

## **A Christian's Response to Self-Esteem**

“Believe in yourself.” “You’ve got to love yourself, before you can love others.” “The most important thing in child-rearing is that children gain good self-esteem.”

These statements and others are so common in our ears these days that perhaps we have become used to them and never give them a second thought. Self-esteem is regarded as a basic human birthright. Self-esteem seems like a scientific issue, one which we are sure is a friendly, wholesome teaching that stands in agreement with Christian teaching. Or does it?

Increasingly, the church is descending into false doctrine, compromise and apostasy. The techniques of the lost who reject God are welcomed in by the professing church, painted over with a thin coat of Christianity and then said to be ‘Christianised’ and ready for safe use by all Christians. One of the areas where this happens is psychology. Self-Esteem is really a part of the modern, psychological approach to dealing with life and its problems. Today, we wish to take a close look at what is the Bible’s Perspective on Self-Esteem.

First, let me make a plea. Many Christians today are either too easily persuaded or never persuaded at all. They either swallow everything from anyone, or else they remain stubborn that their present beliefs and experiences are true. If what you hear in this program clashes with your previously held beliefs, my plea is for you to go to the Scriptures to see what they say. They are the final authority. Don’t judge the Bible by your experiences or present beliefs; judge your beliefs and experiences by the Bible.

Let’s start by defining Self-Esteem. As modern psychologists will put it, self-esteem is really believing and affirming your love for yourself, being aware of your self-worth, placing a high value on yourself. Sounds almost necessary, and quite neutral. I mean what could be wrong with accepting yourself?

But let’s find the real context of the self-esteem movement. Christians often make the mistake of reading their present experience back into the Bible. Some will say, “Isn’t self-esteem just a modern word for what the Bible has always taught?” If so, we have no problem, but if not, then we are dealing with a novel teaching masquerading as an ancient one.

And so those Christians who promote self-esteem like to say that it is taught throughout the Scriptures. But in fact, self-esteem is a child of the psychological thinking of such people as Freud, Maslow, Fromm, Nietzsche, Jung and others. See, the root of psychology is this premise that man is basically good, and he needs improvement. From that premise, the differing schools of thought in psychology build their various remedies for the human condition. But God’s premise is this: man is basically evil, and he needs a complete transformation in Jesus Christ. Realise that these different schools of thought are not different ways up the same mountain; they are not parallel lines that will reach the same goal. They are, in fact, competing theories that are at war with each other. You cannot reconcile the two notions. Psychology, remember, is not a neutral science that is dealing with man’s physical or even to a degree mental wellbeing. It claims to be a science that deals with the soul. The word psychology literally means that ‘the study of the soul’. Therefore psychology must be completely in line with what the Bible says about the human soul or it becomes, in essence, a rival religion. Secular psychology, in essence, is an attempt to solve man’s spiritual problems apart from God. It is another gospel. Let

consider the gospel according to self-esteem and the Gospel of God to see why they do not gel.

### **The Gospel According to Self-Esteem**

This Gospel says, you are basically good. All of your problems come from a poor self-esteem. You need to really love yourself to overcome your own failure. You must focus on your self and enhance your self. Only by loving and valuing your self can you achieve true happiness. Man's problems come not from a broken relationship with God, but from a broken relationship with Self. To heal this relationship we must build our self-esteem. According to this gospel, self and God co-exist perfectly. In fact, here, God's role is to love and affirm you and make you feel great about yourself. God is there to serve you, to confirm that you are wonderful. Therefore, when you love self, you love God and others more.

In fact, this is the interpretation of 'Love thy neighbour as thyself'. There, say the preachers of this gospel, the Bible explicitly tells us to love ourselves. According to this Gospel, most of man's problems are a result of his poor self-esteem. If he only loved himself more, valued himself more, he wouldn't be hurting and damaging others the way he does. He feels so inferior, so he compensates with evil deeds.

According to this gospel, man's problems are all buried in his subconscious, which must be brought out and understood. He claims no ownership for his actions; after all it is his subconscious that controls his attitudes and actions. The solution is to dig this up and wipe it clean. We do not need the cross of Christ; we need to save ourselves by our own hand. As this gospel is interwoven with Christianity, the thinking is: we must have a high self-esteem to show others how proud we are to be Christians.

### **The Gospel According to the Bible**

This Gospel says, you are basically evil. Man's problems are not a result of a broken relationship with self, but a result of a broken relationship with God, which created a self in opposition to God. Man's problem is his rebellion to God, his sin. The way of salvation is not by focusing on yourself, but on **denying your self** as Jesus said in His call to salvation. In Luke 9:23 deny self literally means 'disown' self. According to this Gospel, self is the rebel within man, the sinful nature, the flesh, which seeks to sit upon the throne of our hearts. It wishes to direct life its own way, receive glory, worship and pleasure its own way and basically be the centre of the universe. This self is the enemy of God; it must not be indulged, pacified, helped or stroked. It must in fact be killed, crucified with Christ. This self is not a good, kind thing, but the old man, which was birthed when our father Adam struck out for independence from God. There is no remedy for this self, with a capital 'S', it is evil to the core, and disguises itself as good, Jeremiah 17:9. The remedy for this self is for it to die with Christ when a person receives the Lord Jesus Christ by faith and to be replaced by the resurrection life of Christ Himself. Here, self is not the means to achieve happiness, but Christ is.

God died for us, not because we were lovely, 'or worth it', but because of His love for us (Rom 5:8). He loved us: we would be proud to speculate why. Our response is I John 4:19: we love Him.

Just by looking at these two schools of thought, you can already see why a biblical understanding of the Gospel does not allow for self-esteem teaching as many people teach it today.

The self-esteem gospel is a Trojan horse, that has crept in silently into Christian thinking, and been welcomed in like a long lost friend, a truth which was supposedly always in the Bible, but somehow the true church of the past 1900 years just didn't see it.

No, the Bible is clear that man's problems come from his selfism, not from a lack of love toward that selfism. This idea that the love of self is where we must start is an idea that does not go back further than the psychologists of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In fact, Paul warned that one of the characteristics of people in the last days would be that they would 'lovers of themselves' 2 Timothy 3:1-4. The real gospel is foolishness to self-esteem proponents, and they call it outdated and insulting to speak of sin, death and rebellion. 1 Corinthians 1:18, "For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God."

Consider that man's purpose was to be a mirror, to reflect God's glory. Now if a mirror were somehow faulty in its reflection, the solution would not be to ask that mirror to 'get a good self-image'. That would be preposterous; the point of a mirror is to reflect an image other than its own. Its solution would be to get right with the one it is supposed to be reflecting.

And here is the true balance: the one who looks closely at God in His Word will get an accurate view of himself. From there, he will make the necessary changes to improve his reflection of God. This will be a process, not involving self-love, self-forgiveness, self-confidence, but merely self-examination, and a wholehearted obedience and focus on Christ. 2 Corinthians 3:5: "Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think any thing as of ourselves; but our sufficiency *is* of God."

The real problem with the self-esteem gospel, is that it inevitably excuses sin. "That wasn't my fault, it was because I was feeling bad about myself." "He was violent because of a bad childhood where he was never affirmed." "It's not sin, it's a disease of a poor self-image." Jesus didn't die for a disease, for your mistakes, or for what was not your fault. The Son of God did not die a cruel death because you were thinking inaccurately about yourself. He died for your and my sins, and will judge man for them if they do not receive Him as Lord and Saviour. Let's call sin what it is- sin! Rebellion to God. Disobedience!

There is a thinking that feeling guilty is an evil thing, and we must never feel guilt, for it will damage our self-esteem. What a topsy-turvy kind of thinking. Sure, some guilt is just a perfectionistic self-preoccupation, but some guilt is God the Spirit activating your conscience to lead you back to himself. What hope do we have of holiness if we dull our consciences to His voice? Furthermore, isn't it a very dangerous thing to teach people to love what should not be loved? To tell them to love even what is evil about themselves? How will they ever desire change then? Self-esteem teaching minimizes sin and encourages people to think falsely about themselves.

Isn't it also a laughable contradiction that the world insists you must love yourself as you are, but then produces millions of pages, videos and TV programmes on how to lose weight, look better, and be more attractive. I thought I was fine as I was, why must I change if, "I am the most beautiful person in the world" as they insist I must chant to myself in the mirror? The self-esteem thinking often encourages a kind of

thinking divorced from reality, saying things that will supposedly come true, like your positive confession crowd.

Though the world is saturated with the teaching that you need self-esteem to be a healthy, normal human being, it seems the world's problems are increasing, not decreasing. Could it be that feeding people on a self-esteem diet is creating problems, not solving them? We must also ask, "Is it possible to have too much self-esteem?" This is one the self-esteem proponents seem to dodge. Arrogance, pride are said to be actually results of poor self-esteem which is moving the goal post if I ever saw it.

"Well, there's nothing wrong with building someone's self-esteem," says one. Let's define our terms. There is nothing wrong with praising, encouraging and building people up with truthful words. But that is quite different from trying to build up a confidence, image, esteem in themselves apart from a relationship with God. That is extremely dangerous, and is tantamount to leading a person away from God. Because the people who ultimately reject God are the self-confident, the self-assured, the self-sufficient, and definitely, the self-loving. The misery of our condition as sinners is not supposed to be anaesthetized by the temporary drug of self-esteem; it is meant to be cured by a relationship with God through Christ. Would you eat biscuits that had 'just a little bit of rat poison' in them? Why then do we think that just a little bit of self-esteem teaching in our churches will be harmless? How can we merge these two completely different Gospels, one that exalts the self, the other which crucifies it?

But, we can rightly ask, what does it mean when it says "Love thy neighbour as thyself"? Notice Jesus words. He tells us there are two commandments to be followed: love God, and love your neighbour as thyself. If Jesus was commanding us to love ourselves, He would have said there are three commandments i.e. love God, love neighbour, love yourself. No, - 'love thyself' is a qualifier to the second command to love your neighbour. Just as the first command to love God is qualified by 'all thy heart, soul, mind, strength', so the 2<sup>nd</sup> command is qualified by 'as you love yourself'. Jesus considers the love of self as a given, something naturally in every human. You may say, "But some people hate themselves" Listen to Ephesians 5:29: "For no man ever yet hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as the Lord the church" I clothe myself, feed myself, and entertain myself clean myself, I show that I love myself.

Self-hate is really just another form of self-preoccupation, simply on a negative scale. We must get away from this thinking that thinking positively about self is good, and thinking negatively about self is bad. In truth, thinking about self too much in any way is wrong. True humility gets the focus off ourselves. If people really hated themselves, they would enjoy feeling bad about themselves. The truth is, they love themselves and thus feel miserable when they are not the way they want to be. Even suicide, which we are told is ultimate self-hate, is really not a lack of self-esteem. Suicide, in the mind of one attempting it, is an escape. Why would you try to help someone escape whom you hate? If you hated him, you might enjoy his or her suffering and want to prolong it. People's love for themselves drives them to the ultimate act of selfishness.

We are not commanded to love self, we already do. That natural care we have for ourselves is commanded to be exhibited toward others, not nurtured for ourselves.

Or listen to Luke 6:31: “And as ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise.” Jesus assumes we will want good things for ourselves: it is a given, a natural reaction, the way we are made. If hating ourselves was our natural condition (as the “self-esteemers” tell us), then it would make us *happy* to be treated badly (as it would confirm our hateful feelings of ourselves), and Jesus would, thereby, be telling us to treat others with the same contempt and loathing that we desire for ourselves.

We do not have to build what is already built within us.

In truth, a real love for God and others comes from God Romans 5:5: “And hope maketh not ashamed; because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us.” So even self-love, which you do not have to work on, is governed and controlled by God the Spirit when He lives within us.

If the Bible takes it for granted that you already love yourself, and commands you to make sure your focus is upward and outward, what are we building when we talk of increasing our self-love and looking inward first?

David got it right. He loved God first. Having gazed at God, he could marvel at God’s love for him, which helped him get a correct view of self. Psalm 139 is the testimony of a man with a balanced view of self.

God’s word never instructs us to build our view of ourselves. On the contrary, listen to these verses, a small sampling of the enormous wealth of verses saying the same thing.

Romans 12:3: “For I say, through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think *of himself* more highly than he ought to think; but to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith.”

Proverbs 17:2 : “A wise servant shall have rule over a son that causeth shame, and shall have part of the inheritance among the brethren.”

Jer 9:23,24 : “Thus saith the LORD, Let not the wise *man* glory in his wisdom, neither let the mighty *man* glory in his might, let not the rich *man* glory in his riches: <sup>24</sup>But let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth me, that I *am* the LORD which exercise lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness, in the earth: for in these *things* I delight, saith the LORD. <sup>2</sup>”

Philippians 2:3: “*Let nothing be done* through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves.”

John 12:25: “He that loveth his life shall lose it; and he that hateth his life in this world shall keep it unto life eternal.”

Over and over, God’s law is mentioned , what goes up, will come down. Pride will be abased. And the corollary, what goes down will come up , humility will be rewarded.

Objection: someone says: all truth is God’s truth. If psychology is true then God is behind it. That’s right, therefore the issue here is: is building your self-esteem a truth that is part of God’s overall truth? As we have seen, it clearly is not.

There are two extremes to be avoided.

- 1) The self-esteem promoted by the world. This is nothing less than pride. However you may dress it up as innocent and healthy, it is nothing less than an undue focus and worship of self. The focus is 'me'.
- 2) The second extreme is a deep self-neglect and apparent self-hate and abhorrence that some show. It is often rooted in a false humility, and it still ultimately focusing on self- albeit negatively. It is just on the other end of the spectrum , still focused on self , just in with a critical eye.

The true balance for a believer is to have self crucified with Christ, and to actually show little self-focus or concern, which is true humility. This believer has a biblical understanding of self, and the focus is on God and others. He does not hate himself, or falsely put himself down all the time, nor does he exalt himself and his achievements in his own eyes. He forgets about self, to focus on God and others. God has created all creatures with a natural self-love that causes them to want to survive. This is healthy, and let no one say we are teaching a form of self-abnegation or self-hate. But preoccupation with self quickly becomes self-idolatry, and self-esteem taught as an end in itself is nothing more than bolstering a person's pride.

The victorious Christian neither exalts nor downgrades himself. His interests have shifted from self to Christ. His life is summed up by Galatians 2:20: "I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me."

Real freedom comes from knowing that God loves me not for who I am, but because of who He is. Why waste time drinking from the broken cistern of your own love for yourself, when you can be growing by drinking the living water of God's love for you?