

Thinking Correctly About Self

Roland S. Barnes, Senior Pastor
Trinity Presbyterian Church
Statesboro, GA 30461

"Thinking Correctly About `Self!"

"For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you." Romans 12:3

INTRODUCTION:

In this day of so many secular theories of personality it is very important for churches to make sure that they are setting forth God's truth concerning the doctrine of man. Everyone is convinced that one of the great problems being faced in these last years of the twentieth century is the problem of "low self-esteem".

What is "low self-esteem"? What is the answer, and how should we as Christians respond to the problem? These and related questions will be considered in this article.

I. FIRST, YOU NEED TO MAKE SURE YOU UNDERSTAND WHAT "SELF-ESTEEM" IS!

First, the phrase "self-esteem" must be **defined**. One of the problems in dealing with this concept is that there are many and varied ideas of what the terms mean. Some speak of "low self-esteem" in terms of how people "feel" about themselves. Others speak of it in terms of how one "thinks" about himself. As Christians we must evaluate all things in the light of God's truth revealed in His word. This we will attempt to do in what follows. Christians have too often accepted the ideas of the world uncritically and embraced dangerous errors in the process.

A. It Refers To Your Estimation Of Your "Self!"

The phrase "self-esteem" is a reference to the manner in which one views himself. What is his "estimation" of himself? When a person reflects upon who he is and what he is doing how should he think and feel about himself? How one answers these questions has to do with how one esteems himself.

How should we esteem ourselves? What should be our estimation of ourselves as Christians? How should a non-Christian esteem himself? Are there differences?

B. It Assumes That Is A Standard By Which To Judge Your Estimation Of Your "Self."

One of the problems with phrases like "low self-esteem" is that terms like "low" and "high" are relative and have very little meaning unless they are compared to a fixed standard. What does it mean to have "low" self-esteem? If it means to

think or feel too lowly about self, what is the standard below which one's self-esteem has fallen?

In order to get a handle on how Christians ought to respond to "self-esteem" psychology, they must have a clear understanding of the standard used in determining whether someone's "self-esteem" is low or high.

The phrase "low self-esteem" does not occur in the Bible. However, in Romans 12:3 the Apostle Paul states, "For through the grace given to me I say to every man among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith."

Here the Apostle Paul addresses the problem of having an **"incorrect"** estimation of oneself. In this case the problem was that there were some in the Church who were thinking **"too highly"** of themselves, that is, their estimation of themselves (self-esteem) was too high. Most often the Scriptures are concerned with the exalted ideas that men have of themselves. This seems to be the problem that the Apostle Paul is addressing in this text.

As a result of this incorrect estimation of themselves they were not treating other believers in loving humility. They were haughty in mind (Romans 12:16), and were disassociating themselves from other brothers whom they deemed unworthy of their company. Paul exhorts them, "Do not be wise in your own estimation." (Romans 12:16)

Whether the problem is, as in this case, a self-esteem that is too high, or as is often supposed today, a self-esteem that is too low, the answer must be found in learning to think about yourself correctly, that is, according to God's truth!

This is the only way to correct the problem. Paul exhorts us "not to think more highly" of ourselves than we ought to think, "but to think so as to have sound judgment."

What is the correct way to think about yourself? What is the correct way to feel about yourself? The correct way is to think and feel according to **sound judgment** which is based on the truths revealed in God's Word.

II. WHEN YOU THINK ABOUT YOUR "SELF," YOU BE CAREFUL TO DISTINGUISH THE CATEGORIES OF THOUGHT!

As I have thought about this subject, it seems to me that there are a variety of ways of approaching the subject of "self-esteem" from the Scriptures. The subject can be approached **"ontologically"** (that is, in terms of who you are as a being), **"ethically"** (that is, in terms of your behavior), and **"functionally"** (that is, in terms of your gifts and abilities). In all three areas you and I must think about ourselves correctly! We must think so as to have sound judgment. We must seek to have a correct estimation of ourselves before God.

A. The First Category Of Thought Is That Of "Ontology!"

The first category that we will look at is that of ontology; that is, who we are as beings. Another way of putting the question is: "Who do you think you are?" In answering this question we can think correctly or incorrectly about ourselves. We

could think too highly or too lowly about ourselves. If a man thinks of himself as a god, as did the Roman Caesar, then he thinks too highly of himself. If he thinks of himself as merely a higher form of animal life, then he is thinking too lowly of himself; or perhaps this too is a result of thinking pridefully (highly) of himself a being who can live independently of God.

In either case, his estimation (self-esteem) of himself is incorrect. He is not thinking according to sound judgment. We must view ourselves according to what God reveals about us. According to God we are beings made in His image, in knowledge, righteousness, and holiness. Ontologically (as far as our essence is concerned), we are bearers of the image of God Himself and we are the pinnacle of His creation. (See: Gen. 1:26-28/ Ps 8:4-5)

He has charged us to exercise a godly dominion over His creation. We must also learn to view ourselves as creatures. We are therefore limited in every capacity. We are finite beings created for God's good pleasure. To have exalted views of oneself which deny the limitations of being a creature of dust is to have "too high" of an estimation of self! This is the great error of secular humanism.

On the other hand, it could be that some people are characterized by "low self-esteem" in this sense. They do not have a proper estimation of themselves because they do not see themselves as finite creatures made in God's own image! Wherever Christianity has gone it has transformed the culture of the people by this most radical and amazing truth of the Scriptures.

You and I are made in God's image. Of all the creatures that God brought into being only man is made after the moral image of the creator Himself. To think correctly, to have a correct estimation of self, to have healthy self-esteem is to realize this truth in its fullness.

B. The Second Category Of Thought Is That Of Ethics/Behavior!

The second category to be considered is that of ethics, that is, whether one's behavior is right or wrong. Whereas, in the ontological category the emphasis was primarily on how one thinks, in the ethical category the emphasis is on what one does and correspondingly how one feels.

Often people who do not "feel" good about themselves are told that they have "low self-esteem". It may be true that they have low self-esteem. In fact, it could be argued that in this sense feeling bad about yourself and low self-esteem are merely different ways of describing the same thing. Or it may be that they have an incorrect estimation of themselves with regard to who they are and as a result they are living sinful lives being their own gods and determining for themselves what is right and wrong.

Again, how should one think about himself with respect to his behavior? How should you feel with respect to your behavior? This is primarily a question of ethics. If I am a murderer and I feel no remorse but only a proud arrogance that I got caught, then I am thinking too highly of myself; my self-esteem is too high.

Some would have us believe that the murderer committed his heinous act because he had "low self-esteem." However, it may be that he has "low self-esteem" because of his heinous act. That is, he feels bad about himself because he has done bad things, but because of pride and arrogance he will not repent.

If he had a correct estimation of himself ethically, he would be greatly

concerned about himself. If a person is pursuing an evil lifestyle and he feels no remorse and he has "good self-esteem" then he has an incorrect estimation of himself. His self-esteem or estimation of himself is not according to sound judgment. It needs to be corrected by a sober look at what God's Word requires, so that he will come to the place of a godly sorrow over his sin.

In order to have a correct estimation of myself, I must see my self as a fallen being. I must see myself as God has declared me to be with respect to my sin nature. God requires us to repent of our sin, but we will never repent of our sins until we learn to think correctly about them. Feeling badly about oneself because of sinful behavior is not wrong.

There is such a thing as true guilt. When we have done something that is sinful and wrong the Lord will bring about conviction in our hearts by the work of the Holy Spirit. We will "feel bad" about our sin and the Lord will use this godly sorrow to lead us to repentance and times of spiritual refreshing. (Acts 3:19)

This was the challenge which the Lord Himself set before Cain in Genesis 4:7. Cain offered an offering to the Lord that was not pleasing to Him. Since the Lord did not accept his offering, his countenance fell, that is, he did not "feel good" about himself and became angry. The Lord warns him in verse seven, "If you **do well** (*actions*), will not your countenance be lifted up(*feelings*)? And if you **do not do well**, sin is crouching at the door; and its desire is for you, but you must master it."

Cain was faced with a most crucial decision. If he realized that he had not done well and corrected his error and did what was pleasing in God's sight, then his countenance would be lifted up. He would then find that he felt good about himself because he was doing what is right.

In this ethical sense those who do not acknowledge their sin and repent have an improper estimation of self. Their self-esteem is too high. A correct estimation of themselves ethically would lead them to repentance and an endeavor to do what is right; and as a result of doing right, they would then begin to "feel" good about themselves.

In the ethical category, it is also possible to have a lower estimation of yourself than is proper. It is possible to view yourself as worthless and sinful because you have failed to do things that you are **not** required to do by God, or when you have done things that are not forbidden by God. A person may feel that he is responsible for things that God does not require of him, and as a result he may feel guilt that is not proper.

For example, many children of alcoholic parents are made to think that in some way they are responsible for their parent's irresponsible behavior. The child may be told that he is the one who is causing the stress that has driven his parent to abuse alcohol. If the child believes what he is told by his parent, he may feel that he is responsible and that if he were doing what he should, then the parent would not abuse alcohol. This, of course, is a false sense of guilt which has been imposed upon the child by the parent. Nevertheless, the child may have a low estimation of himself as a result. In this case, the child is thinking more lowly of himself than he ought. He is not thinking of himself as he ought to think. He is not

thinking of himself according to sound judgment. The Bible teaches that each individual is responsible for his own actions.

Sometimes a parent may be guilty of evil and deriding verbal abuse directed at his child. If a child is told that he is worthless and that everything he does is wrong, even when it is not, then that child may begin to think of himself more lowly than he ought. This would lead to a false estimation of himself or a "low self-esteem" that is unwarranted. Again the solution would be for the child to begin to think correctly about what his ethical requirements are according to the principles set forth in God's Word.

In order to think correctly about ourselves ethically, we must see ourselves as sinners in need of the forgiveness which the Lord Jesus Christ offers to all who will call upon Him in faith. When Christ is embraced in faith, the sinner is justified in God's sight. He is given the legal standing of righteousness in God's sight on the basis of Christ's work upon the cross. The Holy Spirit is given to those who trust Christ in order to enable them to what God requires. The standard for judging our self-esteem in this ethical category must always and ever be God's Word.

The Christian must always view himself as "in Christ." The Christian can deal honestly with his sin because he knows that Christ has already taken care of his sin; and that if he confesses his sin, the Lord will be faithful and just to forgive him of his sin and cleanse him of all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:9)

C. The Third Category Of Thought Is That Of Abilities, Skills, Or Gifts!

The third category is that of one's ability to function or to use his or her gifts and abilities. How should we think of ourselves with regard to our sense of being able to contribute something worthwhile in the lives of others? A person may have an exalted sense of his own abilities that is not in accord with reality. If this is the case, he is not thinking according to sound judgment. He has too high an estimation of himself in a functional sense.

On the other hand if a person is constantly told that he is worthless, (that is, that he is totally devoid of any gifts or talents by which he could make a contribution to the lives of others), and he believes it, then he could develop a low estimation of himself that is not according to sound judgment. It may be that some people do not want to venture out and try to use their abilities because they are afraid that they will fail. They do not want to face the embarrassment of failure, so they do not even try. Pride may be at the heart of this problem! This person may be thinking of himself too highly.

According to the Apostle Paul, we are to learn to think about ourselves correctly. There is no person created in the image of God who is totally devoid of gifts and abilities by which he can contribute to the lives of others. It is an evil and wicked thing for anyone to tell another person that they are worthless in this sense.

God has created us in His image, and as beings created in His image, we have gifts and abilities which are designed by Him to enable us to do meaningful work to His glory and honor.

Not all men are alike gifted. Some are possessed of great intellect and others have greater abilities to work with their hands. If a person thinks lowly of himself because he is not as smart as another person then he is not thinking correctly about himself. This "low self-esteem" should be corrected by learning

what gifts one does have and then functioning responsibly according to one's gifts.

If a person thinks that he is a better person than someone else because he has greater functional gifts, then he is thinking too highly of himself, and needs to learn that with greater gifts comes greater responsibility.

CONCLUSION:

The key is to learn to think correctly about oneself; to think so as to have sound judgment. Ontologically, every man is made in the image of God. Every man is a creature made to reflect the glory of his creator to all around him. Through the Lord Jesus Christ, we are enabled to fulfill this most noble and high calling.

Ethically, every man is called upon to obey God and live according to the principles set forth in His Word. When we do so by the power of the Holy Spirit in us, we are fulfilling our purpose in life and the Holy Spirit will fill our hearts with a peace that passes understanding. Of course, no Christian will ever obey God perfectly. Part of thinking correctly about oneself as a believer is to think about oneself as redeemed and forgiven by the work of Christ on the cross. When the Christian sins he must not give into the condemning accusations of Satan. The Apostle Paul reminds us that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. This should motivate the Christian to turn away from his sin and continue to walk in the light of fellowship with the Lord Jesus Christ.

Functionally, every man has been given some ability, gift, or talent that he can use in productive labor to aid the lives of others. When we think correctly about ourselves, we are able to discern what our gifts and abilities are and thank God for them, be they great or small. It is our joy and privilege as Christians to use our gifts and abilities so as to glorify God in all that we say and do.

Healthy "self-esteem" should be understood biblically as thinking correctly about oneself in all three categories: ontologically, ethically, and functionally. When we are thinking about ourselves correctly, according to sound judgment, then we can be at peace with our God and at peace with ourselves. Then we will think less about self and more about the Lord and others. Then it will be our joy to selflessly serve the Lord and bring glory and honor to our great God who creates us in His image, enables us to trust and obey Him, and endows us with gifts and abilities to serve Him.