

Self-Esteem

INTRODUCTORY THOUGHTS

Do you think that it is appropriate for Christians to seek self-esteem?

Do you think that Christianity contributes to a lack of self-esteem in any way?

Is self-esteem incompatible with humility?

THE PROBLEM OF SELF-ESTEEM

Modern culture identifies lack of self-esteem as one of the main causes of personal and social problems, ranging from the poor performance of boys at school, criminal behaviour, obesity, and an inability to develop stable relationships. Many people do feel that they are failures and of little value or significance.

(1) The causes of poor self-esteem

Our self-esteem is a product of the way in which we are esteemed by others, or more precisely the way in which we perceived that we are esteemed by others, and the guilt and shame that we feel about ourselves.

- 1 When **others do not value us**, and do not give us the approval, acceptance and love that we need, then we suffer a loss of self-esteem. Our self-esteem is often deeply affected by our childhood experiences, and the way in which we were treated by our parents and peers when we were at School. Sometimes our lack of self-esteem may be a result of **our pride** in that we do not think that others give us the value that we deserve.
- 2 Our self-esteem will be affected by the **guilt and shame** that we feel about ourselves and our failures. Deep down we feel that others would not want to accept us, and that we do not deserve their approval. Some of this guilt and shame may be false, in that it is the result of social pressure or an unrealistic assessment of ourselves, but some may be genuine guilt and shame.

(2) Consequences of poor self-esteem

Those who suffer from poor self esteem feel inferior and tend to react in one of two ways:

- 1 **they withdraw** from relating to others for fear of being rejected or receiving disapproval
- 2 **they over compensate** by seeking to gain approval and acceptance, usually through achievement

Poor self-esteem can result in serious psychological problems, including the inability to form relationships and friendships, depression, eating disorders, addictions and self-abuse.

(3) Our contemporary culture's answer to problems of self-esteem

Contemporary culture teaches people to address problems of self-esteem in two ways.

- 1 it tells people that all **feelings of guilt and shame are false**, and that they should accept who they are. There is no reason to feel guilty or inadequate.
- 2 it tells people that **they are intrinsically valuable**, and that the problem lies with those who have treated them badly. People need to assert their own value by an act of will.

THE BIBLE'S VIEW OF SELF-ESTEEM

Whilst the Bible does not use the terminology of self-esteem, it is concerned to address questions of personal value. The Bible shares the basic insight that our sense of personal value derives from how others value us, and that this effects how we value ourselves. However the Bible teaches that our sense of personal value should not be determined by what other people think about us, but **by what God thinks of us**.

(1) God values us because he created us

Human beings do have an intrinsic value because they have been created by God in his image. Even though we are fallen, God still regards us as valuable.

How do the following verses suggest that fallen people are valued by God?

Genesis 9v5-7 & Acts 14v15-17

(2) We are unworthy (but not worthless)

The Bible teaches that human beings do not deserve to be accepted by God. They are unworthy and in need of grace. However this does not mean that they have become worthless, in the sense that they are of no value to God at all. Whilst the Bible sometimes uses the word 'worthless' (as for example in Romans 3v12) it carries the sense of being 'useless' or 'unprofitable,' rather

than referring to our personal value (in fact Romans 3v12 quotes Psalm 14v1-3 and Psalm 53v1-3 where the word 'corrupt' is used). We are no longer able to serve the function for which God originally created us.

A parallel might be drawn with the nation of Israel. Whilst Israel disobeyed and rebelled against the LORD, the LORD did not stop loving Israel, as is made especially clear in Hosea 11v1-11.

(3) God demonstrated how much he loves us by sending his Son to die for us

The amazing truth of the Bible is that, although we are unworthy, God values us so much that he was willing to give his own precious Son for us.

In the light of these verses, how does the cross reveal the extent to which God values us?

John 3v16, Romans 5v8 & 1 John 1v9-10

(4) God accepts those who trust Jesus and considers them righteous

God accepts those who repent and trust Jesus. He forgives their sin and considers them righteous (justification). Their sin and guilt are removed, and this should be the basis for the end of their shame. They are adopted into his family and receive the full status of sons (eg Ephesians 1v5). Only Christians have a true foundation for self-esteem.

Read: Luke 15v20-24

How did the Father react when the prodigal son returned?

How would this affect the self-esteem of the returning son?

SELF ESTEEM AND GRACE

The key to a biblical understanding of self-esteem thus lies in the fact of God's grace. Grace demands that we acknowledge two truths:

- **1 We do not deserve to be accepted by God** This means that we must face up to the reality of our guilt and the shame that it produces. Much of our guilt is true guilt and not false guilt. We need to repent.
- **1 God has given his Son for us and accepted us into his family** This means that we are valuable to God. he was willing to go so far as to give his Son for us. Because of what Jesus has done He accepts us, not reluctantly but as his sons.

Christians can be sure that God loves and accepts them, and through the gospel they can be freed from:

- 1 the guilt and shame which produce low self-esteem
- 2 their bondage to the approval of others
- 3 the achievement ethic which drives people to try and earn the acceptance and approval of others

SELF-ESTEEM AND THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

Whilst our acceptance by God is of fundamental importance, the way that we treat each other has a serious impact on our self-esteem. Christians should practice grace in their relationships with one another. Often the Christian community adopts the very same achievement ethic of the world, so that Christians have to earn acceptance, love and approval. In contrast Christians should practice the following virtues, which affirm and build self-esteem

- 1 acceptance: Romans 15v7 & James 2v1-5
- 2 forgiveness: Colossians 3v13
- 3 love: John 4v11; 1 Peter 4v8
- 4 honour for the less able: 1 Corinthians 12v14-26
- 5 correction (but not mere criticism): 2 Tim 3v16

SELF-ESTEEM AND CHRISTIAN HUMILITY

Many Christians find it hard to equate the idea of self-esteem with humility. However in the Bible humility means being willing to serve others rather than considering ourselves 'worse' than others. In Philippians 2v1-11 Christians are to be willing to serve others. To 'consider others better than yourselves' means to consider others as being those whom we should serve. Jesus himself served others from the confidence of his own status as equal to God.

One reason Paul seems to come across arrogantly is that he expresses confidence in his calling, gifts, achievements, character and ministry. Clearly he had a positive self-image, and yet he was humble because he realised that he was the recipient of God's grace, and willing to serve others.

Further reading:

Self-Esteem, Joanna & Alister McGrath (IVP 2002)

The Biblical View of Self-Esteem, Jay Adams (Harvets House)

The Search for Significance, Robert S McGee (Word)