notice how Paul included these elements and connected them to the way God wants us to think about ourselves:

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you [step 1] present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And [step 2] do not be conformed to this world, but [step 3] be

transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God. For I say, through the grace given to me, to everyone who is among you, [result] not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think soberly, as God has dealt to each one a measure of faith (Rom. 12:1-3).

Paul went on to describe the results of this surrender (12:4-21). His words show that those who live according to these principles have reason to feel good about themselves and about what they are doing. In many different ways, Paul encouraged his readers not to be overcome by evil but rather to overcome evil with good (v.21).

ARE WE INHERENTLY GOOD OR BAD?

As we saw earlier, the Bible's approach to a healthy and realistic opinion of ourselves is a two-sided coin. One side gives us reason to feel good about ourselves. The other side gives us reason to feel bad. If we try to emphasize either side to the neglect of the other, we end up with an opinion of ourselves that is more inclined to reflect human standards rather than God's.

MEASURED BY HUMAN STANDARDS

According to some social scientists and educators, humans aren't born bad. We are damaged by the shaping influences of our environment. Even though similar patterns and

tendencies of human behavior show up in all cultures, many continue to see flaws of human character as written by the chalk of social pressure on what begins as the empty blackboard of innocence. They believe we all begin with a clean slate and that human nature is amoral until a child begins to interact with society.

HUMAN NATURE		
MAN	GOD	
Born without purpose	Created by God and for God	0
Born innocent	Born sinful	1
Basically good	Inherently evil	2
Evolved from matter	Created in God's image	3

Another perspective is added by those who see humanity as the result of naturalistic evolution. They believe the human species is a sophisticated animal related to all other planet

life by processes of accident and adaptation. Human nature by this standard is not good or bad but rather an ongoing expression of the survival of the fittest.

MEASURED BY HEAVEN'S STANDARDS

In the biblical view of human nature, we are shaped by the polar opposites of spiritual dignity and moral depravity. From Genesis to Revelation we find a description of our humanity that is at once more complimentary and more critical than we will find in any textbook of social science.

Spiritual Dignity

According to the Bible, human nature carries with it an inherent sense of dignity. Genesis describes us as a race of beings made in the likeness of God. That sets us apart. Crows,

crocodiles, and crickets were made by Him and for Him. But they were not made with a capacity to know, enjoy, obey, and talk to God. That has been reserved for us. We have been made in His image—every one of us. Every one of us is eternally more valuable, therefore, than the family dog (even if he gets treated better sometimes), far more valuable than a river or an ocean or a mountain, and far more valuable than the combined assets of our planet. Because of the designer label we bear, and because of what we have been made for, it would be impossible for any of us to adequately estimate our inherent personal worth.

David, the ancient king of Israel, understood the source of this dignity. Known as “a man after God’s own heart,” he saw the origin of human value when he prayed:

You formed my inward parts; You covered me in my mother's womb. I will praise You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; marvelous are Your works, and that my soul knows very well. My frame was not hidden from You, when I was made in secret, and skillfully wrought in the lowest parts of the earth. Your eyes saw my substance, being yet unformed. And in Your book they all were written, the days fashioned for me, when as yet there were none of them (Ps. 139:13-16).

We may not have the appearance, or abilities, or social privileges we'd like to have. Yet we exist by the will and wisdom of the God who has made us for Himself. Whether we're good-looking or not, whether we're rich or poor, whether we're African, Asian, or

European by descent, God has made us to know, honor, and enjoy Him forever.

Moral Depravity

It is just as clear, however, that none of us exists in original showroom condition. The term *depravity* is used by theologians to describe the extent to which every part of the human personality has been damaged by our spiritual separation from God. Our shared moral depravity doesn't mean that we are all as bad as we could be. It means instead that we are all fallen, broken beings who from our birth are so spiritually defective that we are inclined to live for ourselves in stubborn self-centered ways.

We pay dearly for this inherited spiritual condition. We end up feeling good about bad things and bad about good things. We all feel the pull of sexual temptation,

social power, and material indulgence. All too often we resort to aggressive, angry ways of dealing with those who compete with us for limited resources. We each take turns proving what the Bible says about human nature (Rom. 1–3).

Does our spiritual condition touch our self-image? Like a fish touches water! It's hard to feel good about ourselves when we intuitively know that something is wrong with us. Something deep within lets us know we were made to walk on higher ground, to breathe better air, and to enjoy more loving relationships. Yet, not surprisingly, the bends and twists in our own nature get in the way of solutions.

Stubborn self-reliance, one of the symptoms of our flawed human nature, has a way of making low self-esteem worse. With subtle, self-centered demands, we

signal to the world that we don't like what is happening to us. We think we deserve better. We are angry that we can't have the appearance or abilities or relationships or circumstances that others have. We don't like ourselves the way we are. We want better. We think we need our self-esteem pumped up. What we don't realize is that our depravity can deceive us. We don't realize that what we thought was low self-esteem can be wounded pride.

Sometimes it is our bruised pride that prompts us to struggle with anger and envy. No, it's not easy to accept. But it's true. Sometimes it is our concealed conceit that convinces us that because we have been hurt, it is necessary for us to hurt others. Rather than rising above the problem, we get tangled in it. We do to others what has been done to us.

WHOSE OPINION COUNTS?

According to the Bible, the ultimate answer for our spiritual needs is more than adequate to rescue us from the grip of low self-esteem. Ironically, the same solution can deliver us from an excessively high opinion of ourselves. Once again, though, we need to see the difference between seeing and measuring ourselves by human standards or by the measure of heaven.

At some point we need to decide whose opinion we are going to depend on to reshape the way we think about ourselves.

MEASURED BY HUMAN STANDARDS

There are those who say that the only way out of the trap of low self-esteem is to see *yourself* as the most

significant person in your life. The measure of man says, "The answer lies within you. You must reach deep down within yourself for the resources necessary to rise above the rejections, the insults, the lack of fairness. You can do it. Others have, you can too. You can be anything you want to be. Dream it. Believe it. Achieve it. You just need to believe in yourself, trust yourself, and depend on yourself. Don't wait for anyone else. You are number one. Don't stand at the end of the line. Push ahead. Make your own breaks. Don't wait for an invitation. Don't be a doormat. Don't settle for anything less than your dreams. You deserve it. You have it coming to you. You are the most important person in your life."

What's true about this point of view is that we do need courage and strength of

will to make choices that are in our own best interests. But that's not the whole story. There is a better way.

SIGNIFICANT PERSON		
MAN	GOD	
You have answers	God gives answers	0
You can do what you set your mind to	You can do what God wants you to do	1
You have strength	God gives strength	2
Believe in yourself	Believe in God	3

MEASURED BY HEAVEN'S STANDARDS

According to the Bible, the most important person in our life is not us but the One who cares more for us than anyone can imagine (see Eph. 3:14-21).

What's amazing beyond words is that in the unfolding chapters of the greatest story ever told, the great King and Creator of Genesis appears in history

as our Savior. After giving us life (Jn. 1:1-4), the same God miraculously took on the body of a man to come to our rescue (Jn. 1:14).

According to the combined Gospel records of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, our Creator lived for us and among us in the person of Jesus Christ. But by those same accounts He did more than live for us—He also died for us.

What God did for us in the person of His Son is enough to change the way we think about ourselves today and forever.

In life, Jesus gave us every reason to trust that He had come in behalf of heaven. In death, He took the punishment for everything we should feel bad about. In resurrection, He showed His power to overcome our worst enemy and bring each of us to our ultimate potential.

What a story! The ultimate kind of prisoner

exchange. First, He took our place on an executioner's cross. Then, after destroying everything that could hurt us, He provided us with a wonderful exchange: His pardon for our guilt, His strength for our weakness, His goodness for our depravity.

The terms of this exchange are strikingly clear. When we admit our guilt and trust Him, He gives us a new identity, a new past, a new address, and a new profession. In short, He offers us a whole new life, and with it comes a new way of thinking about ourselves.

In Christ We Have A Position That Is Secure.

Once we have trusted Christ as Savior, we have an irreversible relationship with Him. We are in Him. He is in us.

It may sound too good to be true. But because the Bible can be trusted, it's a

fact. Christ fought and won a battle that we never could have fought or won on our own. That makes Him our Savior, our Lord, our life, our forgiveness, our hope, our protection, our source of everything we could ever ask for—and more. That makes Him infinitely and eternally more important and more significant than any other person in our life. That gives us every reason to trust what He says about us.

All of this may seem hard to accept. Everything inside you might say you'd rather have your father's approval, your mother's affection, your children's respect, your mate's unconditional love. But is that really the answer? How significant are they compared to the One who designed you and then died for you?

"But," you say, "that all seems so theoretical, so ethereal, so far off." Then let's start nearer to home.

Let's say that you aren't much to look at. You come from a family where your father was an alcoholic, your mother ran around, and your older brothers and sisters seemed intent on making your life miserable. Let's say you're poor, you're emotionally unstable, and you're taking tranquilizers just to help you get by. What can Christ do for you in that condition? Well, if you've trusted Him as your Savior, then open a window and let in some fresh air. Don't confine your reality to the stuffy air of your limited circumstances. Life is bigger than that. God is bigger than that. Eternity is far bigger than that. Let your heart be captured by the most important Person in your life. Believe Him when He tells you that things are going to get better for you. Believe Him when He tells you that the best is yet ahead! Trust the most

reliable authority in the world when it tells you that in Christ, you have:

- A new past (Rom. 6:1-6).
- A new future (8:18-32).
- A new name and identity (Acts 11:26).
- A new lease on life (2 Cor. 5:17).
- A new relationship with God (1 Jn. 1:1-4).
- A new occupation (Eph. 6:5-9).
- A new inheritance (1:11).
- A new source of provision (Phil. 4:19).
- A new family (1 Jn. 3:1).
- A new assurance (Heb. 13:5).

Because of our position in Christ, our relationship with Him, and our position in His family, His love never has to be in doubt. Yet there is much more. This position in Christ becomes a basis not only for a new self-image but also for a whole new way of life. It provides a foundation for new attitudes and a new

approach to relationships. When practiced, it gives us so much to feel good about and to be thankful for.

In Christ We Have A Challenge For Living.

In the first two chapters of his letter to the Colossians, the apostle Paul wrote about our position in Christ and all the riches that are ours in Him. Paul then challenged us to live a life in keeping with our position when he wrote:

If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth. For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory (Col. 3:1-4).

We need to think of

ourselves as the people God says we are. We need to show that what He says about us is far more important than what anyone else says or doesn't say about us (Eph. 4:17-32).

This doesn't happen automatically. It happens only as we continually renew our minds with the thoughts of God, as we consciously think about who we are in Christ, and as we expectantly wait on the Lord for His ability to be and do everything He wants us to be and do (2 Cor. 3:5; Phil. 4:10-13).

It doesn't happen overnight. Learning to practice our position in Christ is a process. It's a struggle. It's a long walk that gives us one opportunity after another to believe what the Lord says about us. Either we believe Him, or we believe our feelings, enemies, or circumstances.

CAN WE BE ANYTHING WE WANT TO BE?

It is sometimes said that what the mind can believe, the mind can achieve. Just as often, we hear it said that we can be anything we want to be. We just have to believe in ourselves. We just have to overcome those obstacles to self-esteem that can keep us from realizing our dreams. But allowing for the importance of a positive mental attitude, and allowing for the importance of being able to dream and see “things which do not exist as though they did” (Rom. 4:17), much of this thinking is not realistic.

On the other hand, the person who has a relationship with Christ has an enormous basis for good self-esteem. That person can say, “As I walk with

Christ and surrender to Him, I can by His Spirit be anything He wants me to be. I can do anything He wants me to do. I can say anything He wants me to say. As I depend on Him for my life, I can overcome obstacles that He wants me to overcome. I can resist temptation and avoid pitfalls.”

What this also recognizes, however, is that it is just as true that we will not be able to do anything the Lord doesn't permit us to do. The sky is *not* the limit—the will of God is. We no more have tomorrow in our back pocket than we do the next 20 years.

The need, then, is for self-esteem with humility—the kind of rightmindedness that, ironically, can give us the confidence that will enable us to do anything God wants us to do!

HELP TO HELP OTHERS

The following questions are listed here for you to use in teaching or discipling others. We suggest that these questions be discussed prior to studying a specific section—as preview questions.

HOW SHOULD WE FEEL ABOUT OURSELVES?

1. What is self-esteem?
2. Where does it come from?
3. What is man's standard of measuring self-esteem?
4. What is the Bible's standard of measurement? (1 Cor. 4:1-4; 2 Cor. 10:12,18).
5. Is it always right to feel good about yourself? (Jas. 4:7-10).
6. Is it natural to love ourselves? (Mt. 22:39).

7. In what sense should we hate ourselves? (Rom. 7:21-24).
8. How can “dying to ourselves” result in a new life? (Gal. 2:20).
9. How can we put a low self-image to work for us?

BY WHAT VALUES DO WE SEE OURSELVES?

1. How does a poor sense of self-worth affect us?
2. What values do most people use to measure their own self-worth?
3. What does God value in a person? (1 Sam. 16:7).
4. Where should we find our greatest fulfillment? (Jer. 9:23-24).
6. How can we develop an accurate self-image? (Rom. 12:1-3).
7. How can God's values shape our lives and help us to feel good about ourselves? (Rom. 12:4-21; Gal. 6:1-4).

ARE WE INHERENTLY GOOD OR BAD?

1. How do social scientists tend to evaluate human nature?
2. In what ways would you expect the Bible to be more complimentary than social scientists?
3. In what ways would you expect the Bible to be more critical than social scientists?
4. On what basis does the Bible recognize human dignity? (Ps. 139:13-16; Heb. 2:6-8).
5. On what basis does the Bible recognize human depravity? (Rom. 1:18-32; 3:10-18; 7:7-24).
6. What is the impact of our stubborn independence and self-sufficiency on our self-esteem?
7. How can a right sense of failure help us to feel good about ourselves? (Rom. 7:24–8:17).

WHOSE OPINION COUNTS?

1. By human standards, who should be the most significant person in your life?
2. How can we be hurt by “significant others”?
3. By God’s standard, who is to be the most “significant other”? (Eph. 3:14-21).
4. In what sense can we start over again with Christ? (2 Cor. 5:17; 1 Jn. 5:1).
5. How can Christ give us a new past (Rom. 6:1-6), a new future (Rom 8:18-32), and a new identity? (Acts 11:26; Gal. 2:20).
6. How can Christ give us a new occupation (Eph. 6:5-9) and a new source of provision? (Eph. 1:11; Phil. 4:19).
7. How can this relationship help us to feel good about ourselves?

A NEW BEGINNING

Maybe the best way to close is with the comments of a person who has found help in this approach to self-esteem.

In response to an article on self-esteem that first appeared in an RBC newsletter, he wrote:

That article told me so much more about the origins of my lifelong problem than anything I have ever read. I have searched books on psychology and talked to numerous people. And I've had psychology courses in college. Now, for the first time ever, I have somewhere to begin in attempting to unravel my problems.

I have always felt cursed with oversensitivity, taking offense too easily. I have

seen what that has done to others—especially my own dad and mom—and I really didn't want to pass this on to my own family (although to some extent, I guess I already have).

Having given my life to the Lord and recommitting myself to His loving care just a year ago, I've had less of a problem with low self-esteem because I've been trying to live more for Him and less for me.

“I still struggle with my self-esteem. The difference now is the hope I feel in my Savior.”

Surrender has been the guiding principle of my life since last November. But I would be guilty of telling a lie if I said my problems with self were

gone! I still struggle with it. The difference now is the hope I feel in my Savior. I have asked Him to be the Master of my life, to guide my steps, to mold me into the new creature He wants me to be. And He's doing it!

It may be a longer process than I want it to be, but the Lord knows what I need. Yes, it is so difficult to die to self—to “deny yourself, take up your cross and follow Me.” I choke sometimes on my pride. It wells up in my throat and I want to fight, to swear, to yell, to cry when I feel wronged by another. But I say instead, “Thank you, Lord. I praise You for sending this. I know that ‘all things work together for good to those who love God.’ ”

It's working. Lately the Lord has taken what started out to be terrible

days for me and turned them completely around so that I feel a warm, loving glow within, and am smiling and thinking of others rather than myself.

“I choke on my pride. It wells up in my throat and I want to fight, to swear, to yell, to cry when I feel wronged by another.”

Praise the Lord!

These are far greater miracles to me than telling a lame man to rise, take up his bed, and walk! Thank you, Lord!

I pray that the experience of this one person will be repeated in all of us as we discover what it means to trust the counsel, love, and power of the most significant Person in life.

WHERE CAN YOU BEGIN?

It has been said that the best way to get rid of an enemy is to make him your friend. This is true of the things that seem to threaten your self-image. They can be the means by which you discover your real purpose, power, and potential.

How do you make these “enemies” your friends? Let them do for you what self-confidence, self-sufficiency, and self-satisfaction could never do. Let your weakness push you to dependence on God. He alone can give you every good and every lasting reason to feel good about yourself.

Don't be afraid. Or if you are, let your fear bring you to the One who loves you. The results of acknowledging that you have been on the wrong

path will far outweigh any temporary pain of confession. You will soon find great relief as a result of admitting to God that you have sinned against Him by banking on the world's values. Romans 3:23 says, “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”

Then, confess Jesus Christ as your Designer, your Lord, and your Savior. Trust Him to save you on the basis of the payment for sin He made on the cross. Accept the fact that when He died, He died for you. When He rose from the dead, He rose to make His life available to all who would believe.

This is the first step to a new beginning. It is God's answer for a new birth, a new identity, and a new potential. It's found in the One who loves us more than we could ever love or care for ourselves.

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