

IF NOT SELF-ESTEEM, THEN WHAT?

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self-value	self-worth	self-abasement	self-acceptance
self-criticism	self-defeating	self-idolatry	self-mastery
self-policing	self-understanding	self-deprecating	self-worship
self-denigration	self-validating	self-doubt	self-absorbed
self-expression	self-help	self-revealing	self-centered

These are just a sampling of the current **213** self-hyphenated (I guess that could be added to the list) words in the English language.

Not only are these words abundant in number, but they saturate the way we think about life. They influence the way we think about the goal of life, the function of relationships, how to parent, what the church is about, why Jesus came, and a myriad of other things. This is why it is imperative we understand what the Bible actually tells us to do with *self*.

There are many places one could begin exploring the Bible on the subject of self: the implications of being made in the image of God, the fall and our sinful nature, the price Christ paid to redeem us, our identity as children of God, or the imputed righteousness of Christ to man. This article will approach the subject by examining the New Testament texts that contain Jesus' teaching on the Great Commandments.

The question we will strive to answer is, "Does low self-esteem the cause our problems in life or is low self-esteem an outcome of our problems?" In other words, should we try to solve our problems by raising our self-esteem, or would that effort only increase our problems and distract us from a more pertinent solutions?

Self-Esteem: Goal or Method?

In order to answer this question well, we will have to define our terms. Often there is confusion on this subject because people use the same word to mean many different things. Before determining whether self-esteem is a goal (something to be pursued) or a method (a way of pursuing something), it is helpful to define several terms that are used synonymously with self-esteem. These initial definitions are not intended to be distinctively biblical or Christian, but an entry point of conversation with anyone interested in the subject of self-esteem.

Confidence: a positive demeanor based upon an expectation that circumstances will not be overwhelming or defeating.

Identity: a sense of who one is that is not dependant upon circumstances or peer group.

Purpose: a direction or agenda to life that gives meaning to particular decisions and events.

Security: a disposition of stability in the midst of uncertainty.

Wisdom: the ability to make decisions according to preset, effective principles resulting in a productive, functional, and enjoyable life.

These five words are *goals* that can be pursued. They are matters of character and ability. Self-esteem, however, is a *method* of pursuing confidence, identity, purpose, security, and wisdom. What is self-esteem?

Self-Esteem: a belief system that proposes by loving myself and appraising my own self-worth to be high enough I will attain confidence, identity, purpose, security, and wisdom.

This article is posing the question, “Do people lack confidence, identity, purpose, security, and wisdom because they don’t love themselves enough, or do they lack these things because their focus upon self has distracted them from the true source of confidence, identity, purpose, security, and wisdom?” Now that the question has been clearly articulated, we can begin to approach the biblical texts with the right frame of reference.

What is the Biblical Foundation?

Jesus directly addresses the issue of how we are to relate to our “self.” In Mark 12:28-31 (see also Matthew 22:37-40) He summarizes all of Scripture and the purpose of man in two statements:

1. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength.
2. Love your neighbor as yourself.

Interestingly, Jesus even numbers His points, “On these *two* commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.” There are only two commands, not three. Not only does Jesus number His points, He also prioritizes them, “*First*, love God.... *Second*, love others...”

Much Christian teaching from this passage says that Jesus is building a pyramid of priorities; that Jesus is establishing an order of operation for healthy living. They, however, reverse the order of Jesus’ commands and add a third command. Making love for self a pre-requisite for loving others. The natural train of logic, although few go so far as to state it explicitly, is that we would need to love others before we could love God.

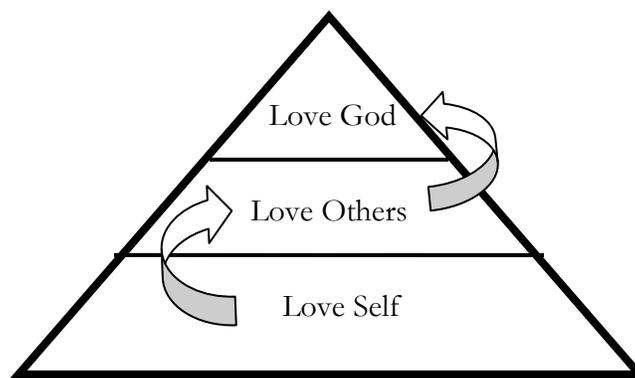


Figure 1: Loving Self as Foundational Love

This model is the natural overflow of the common secular teaching that we must love ourselves before we can love anyone else. For the sake of being appropriately critical, pause to consider how much biblical truth the secular media agrees with. Do they tend to agree with a pro-life position on abortion, a traditional view of marriage, prayer in school, teaching intelligent design as a legitimate alternative to evolution, or the public posting of the ten commandments? Most do not. It seems odd, then, that the majority of secular experts and media outlets would fervently promote self-esteem, if it is a truly biblical concept.

It is also worth noting that many secular counselors and researchers are beginning to denounce the self-esteem movement. The Harvard Mental Health Letter (February 2004) correlates self-esteem with a significant mental illness concluding, “The distinction between self-esteem and narcissism seems to disappear.” The larger article links the self-esteem movement with unhealthy self-obsession in our culture.

Other research is beginning to note that criminals and socially immature segments of the population score very high on self-esteem inventories. These people whole-heartedly believe that they are good, right, worthy, able, and deserve to get their way. Erica Goode in the *New York Times* (October 1, 2002) cites research to indicate that, “D students think as highly of themselves as valedictorians, and serial rapists are no more likely to ooze with insecurities than doctors or bank managers.”

Dr Michael Edelstein, a secular counselor of Rational Emotive Behavioral Therapy (a protégé of Albert Ellis), sarcastically comments:

Self-esteem is both the sacred cow and the golden calf of our culture. Nothing is esteemed higher than self-esteem, and no self-esteem can be too high. Nathaniel Branden, a leading exponent of self-esteem, raises the question: “Is it possible to have too much self-esteem?” and gives the resounding answer: “No, it is not, no more than it is possible to have too much physical health.”

Jill Elish reports on a 30 year longitudinal study conducted by Roy Baumeister (Florida State University), Jennifer Campbell (University of British Columbia), Joachim Krueger (Brown University), and Kathleen Vohs (University of Utah) which found that self esteem was not the variable that correlated with life success or satisfaction. After a “thorough review of all the major studies on self-esteem” Baumeister concludes, “Once schools started self-esteem programs, I think they developed a momentum on their own, partly because the exercises, e.g. going around the room and letting everybody say what is special about himself or herself, feel good to all concerned (Elish, web).” Self-esteem was neither proven to increase school performance nor to reduce the likelihood of children smoking, drinking, taking drugs, or engaging in premarital sex.

While there are many psychologists who would differ with the Harvard Newsletter, Erica Goode, Dr. Edelstein, and the 30 year longitudinal study it is worth noting that the self-esteem theory is not an undisputed fact, even in secular circles. That being said, the more important question is what does the Bible teach about *self*?

What did Jesus mean when He said we are to love our neighbor *as ourselves*? The weight of other biblical texts, church history, and evangelical theology all indicate that Jesus meant, “You already love yourself. What you need to learn is to focus the same amount of attention, interest, and concern that you already give yourself on others.”

In Jesus' most basic description of discipleship our Lord says, "If anyone would come after me, let him *deny himself* and take up his cross daily and follow me (Luke 9:23, *emphasis added*)." Discipleship is to die to self, not love one's self more. John Piper, in his definition of biblical counseling, reiterates this point, "Love is not possible where self-preoccupation holds sway in a person's life. So self-forgetfulness is a part of true mental health. This is not possible to create directly, but only as one is absorbed in something worthy and great. The aim is to be absorbed in God and anything else for God's sake."

Jesus set the agenda for what is to be pursued in life when He heard His disciples arguing about who would be the greatest, "But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all (Mark 10:43-44)." Jesus' statement is not in agreement with the idea that we must love ourselves before we love anyone else.

Paul, in describing the false doctrines and evil practices that will emerge in the end times, clearly states that love of self will mark those dark days, "But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. For people will be *lovers of self*, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy... (II Timothy 3:1-2, *emphasis added*)." It can be said, that by placing love of self first in the list, Paul is implicating that obsession with possessions, lack of gratitude, irreverence towards parents, and the other vices will emerge from advocating for a love of self as one's first priority.

John Calvin (2003) comments on this passage, "Only let my readers observe that self-love, which is put first, may be regarded as the source from which flow all the vices that follow afterwards (p. 238)." Modern New Testament scholar Gordon Fee (1988) concurs in his commentary on 2 Timothy, "[Paul's list] begins appropriately with *lovers of themselves* since from such misdirected love all other vices flow (p. 269-270)."

Paul goes to great lengths to permeate the church with the idea that life is not about us, we are not worthy, and that our primary focus is to esteem Christ. "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me (Galatians 2:20)." "The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost (1 Timothy 1:15)." "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast (Ephesians 2:8-9)."

The danger of self-esteem is that it tries to persuade us that we are good enough, capable, and worthy. We need the gospel precisely because we are not good enough, capable, or worthy. Salvation does not give us a righteousness of our own that we can esteem. Salvation gives us Christ's righteousness that we might worship Him with reverent, grateful awe.

This moves us to the question, "If Jesus was not teaching self-esteem when He gave the Great Commandments, what was He teaching?" It can be affirmed that God wants us to have confidence, identity, purpose, security, and wisdom. It can even be affirmed that Jesus was teaching us how to attain these things in the Great Commandments, but let us look at the wisdom behind the order in which Jesus places the commandments.

First and foremost, Jesus prioritizes our relationship with God. Without the redeeming presence of Christ in our lives we are utterly incapable of genuine love. This does not mean that all lost people are savages and heathens, but that they are solely motivated by what they perceive to be in their best interest. Lost people

may believe kindness and benevolence to be the best way to achieve what they want, but this is a different motive than biblical love.

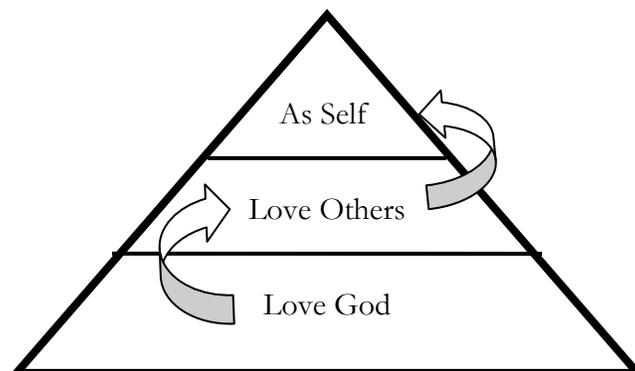


Figure 2: Loving God as Foundational Love

Our relationship with God is to be the all satisfying foundation for every other relationship. “His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence (2 Peter 1:3).” As John Piper (1996) states, “God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him (p. 50).” Augustine said it this way, “Our hearts are restless until they find rest in God.” To make our relationship to ourselves primary is to make *self* a God-substitute, an idolatry.

When that relationship with God is firmly established as the foundation of other relationships then we are prepared to truly love other people. We no longer “need” them to approve us, fill us, complete us, or sustain us, because God does those things. That frees us to love them instead of trying to satisfy ourselves with them.

This idea of “loving others instead of using them for our agenda” is precisely what Jesus meant when He said we are to love our neighbor as ourselves. In the same way that we naturally look out for our own good, we are to seek to be a blessing to others. This is the same logic Paul used in Ephesians 5:28, “In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself.”

Paul does not say husbands first learn to care for yourself and then you will be able to care for your wives. He assumes (based on our natural instincts and selfish, sinful tendencies) that the husbands are already caring for their own bodies. Paul calls them to place that same energy and attention into caring for their wives. Why? Because when a husband places their wife’s cares above his own, he will have a home marked by confidence, identity, purpose, security, and wisdom.

The debate over self-esteem is a debate over human nature. Are people basically good and, therefore, only need affirmation, insight, education, and encouragement? Or, are people inherently sinful and, therefore, need to learn self-denial, repentance, humility, and selfless love? Jerry Bridges (1994) says it this way, “If we are to succeed in putting sin to death, we must realize that the sin we are dealing with is none other than a continual exalting of our desire over God’s known will (p. 193).”

How do we attain these five things?

It is not enough to merely debunk a defective method without generating an effective alternative. So if self-esteem is not the most effective and biblical method to attain confidence, identity, purpose, security, and wisdom, then what is?

The method of creating an alternative will be to take the five synonyms for self-esteem and give a concise method for growing in these areas. Reflection questions will be given for each to assist you in evaluating where you stand in each of these areas. These sections are not intended to be exhaustive, but to provide an introduction for how to apply this new paradigm. A complete article will be devoted to each subject in future editions of the journal in order more fully (and biblically) define and apply each synonym.

Confidence

Confidence is a bi-product of what needs to be done, the available resources to achieve that, and my assessment of what is at stake. If a basketball player needs to make a shot to win the game and believes he can do it, he is confident. If he doubts his ability and the game is important to him, he is not confident. If he doubts his ability, but is playing with his three-year-old son in the back yard, confidence is not an issue.

Biblical confidence is not about being able to do everything. We were created to be dependent upon God. Any confidence that does not reinforce our dependance upon God is sinful pride. Jerry Bridges (1994) says it this way, “Your worst days are never so bad that you are beyond the reach of God’s grace. And your best days are never so good that you are beyond the need of God’s grace (p. 18).”

It is good and right, in some circumstances, to not be confident. This accounts for the “high self-esteem” of most criminals. They are confident when it is wrong to be confident. If you struggle with appropriate confidence, here is a series of questions to help you think about your circumstances biblically.

1. What needs to be done? Sometimes fear emerges from a lack of clarity. I feel timid because I do not know what is expected.
2. Am I or should I be capable of this? There are times that we lack confidence because we demand that God allow us to be good at something He has not called us to do. We also often need to realize there is nothing wrong with not having a particular skill. Much of the self-esteem hype in our culture is the result of making demands of God.
3. What is at stake? Our idolatries always betray us. If I make success at work, getting all A’s, being popular, or anything else the end all of my life, it is likely that I will lack confidence. When I deride myself for a secondary matter, the problem is not confidence. The problem is a lack of purpose (see below) and idolatry.

REFLECTION: When a pivotal moment of life comes, to whom/what do you turn instinctually? Where did you go for advice on the last major decision you made?

Identity

Identity is that part of our character that remains the same despite our circumstances. When people change who they are based on their peers or environment, it is not because they do not love themselves, it is

because they do not know who they are. In each environment they do what they think will get them what they want.

What allows a young person to resist peer pressure? Knowing who they are. What allows someone to take action in an abusive relationship? Knowing they are not dependent upon the abuser.

This requires that Christianity becomes who we are, not just something that we believe or do. The Scriptures are full of identity statements. Believers are children of God, ambassadors of Christ, salt and light, a royal priesthood, servants of the King, God's craftsmanship created for good works, and the bride of Christ. The Bible gives us these concepts not to rev up our self-importance, but to remind us of who we are so that we would know how to live.

When temptation arises, the question is not, "Do I love myself enough to be good?" but, "Who am I?" If I view myself as "the awkward kid," "just a pay check," "a nobody," "the preacher's kid," or any other false identity, then it makes sense to wallow in pity or commit sin. If I discipline and challenge myself to truly consider who I am in Christ, then defeating labels become obvious deceptions and distractions.

REFLECTION: Who are your heroes? When you daydream about "making it," what are you doing and what are the attributes of success?

Purpose

Purpose is the unifying goal that gives meaning to all the individual decisions we make. A lack of purpose results in sporadic, directionless decision making and is often interpreted as a low self-esteem. Again, the deficiency is not in self-approval but in direction.

The Westminster Confession makes the matter of purpose quite clear. It asks, "What is the chief end of man?" and answers, "To glorify God and enjoy Him forever." This is the purpose for which we live. If we lose this purpose, all our efforts will be as Cornelius Plantinga (1996) says, "If we try to fill our hearts with anything besides the God of the universe, we find that we are overfed and under-nourished (p. 122-123)." Our effort, no matter how great, will not produce a satisfying productive result.

Do you have a personal purpose statement? Can you articulate in a few sentences the common denominator of the decisions you make? If not, it makes sense why life seems disjointed.

REFLECTION: How would you complete the sentence, "If only I could..."? When you get a free moment, what do you work on or where do your thoughts go?

Security

Security is a result of where you put your trust. Insecurity is generated when that which I deem trustworthy fails. Terrorism, moral failure of spiritual leaders, car accidents, and health trouble can all result in insecurity because they call into question things we usually deem dependable.

Security is something we can never muster in ourselves. We are sinners; meaning we will disappoint our good intentions. We are dying; meaning we have no earthly permanence. We are limited in knowledge; meaning we will make foolish choices and accept bad information. We socialize with other sinners; meaning trusted alliances will let us down. We cannot generate security.

Security must be sought in God. Only God is eternal, all knowing, and incapable of folly. Security is only found in God. Life becomes a moment by moment trusting of God, not being ruffled by the fact that apart from His grace and wisdom I would destroy myself, because God is dependable and able to sustain my security.

REFLECTION: During your last crisis what did you do? What did you tell that last person who came to you in a crisis? Did God seem relevant at those moments?

Wisdom

Wisdom is the ability to make choices that result in a biblically productive life. Low self-esteem often gets blamed for foolish choices, when the real culprit was the lack of an ability to assess life in biblical categories and respond appropriately.

Wisdom is not the ability to recite (accurately pronounced) all the places and people found in the book of Genesis. An example of wisdom is the ability to hear a dispute between friends, identify principles of biblical conflict resolution, identify the driving motivation of each person, and lovingly guide them to resolution. This wisdom takes the confidence to speak up, an identity that is independent of your peers, purpose to see God glorified more than to keep quiet, and being secure enough to withstand temporary conflict and possible rejection.

If my primary concern is loving myself, it's not worth it. The way of wisdom is too hard. There are easier things that would give me a more immediate pleasure. A primary focus on self (i.e., believing I need to love myself before I can love anybody else) prevents us from having biblical wisdom.

For example, the wisdom principle of delayed gratification is based on self-denial not self-love. Self-love would say, "You deserve _____. Go ahead and get it. You need a reward now and you can pay for it later." Self-denial says, "If God has not provided the means for you to have _____ you should not get it. It might be good to have later, but now is the time to thank God for what He has already blessed you with."

REFLECTION: What have you done in the last month to increase your wisdom? Reflect on one problem that you resolved in a truly biblical manner.

Conclusion

This article is the introductory article in a series of articles designed to create a manual for helping people understand and apply the biblical alternative to the self-esteem theory. As a result of reading this article you should: (1) understand the need for an alternative to the self-esteem theory, (2) be able to distinguish good and necessary goals that people should pursue from self-esteem, and (3) develop a more accurate self-understanding based upon the five goals articulated in this article.

The next articles in this series will deal with confidence, identity, security, purpose, and wisdom individually. Each article will provide both case study and biblical instruction on how to grow in this area of life.

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