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The Biblical View of Self-Esteem

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1

Love...As Yourself?

CHRISTIANS who propagate these “self-esteem” teachings make a feeble show at finding self-esteem principles and practices in the Bible. While admitting that it was the unbelieving psychologists from whom they took their lead, they have made every attempt possible to scrape up some Biblical support. The Scriptures are ransacked and verses are twisted in order to give some sort of Biblical credence to the theory. But the Bible is used not to discover what God has to say or what to believe; rather, the viewpoint was already bought and brought to the Bible when the Biblical search began.

That methodology is always dangerous. Yet it has been the stock-in-trade of Christians who are psychologists: A pagan system is adopted; then the Bible is said to support it. First it was Freud's^[A] view of the "id"¹ that was supposed to approximate the Bible's teaching on original sin. Then, since Jung^[B] made religious statements now and then, he was said to be "close" to Christianity. (Of course, that his thinking confessedly is based on such "religious" views as those found in the Tibetan *Book of the Dead* was rarely mentioned.) Next, Carl Rogers'^[C] views on listening and acceptance were readily likened to Biblical ideas (even though statements in Proverbs 18 and elsewhere oppose Rogerian thought and practice in both areas). Then Skinner's^[D] behaviorism was equated with scriptural statements about reward and punishment (without taking notice of the fact that the latter are conditioned by God's eternal reward-and-punishment program, and thereby are entirely different). Now, as the latest fad, it is self-worth dogma that is said to be similar or identical to Biblical doctrine.

This penchant for "finding" the latest psychological ideas in the Scriptures is dangerous for several reasons:

1. The extra-Biblical view is given Biblical authority in the eyes of many Christians. To answer the question "how can so many Christians be led into the acceptance of psychological self-esteem views?," the reason is that these views are given a Biblical cast and are supported by Biblical passages that have been wrenched out of place and made to do service that they were never intended to do. Unfortunately, many Christians are deceived into thinking that the Bible really does teach such things.

2. God is misrepresented. This, of course, is the most dangerous fact of all. That Christian psychologists (very few of whom take the time to become competent in serious exegesis) can use the Word of the living God in such a cavalier fashion as they sometimes do, and that undiscerning Christians so readily accept their interpretations, is both frightening and appalling. Passages are distorted and misused with abandon; the Scriptures are made to say what the interpreter wants them to say; and the Bible, as if it were made of wax, is shaped to fit the latest fad. There is a certain lack of reverence for God Himself evidenced in this process.

3. Any system that proposes to solve human problems apart from the Bible and the power of the Holy Spirit (as all of these pagan systems, including the self-worth system, do) is automatically condemned by Scripture itself. Neither Adler^[E] nor Maslow^[F] professed Christian faith. Nor does their system in any way depend upon the message of salvation. Love, joy, peace, etc., are discussed as if they were not the fruit of the Spirit but merely the fruit of right views of one's self which anyone can attain without the Bible or the work of the Spirit in his heart.

For these reasons the self-worth system with its claimed Biblical correspondences must be rejected. It does not come from the Bible; Christians called the Bible into service long after the system was developed by others who had no intention of basing their system on God's Word. Any resemblance between Biblical teaching and the teaching of the self-worth originators is either contrived or coincidental.

But, because Christians have attempted to make a Biblical case for this unbiblical substitute for God's way of helping men, we must take a hard look at the principal passages that have been forced into service. There are three: 1) Matthew 22:36-40, 2) Romans 6/Colossians 3, and 3) James 3:9.

Matthew 22:39b

Together with these verses, we shall also have occasion to look at the parallel passage in Luke 10:25-37.

"Master, which is the great commandment in the law?" Jesus said unto him, 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.'"—Matthew 22:36-40

For purposes of our discussion, the most important verse is Matthew 22:39b: "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself." This is probably the verse most quoted by advocates of self-worth, self-esteem teaching. Trobisch, for instance, called it a "command to love yourself,"^[1] and says:

Self-love is thus the prerequisite and the criterion for our conduct towards our neighbor.^[2]

That is an astonishing statement! Trobisch is telling us not only that Jesus commanded us to love ourselves, but that we cannot love our neighbor properly unless we first learn to love ourselves, because the criterion, or standard, by which we determine how to love a neighbor is how we love ourselves!

He has the temerity to say, "This [the finding of modern psychology that man must acquire a love for himself] sheds new light on the command which Jesus emphasized as ranking in importance next to loving God." In other words, Trobisch thinks that until modern psychologists unearthed the truth elsewhere, this important Biblical command—in this very important new aspect—lay buried and was not adequately understood! For nearly 2000 years the church was in the dark!

In truth, the verse says nothing of the sort. Consider the facts. First, there is no command here (or anywhere else in the Bible) to love yourself. Does that surprise you? To hear self-image leaders talk, you would think the Bible contained little else. But in fact there is no command here or elsewhere in Scripture to love yourself.

¹ **id** – in psychoanalysis, that part of the psyche which is regarded as the reservoir of the instinctual drives; it is dominated by the drive for selfish pleasure, or lust. The Bible teaches that the *psuche* (Greek: soul) can attain its highest end and secure eternal blessedness if the true believer in Christ makes right use of the aids offered by God: reading and meditating on the Word of God, hearing Biblical preaching in a Biblical church, prayer, and fellowship with mature believers.—*Editor*

Christ made it perfectly clear that He was talking about two, and only two, commandments. In verses 39 and 40, He speaks of the “*second*” commandment and “these *two* commandments.” There is no third commandment. All of Scripture can be hung on two pegs: Love God, love neighbor. Yet the self-esteem people make three commandments out of Christ’s two! There is absolutely no excuse for treating the Scriptures in this manner.

As if such distortion of plain scriptural teaching were not enough, they go further and make the first two commandments depend upon the supposed “third.” According to the Adler/Maslow hierarchy, lower-level needs must be satisfied before higher-level needs can be. This means that level 4 (self-esteem) needs must be met before level 5 (self-actualizing) needs can be. Or, to put it in terms of the verse that is being forced into the Adler/Maslow system, you cannot love your neighbor (a level 5 activity) until you first learn to love yourself (a level 4 activity). That is why Trobisch maintains “Self-love is thus the prerequisite” for loving your neighbor. He goes on to say:

You cannot love your neighbor, you cannot love God, unless you first love yourself...Without self-love there can be no love for others.
[3]

This way of thinking is not confined to Walter Trobisch. Remember Crabb’s^[6] statement of the case:

In order to be well-adjusted, you must reach the stage of self-actualization. In order to reach that stage you must pass through the other four stages first...^[4]

Now listen to Philip Captain:

Actually our ability to love God and to love our neighbor is limited by our ability to love ourselves. We cannot love God more than we love our neighbor and we cannot love our neighbor more than we love ourselves.^[5]

Captain has even refined the hierarchy with a twist of his own: Love for God is dependent on love for neighbor, which in turn is dependent on love for self.

In each of these constructions the writer is thoroughly convinced that love for God and neighbor is contingent on love for one’s self. But in the Biblical passage not only is there no third commandment, but neither is any dependent relationship set up between the two commandments. Both of these self-esteem claims are brought to the text to reshape it; then, in its reshaped form, the text is forced into the system.

Jesus actually *presupposes* a love of self in this passage. He says, “Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.” The command is to love your neighbor *as you already love yourself*. The verse could be translated [from the Greek] literally, “You must love your neighbor as you are loving yourself.”

That same self-love that is presupposed by Jesus is likewise presupposed in Paul’s argument in Ephesians 5:28-29, where he urges husbands to love their wives “as you love [are loving] your own body.” He goes on to say:

For no man ever yet hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as the Lord the church.—Ephesians 5:29

In other words, Paul’s entire argument turns on the fact that we already exhibit love for ourselves.

Luke 10:29

Comparing Luke 10:29 with Matthew 22:36-40, an important contextual addition appears. Luke tells us, “

But he [the lawyer whose words occasioned the discussion], willing [wishing] to justify himself, said unto Jesus, And who is my neighbour?

Whereupon Jesus told the parable of the Good Samaritan.

What was the lawyer’s problem? Was he suffering from a loss of self-esteem? Quite the contrary. Luke says that “he wanted to *justify* himself.” That is to say, the question he raised, “Who is my neighbor?” was not really asked for information but to stump Jesus. And notice that he wanted to stump Him *so that he could justify his own sinful ways*. It was asked, therefore, out of *self*-interest. He liked himself the way he was and did not want to give of his time or money to his neighbor. He wished to remain all wrapped up in himself.

The parable of the Good Samaritan certainly was not designed to foster a higher *self*-interest, but just the opposite. The very point of the parable is that one must love his neighbor—i.e. anyone in need—as himself. He must look after the needs of others and even put himself out for others. Jesus did not say that in order to engage in such high-level activity as the Samaritan did, one must first come to a place where all his own needs at lower levels were satisfied. What of the priest and the Levite? Were they deprived? Did they have low self-esteem? Of course not. They probably considered themselves far better than the Samaritan. Their problem was the same as the lawyer’s: They loved themselves so much that they would not put themselves out for anyone else.

Trobisch tells us that our love for ourselves is the “criterion” as well as the prerequisite for loving others. He explains this by saying, “It is the measuring stick for loving others which Jesus gives us.”^[6] What he is claiming is that when Jesus said, “Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself,” He meant “*Do the same things for others* that you do for yourself.” But that couldn’t be right for several reasons. First, the criteria for loving others are the Ten Commandments that Jesus was here summarizing in two:

“Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbour as thyself.”—Luke 10:27

By saying that all the books of the Bible (the Law and the Prophets) could be summed up in those two commandments, He was also pointing to the Scriptures as the outworking of the commandments in everyday life. In effect, then, Jesus was saying that the criteria for loving God and others are to be found in the Bible—not in us.

Clearly we must love our neighbors as the Bible commands, and not by doing the same things for them that we do for ourselves. Out of self-love we do not only good things, but all sorts of injurious and sinful things to ourselves: We commit adultery, we lie, we steal, we eat too much, we commit suicide, etc. Things we do for ourselves, then, are not the criteria for loving others.

What then do Jesus' words "as yourself" mean? There is no thought of criteria in them, since, plainly, the criteria were to be found in the Ten Commandments and their outworking in all of Scripture. The thought has to do with *intensity*, *fergency*, and *amount of love*. Notice carefully that Jesus says the second commandment is just like the first (Mat 22:39). In what respects are the two alike? First, they both speak of love; they are both commands to love. But that cannot be the primary likeness to which Jesus was pointing; it is too obvious to make a point of. There is a second way in which the two commandments are alike. Jesus' command to love God "with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind" (v 37) means with all you are and all you have. It means to love God genuinely and sincerely, fervently and wholeheartedly. It is in this respect that the two commandments are "just alike." When you are commanded to love your neighbor "as yourself," it means to love him just as wholeheartedly as you love yourself!

We already have a *fervent*, *dedicated*, *genuine*, and *sincere* love for ourselves. With sinners, this love is almost always excessive. Now, says Jesus, extend the same amount of love toward your neighbor: Love him "as yourself." The argument is precisely the same as the argument that Paul makes for a husband loving his wife "just as" he *already* loves his own body. How is that to be done? In the same fervent, nourishing, and cherishing attitude with which a man cares for himself (not necessarily by *doing* the same things to his wife that he does to himself).

It is plain that Matthew 22, supposedly the strongest passage supporting self-worth, is actually aimed directly at the movement itself. Any serious consideration of this passage completely repudiates the kind of self-love teaching we see today.

To sum up this chapter, we must love our neighbors as ourselves. But Matthew 22:39 contains no commandment to love one's self, since we need not be concerned about learning to love ourselves if we truly love God and our neighbors. Since the fulfillment of these two commandments is the fulfillment of all, we will always do the right things for ourselves. Love, in the Bible, is a matter of *giving*: "God so loved the world, that he *gave*" (Joh 3:16); "He loved me and *gave*..." (Gal 2:20); "Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and *gave* himself" (Eph 5:25). Because it is more blessed to give than to receive, the self-love proponents (who advocate getting from others and *giving to self* before giving to God and others) take away a rich blessing from those who follow their unbiblical emphasis. There is no need for concern about how to love one's self, for so long as one seeks first to love God and his neighbor in a Biblical fashion, all proper self-concern will appear as a by-product. That is why the Bible never commands us to love ourselves. Since the Bible is silent on the matter, we should be too.

2

Of Infinite Worth?

Romans 6:1-13 and Colossians 3:1-10

Now it is time to look at Romans 6 and Colossians 3. First we must think about the sections from Paul's two letters. In the parallel passages found in Romans 6 and Colossians 3 the believer is told to "consider" himself dead to sin and alive to God. He is assured that he is a new person in God's sight and that the old person he used to be is legally dead. In addition, he is exhorted to become, in everyday living, the new person that he is counted to be in God's sight in Christ.

Self-image theorists have been quick to pounce on these passages, turning them to their own purposes and giving little or no consideration to the purposes for which they were written. It is clear from even a cursory reading of the two chapters that Paul had no intention whatever of teaching self-worth doctrine. And no Christians ever found such teaching in these passages over a 1900-year period until humanistic psychologists "alerted" them to the dogmas that they now profess to find so plainly taught there. Nevertheless, self-esteem advocates take comfort in what they think they can make these passages say.

One zealous advocate of the system claims:

Our self-image as Christians, therefore, must be of ourselves as persons who have decisively rejected the old way of living which is called the old man, and have permanently adopted the new way of living which is called the new man.

In support of this he cites Romans 6:11:

"Likewise reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord."

Then, to make his point, he insists that:

This is as clear a Biblical statement of the Christian's self-image as one can find anywhere.^[1]

If the professor who made that statement is correct, and if no clearer “Biblical statement” of the doctrine is to be found, then the movement is in grave trouble. The fact is that there is nothing clear about self-image in the passage at all.

True, Colossians 3 and Romans 6 tells us that as God looks at us “in Christ” our standing before Him as Judge is perfect; no fault can be found. We have been completely forgiven when we believed, and now God sees us as brand-new people in His Son. *In Him* all the old ways have gone and the new ways have come to stay. All that is wonderfully clear. But what is also clear is that Paul does not tell us this to “make us feel good about ourselves,” or to “give us strokes,” or to “raise our self-esteem.” His purpose is *to urge us to become in everyday living what we already are counted to be in Christ*. In other words, he wants us to see that *in ourselves* we fall far short of what we are *in Christ*.

Listen to Romans 6:1-2:

What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid. How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein?

Verse 2 sounds more like an exhortation than a stroke! The professor who quoted Romans 6:11 was selective; to give the full sense, he should have quoted the next verses also. Verses 12 and 13 continue Paul's thought:

Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, that ye should obey it in the lusts thereof. Neither yield ye your members as instruments of unrighteousness unto sin: but yield yourselves unto God, as those that are alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness unto God.

What is clear is that Paul's purpose in urging us to “consider” ourselves dead to sin and alive to righteousness in Christ, is to get us to live differently. The “therefore” with which verse 12 begins [in some Greek texts] introduces the conclusion that we should draw from the fact stated in verse 11. Paul does *not* say, “Therefore you ought to feel good about yourselves.” He *does* say, “In daily life start living up to the high standard of your legal standing in Christ.”

Paul, writing to the Colossians, states:

For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God...Mortify therefore your members which are upon the earth; fornication, uncleanness, inordinate affection, evil concupiscence, and covetousness, which is idolatry...But now ye also put off all these; anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy communication out of your mouth. Lie not one to another, seeing that ye have put off the old man with his deeds; And have put on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him.—Colossians 3:3, 5, 8-10

Again, the fact that the old life has been replaced by the new life in Christ is affirmed. And again, just as surely as before, what Paul makes of it is this: since this is true in Christ, in your everyday affairs start living like it is true. There isn't the slightest whisper in these passages about looking on ourselves as people of great worth or about gaining a better self-image. All he is doing is holding up the ideal (our perfect standing in Christ) and urging us to approximate it more fully in ourselves.

Do these passages warrant us to say anything like the following Christian writer does?

We must view ourselves as uniquely wonderful, intrinsically valuable.^[2]

Certainly not! The purpose of these passages is to show us the great gap between what we are *counted or reckoned to be in Christ* (justification) and what we *actually are in ourselves in daily living* (sanctification), *in order to urge us to close the gap*. They are designed not to make us satisfied with ourselves so that we may accept ourselves as we are, but to *destroy* any self-satisfaction that may exist and to motivate us to make greater progress in Christian living. Nothing could be better designed to thoroughly reduce any sense of pride, worth, or satisfaction to which we may cling than to hold up before us our perfection in Christ and then ask us to compare our actual performance with it! Romans 6 and Colossians 3 effectively attack self-esteem teaching rather than bolster it.

These passages, then, were not written to make us feel better about ourselves but to show us how God sees us in Jesus, so as to spur us on to more consistent Christian living. There is great potential in the new life that we have in Christ, but we will never begin to realize it if we sit around thinking about how worthy we are.

James 3:9

Now we come to James 3:9 and its Old Testament background found in Genesis 1:27 and 9:6:

Therewith [with the tongue] bless we God, even the Father; and therewith curse we men, which are made after the similitude [likeness] of God.—James 3:9

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them...Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed: for in the image of God made he man.—Genesis 1:27; 9:6

The operative words in these verses are “image” and “likeness.” Self-image thinkers are quick to point out (correctly) that in these passages man is said to be in God's image not only before the Fall but afterward. Since in Ephesians 4:24 and in Colossians 3:10 we are told that God's image and likeness are being *renewed* in the believer, it is certain that the full image and likeness did

not remain after the Fall; nevertheless something that the writers of Genesis 9 and James 3 could still call God's "image" and "likeness" did remain. It is not important to discuss distinctions between what might be called man's moral and intellectual likeness and his constitutional likeness at this point, since they contribute nothing to the question under consideration. What is certain is that, in some sense, man is still in God's likeness.

Further, let us observe that penalties and warning as well as rebukes and exhortations are adduced from the fact that man is God's image-bearer. Those who curse other people or take their lives do so at great peril just because of that fact. Self-esteem proponents have interpreted these Biblical sanctions in an unacceptable manner.

Listen to some of the self-worth arguments:

Does this [the Fall of man] mean that man now became a being of no worth? Nothing could be further from the truth. Even after the Fall, man was still considered to be a being of infinite worth...The Scriptures...affirm that even fallen man still bears the image of God.^[3]

Another writes:

Even New Testament writers recognize the image of God in man. James warns against cursing because they are made in the likeness of God.

He believes that this—is the bedrock for self-esteem. We are created by the hand of God and in His image.^[4] A third rhapsodizes about—the nobility, uniqueness, meaning, worth and significance of man. All of these, he assures us—rest on his being made in the image of God.^[5]

It is true that man is still in God's image in some sense (though the moral and intellectual image has been so defaced that it must be restored), but what does this mean? The fact itself says nothing at all about self-esteem or self-worth. In none of the contexts in which the image of God in man is mentioned does the writer use that fact to teach the kinds of things that we have been reading in the quotations above. How is it possible to extrapolate the idea that man is "of infinite worth" from the fact that he was created in God's image? The one concept does not follow logically from the other. Moreover, man's nature, which bears God's image, is never held out as a reason for having high self-esteem.

Then why are we warned so sharply against assaulting God by assaulting man, God's image-bearer? Here is the crux of the matter, and it is here that the self-esteem writers go astray.

Consider this: I show you a photograph of my wife. If you curse it, make fun of it, spit on it, and tear it up—you will have to answer to me!

"Why?" you ask. "After all, it's only a *photograph*."

Yes, but it is a photograph of *my wife*! That is what makes all the difference.

The picture itself—the paper and ink, etc.—is not of much value. It is worth only a few cents. What is of concern to me is not the picture itself but the one whom it represents.

Intrinsically man is worth little; he is certainly not of "infinite worth." No created finite being, whether fallen or unfallen, unredeemed or redeemed, could be. The warnings of Genesis 9 and James 3 do not stem from the fact of man's infinite worth; rather, they stem from the fact of *God's* infinite worth! To dishonor man and to abuse him is to dishonor and abuse God because he is made in God's image. That is what brings the warning and the penalty. It is *the One whose image and likeness man bears* that is of significance—not the man who bears that image and likeness. He is merely the photograph.

Recently a seminary student told a criminal in jail who thought he was "nothin':

William, you ain't nothin'. God made you in His image. You have infinite worth in His eyes.^[6]

Why didn't he tell him that he was a sinner who was in desperate condition apart from the saving grace of Christ? That the infinite God took on human flesh and died on a cross to pay the penalty for sinners like him, and that by believing he could now have eternal life?

Since we have encountered such statements as "infinite worth" applied to man in more than one place, let's follow that line of thinking just a bit further. Outlandish claims are made for man, claims that one would expect to hear only from pantheists, or humanists who place man on God's throne. Here are just a few:

The human being is a glorious, dignified creature with infinite value.^[7]

God wants us to see ourselves as his gift to the world.^[8]

We are something beautiful that God has done. We are something exquisite that he has planned.^[9]

Where is the Biblical precedent for using such language? Certainly nothing like it can be found in the entire Bible. Wouldn't you think that any writer, speaking in God's name, would be careful to talk as the Bible does? These writers, and many more like them, seem to have thrown off all restraint in their desire to glorify man.

Here is what a third writer opines:

By creation, every human being is a unique person of great worth and dignity.^[10]

I shall let these statements, all made by professed evangelicals who are deeply involved in propagating self-worth teaching, speak for themselves. When you can find anything like what they are saying in the Scriptures you should take them seriously. Until that time you should write off their words as totally misguided.

Matthew 6:26, 10:31; Luke 12:7

Occasionally the self-worth enthusiast will refer to Matthew 6:26, “Are ye not much better [worth much more] than they?” or Matthew 10:31, “ye are of more value than many sparrows,” or Luke 12:7, “ye are of more value than many sparrows.” The enthusiast will then make the point that “here is a statement about man’s great value!” The passages are used to show man’s “infinite value” to God. But do they?

Examine them closely; notice what Jesus actually says. Let us ask two questions:

- 1) How much value is man said to have?
- 2) To whom is he said to be of value?

In the passages, Jesus is explicit: Two sparrows are sold for a cent, and five for two cents. Man is said to be more valuable than “many sparrows.” This means that if “many” sparrows means 500 sparrows, you are worth \$2.50 at most; if it means 1000 sparrows, your worth exceeds \$5.00! The point is not man’s great worth but God’s far-reaching providential care. If it extends to sparrows, which are worth so little, then it surely extends to man, who is worth more.

The answer to the second question, To whom is he said to be of value? grows out of the first. Since Jesus is discussing value in monetary terms, it is clear that He is speaking of man’s worth (over against a bird’s worth) *to other men*. The bird is worth so much to man; a man is worth more. Man’s value to God is not in question. The argument from the lesser to the greater on the scale of being has to do with God’s providence and *not* with man’s value. If, in His infinite goodness, God cares for the birds of the air, won’t He care for you, who in the eyes of men are worth more?

If self-image enthusiasts wish to say that God counts man’s worth to Him monetarily, and that this worth amounts to something that compares to sparrows, the fact is hardly calculated to bolster one’s self-worth! The comparison can only serve to cool enthusiasm, not foster it.

The fact is that these verses teach nothing whatever about self-esteem.

3

What Does the Bible Teach?

So far I have tried to evaluate the self-esteem movement Biblically and show that, weighed in God’s balance, it is found wanting. You might think that the book should end at this point, having come to a natural conclusion. However, if I left you here, all that I have done so far would be in vain. It is not enough to burn down a house; it is also necessary to erect another in its place. That I shall now attempt to do.

What is the Biblical alternative to the self-worth approach? In an earlier section, I discussed Matthew 6, in which Jesus Himself set forth two contrasting ways of life: the pagan way and the Christian way. The pagan way had as its priority becoming secure and significant through the accumulation of “things” to meet “needs.” The Christian way puts God and His empire first. But how? What makes the difference?

Self-denial: 2 Timothy 3:2, Matthew 16:24-25

Jesus sets forth self-denial rather than self-affirmation as the way to enter into a proper relationship with God. Seldom do we read in self-worth literature about self-denial, the one emphasis on self that *does* run all through the New Testament. We shall take a look at some of the key passages relating to this Biblical emphasis and try to understand what God says, relating it all the while to the self-worth approach.

In 2 Timothy 3:2 we read of “lovers of their own selves” (*philautoi*). Here this word is listed along with a host of other sinful aberrations that Timothy will have to avoid during the days of his forthcoming ministry. Paul’s warning is timely to ministers today. Presumably there is a kind of self-love that is clearly condemned in the Scriptures. Since the word *philautoi* occurs only in 2 Timothy 3:2, in a list, without further explanation, we cannot discover anything about its exact meaning from the context. All we can say is that it keeps bad company with such characters as “proud, blasphemers,...false accusers...despisers of those that are good...highminded, lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God.”

Thoughtful consideration of the list in 2 Timothy 3 will lead you to the conclusion that every one of the items in it (and it is much longer than I have indicated here) could be said either to have a self-centered focus or to grow out of such a focus. It is easy to see the dangers of self-centeredness by studying it. And it should grieve us to think of children in Grand Rapids or elsewhere being encouraged to think they deserve a “pat on the back” and being told to “feel good” about themselves, thereby being led in the

very pathway to selfishness that God condemns. Many of the problems listed in 2 Timothy 3 could appear in their lives later on as a result of encouraging, rather than curbing, the sinful tendencies that are inherent in fallen human nature (cf. Pro 22:15).

The proper thing to encourage, according to the Word of God, is self-denial. The command to deny self occurs six times explicitly in the Gospels, but the concept is everywhere in Scripture. That is what the Lord was getting at when He told His disciples to forget their own interests and put His affairs first, “seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness” (Mat 6:33).

What does God say about self? He says, “Deny self”:

Then said Jesus unto his disciples, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it.—Matthew 16:24-25

This does not mean that a person must deny himself some particular thing, as some erroneously suppose (“I’ll give up chewing gum for Lent”), but it means to deny *one’s own self* (literally “to say no to yourself” or “to disown yourself”). If anything could stand in sharper contrast to Christ’s command to deny self than the self-affirming, self-gratifying emphasis that we have been reading about in the self-esteem literature, I don’t know what it is.

Just as Jesus set the Gentile way over against the Christian way of life in Matthew 6, here too He contrasts two utterly diverse and irreconcilable paths. The interesting fact that should not be missed is Jesus’ antithetical way of stating this matter: There is no room for compromise. Quite the opposite of the eclectic integrationists, who want to merge and blend as much of what the world has to say with Biblical teachings as they can, Jesus distances Himself from the pagan way of life (Matthew 6) and from those who do not deny self and follow Him but instead want to “save their lives.” This antithesis occurs in each of the Gospel accounts (Mar 8:34-38; Luk 9:23-25; Joh 12:25). Jesus says, “Whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it” (Mat 16:25). It is difficult to see how the integrationists can reckon with this.

The words translated *self* and *life* (*beauton* and *psuche*) both mean “self” and refer to the same thing. As a matter of fact, they are used interchangeably. (Compare Matthew 16:26 with Luke 9:25. In Matthew, *psuche* is used, whereas in Luke it is *beauton*.) Christ is telling us not only to say no to ourselves and yes to Him (“follow me”), but He affirms that we must put self to death by “taking up our cross” (Luke adds “daily”). To take up the cross does not mean making some particular sacrifice, nor does it refer to some particular burden (“My husband is my cross”). Anyone in that day, reading those words, would know plainly that taking up the cross meant one and only one thing: putting to death an infamous criminal. Jesus, therefore, is saying, “You must treat yourself, with all your sinful ways, priorities, and desires, like a criminal, and put self to death every day.” That says something about the self-image that Christ expects us to have!

That is bitter medicine for all of us, and especially for self-worth proponents. Yet it is the only cure for a church that increasingly is growing sick—of *itself*. The seeming paradox is that the person who focuses attention on himself will lose all he wants to preserve for himself, whereas the person who puts Christ and His interests first is the one who gains all that the other loses. This is the same truth that Jesus taught in Matthew 6. There the Gentiles zealously seek with care and worry (and never really find satisfaction in) the things that the Christian, who forgets about his “needs” and puts Christ first, finds “added” to him.

A Contrast: John 12:25

In John 12:25, we read that

“He that loveth his life [self] shall lose it; and he that hateth his life [self] in this world shall keep it unto life eternal.”

Here there is a strong warning. Indeed, the promotion of self-love is the very thing warned against: “Whoever loves self...loses it.” Rather than love self, Christ says, in this world we should lose self, or, as He puts it here, “hate it,” in order to preserve it for eternity.

The two words *lose* and *hate* mean virtually the same thing and help interpret each other. They mean *putting aside one’s own desires, interests, and concerns* (even legitimate ones) in order to do Christ’s bidding. “Hating” self means “to love less,” as it plainly does in Luke 14:26:

If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple.

We know that the word *hate* in all these passages has such a meaning, from the parallel phrase in Matthew 10:37, where instead of “hate” we read,

He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me: and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.

To “hate” another person or one’s own self is the same as to put Christ and His kingdom before others or self.

This matter of denying self is not a peripheral issue. It strikes hard at the core of self-worth, self-esteem, self-love thinking. In self-love teaching the idea is not merely that Christ and self can both be put on the same level of priority (from Jesus’ words it is clear that even this is impossible; He calls on us to *choose* between the two), but that before we can love and serve Christ we must first be served and loved, and love ourselves. Could any teaching be more plainly opposed to what Jesus said?

The consequences of self-love dogma are very serious. These words of Jesus warn of eternal deprivation. One wonders how many young people will be led astray, led away from discipleship for Christ, which requires losing their “selves,” because they were told “Feel good about yourself” rather than being told that there is a criminal inside who needs to be put to death daily. The danger is obvious in the words of the psychologist who countered the words of his client, telling her that “putting a priority on self-acceptance is the first step many of us need to take” rather than seeking first the kingdom of God.

God wants us to “lose” our selves in this world by throwing ourselves wholeheartedly into the service and love of Christ and His empire. Having children act out a skit, “A Pat on the Back,” and encouraging them to write essays on what they like about themselves, are activities that throw all the attention on self. Such a wrong emphasis could be devastating to Christian education.^[1]

Discipleship: Luke 14:25-27

And there went great multitudes with him: and he turned, and said unto them, If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple. And whosoever doth not bear his cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple.

Let me say one more word about the passage in Luke 14:25-27. Discipleship, the subject in view in all the passages that we have been studying in this chapter, means the renunciation of all ties—even the closest and dearest ones in life. It does not always mean that we must forsake all others in order to follow Christ, but it *does* mean that we must have such allegiance to Him that we are ready at all times, if called upon, to do so. Jesus especially points out, as if this were the hardest part of all to do, that the disciple must renounce “even his own life [self] too.” The great thing to which to point people is pleasing Christ, following Him, and doing His will. That will not confuse children—or others—or lead them astray! Anyone, including self, who gets in the way of that is wrong.

There can be no doubt about the fact that Christ was concerned about the self; it is not as though He ignored the subject. Indeed, He thought it of such importance that He spoke about it in the closest possible connection to discipleship and made definitive pronouncements about it. Yet in all this He gave no indication of man’s great worth, nor did He allow any place for extenuating circumstances: “You can renounce all your ties and follow me after all your needs have been met and you have learned to love yourself.” The very idea sounds ludicrous when you put it in Jesus’ mouth!

Put Christ before Self: 2 Corinthians 5:15, Romans 14:7-8

And of course there are also other passages that speak of putting Christ before self. Take, for example, 2 Corinthians 5:15:

And that he died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him which died for them, and rose again [on their behalf].

There you have it: One must no longer live for self, as he did before coming to Christ. The old way of life was put off in Christ, and now must be put off in our lives. The focus of life must now be “For me to live is Christ” even though it once was “For me to live is self.” What could be clearer?

Now consider Romans 14:7-8:

For none of us liveth to himself, and no man dieth to himself. For whether we live, we live unto the Lord; and whether we die, we die unto the Lord: whether we live therefore, or die, we are the Lord’s.

Again, the main point of the passage is that Christ is to take the place of self in the Christian’s life. It is not that this happens in any substantive sense, of course, but in terms of desires and will and the like. Eating and regarding days (v 6) is not a private matter; it affects other people, including new converts. No Christian is to live out of regard for himself. “What is for the welfare of the kingdom and for the honor of Christ?” is the kind of question he should ask himself. His answer ought to be, “I shall live in such a way that, whenever there is a choice, I shall gladly serve Christ and others first.” He must live for Christ, and, as Paul says, if need be, die for Him.

Interestingly, the last part of verse 7 speaks cogently to the suicide issue: “no man dieth [i.e., if he dies properly] *to [for] himself.*” Liddon says those words mean—

To welcome or seek death as a relief from the troubles of this life. Of this selfishness in death, suicide is the highest expression.^[2]

Liddon’s words are important. Paul’s whole point is that we must not do anything—live or die—for ourselves; all must be done for Christ. A suicide dies for himself; no suicide could die for Christ. It is because of this verse that we know that suicide is an act of the old man, of self-centered thinking, which at times (among the Stoics and some modern existentialists) has even been encouraged.

Holliday, who shot himself, and Wanda Williams, who hanged herself, both committed selfish acts of self-murder. They thought nothing of loved ones, or students, or anyone else. They were thinking of themselves as indeed their suicide notes indicate. It was not low self-esteem that did them in, but too high a regard for self. They said, in effect, “I am too good to be treated this way. I will put up with it no longer.”

The Scriptures teach us that Christians own nothing, not even their lives, since Christ has purchased them. The minute you get that fact wrong, and think that anything, even your own self, is really yours, you don’t own it—it owns you!

Conclusion

Love itself is the very cessation of self-directed, self-concerned, self-centered living. That's why living for Christ and others out of love for them points us away from ourselves. Self-esteem pursuits deflect one's attention from others and thus destroy Christian love. Rather than laying the groundwork for love (layers upon which to build it, as the Adler/Maslow scheme says), it erodes everything worthwhile. Love—other-directed concern—*alone* sets us free from self!

Contrary to the modern emphasis we have been studying, the Bible teaches that you can't properly relate to yourself ("find" or "save" self) until you learn to love others. As usual, pagan thinking reverses God's order of things.

Jesus disposed of the myth that we can love others only after they have first loved us by saying,

For if ye love them which love you, what thank have ye? for sinners also love those that love them.—Luke 6:32

In effect, by referring to "sinners" (i.e., enemies of God), He characterized, once and for all, the "I'll love you if you first love me" position as ungodly.

For a Christian, the alternative to self-love, self-esteem, self-worth, and any other kind of self-centered teaching that might appear in the future, is clearly *self-denial*. When you seek to gain yourself, you can only lose it; when you are willing to lose yourself for Christ, you save it. It's that simple—and that profound. ∞

Notes

Love...as Yourself?

1. Walter Trobisch, *Love Yourself* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1976), page 11.
2. Ibid., p. 11.
3. Ibid.
4. Lawrence Crabb, *Effective Biblical Counseling* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977), p. 81.
5. Philip A. Captain, *Eight Stages of Christian Growth* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1984).
6. Trobisch, op. cit., p. 11.

Of Infinite Worth?

1. Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Christian Looks at Himself* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), p. 45.
2. Robert Morey, *Death and the Afterlife* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1985), p. 37.
3. Hoekema, op. cit., p. 22.
4. Bruce Narramore, *You're Someone Special* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), p. 23.
5. Morey, op. cit., p. 37.
6. Bruce Rathbun, a student at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. Reported in *The Presbyterian Journal*, Apr. 24, 1985. Schuller's new 'evangelism-by-strokes' has caught on widely. An evangelistic tract entitled "You're Special" reads "You are special indeed! The Bible reveals God's total interest in you as an individual...yes, you are valuable to God!" (Ted Griffin, Good News Publishers, n.d., #6C04).
7. Robert H. Schuller, *Self Esteem: The New Reformation* (Waco: Word Books, 1982), p. 151.
8. Rouner, Arthur, *You Can Learn to Like Yourself* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1978), p. 4.
9. Ibid., p. 5.
10. Dennis J. De Haan, *Daily Bread*, Feb. 1985.

What Does the Bible Teach?

1. For information about a truly Christian school program, in which the emphasis is not on self but on ministry to others in Christ's name, see my *Back to the Blackboard* (Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1982).
2. H. P. Liddon, *Explanatory Analysis of St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans* (London: Longman's Green and Co., 1899), p. 262.

The following notes have been added by the editors. The author has mentioned them in the text not to endorse their views, but to hold their writings as examples of incorrect interpretation of Biblical truth.

- A. **Sigmund Freud** (1856-1939): Austrian neurologist who founded the psychoanalytic school of psychology. He is best known for his theories of the unconscious mind, and redefinition of sexual desire as the primary motivational energy of human life.
- B. **Carl Jung** (1875-1961): Swiss psychiatrist and founder of analytical psychology, who has influenced countercultural movements worldwide. Jung emphasized understanding the psyche through exploring the worlds of dreams, art, mythology, religion, and philosophy. He cautioned

that modern people rely too heavily on rational thought, and need better to appreciate unconscious realms.

- C. **Carl Rogers** (1902-1987): American psychologist and among the founders of the humanistic approach to psychology. His understanding of personality and human relationships found wide application in psychotherapy and secular counseling.
- D. **B.F. Skinner** (1904-1990): American psychologist, author, and inventor. He innovated his own philosophy of science called *Radical Behaviorism*, and founded his own school of the experimental analysis of behavior.
- E. **Alfred Adler** (1870-1937): Austrian medical doctor, psychologist, and among the founders of the psychoanalytic movement. He was the first major figure to form an independent school of psychotherapy and personality theory.
- F. **Abraham Maslow** (1908-1970): American psychologist. He is noted for his conceptualization of a “hierarchy of human needs,” and is considered the founder of humanistic psychology.
- G. **Lawrence J. Crabb, Jr.** (b. 1944): psychologist, author, and Bible teacher. He has written many books and founded New Way Ministries. He began studying abnormal psychology and personality theory during his schooling. He is among those “Christian counselors” who hold that the Scriptures alone are insufficient as a guide to emotional health. (Most conservative Biblical counselors hold that God’s Word known and applied, by faith through the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit, is all that is necessary for spiritual maturity in Christ.)