

A RATIONALE FOR DISCUSSING SELF-ESTEEM

by Kenneth Williams, Ph.D.

“Is all this emphasis on self-esteem, self-love, self-acceptance and self-image really necessary? Is it even right to spend so much time on self?” These questions are legitimate and deserve thoughtful answers.

In American culture self is a major preoccupation. Our society constantly tempts us to be more concerned about ourselves than is spiritually and emotionally healthy. This is not true of many other cultures. For example, studies of Chuj (Mayan) culture in Guatemala show that Chuj people clearly do not focus on self, and so discussions related to self-esteem are unnecessary. Chuj people naturally accept who they are without question or even being consciously aware that they do it. I believe that this was largely true of cultures in Bible times also, and therefore these issues were not major areas of focus. However, God’s Word does give clear principles for how we should see and accept ourselves.

We address these issues in some depth in order to lay a biblical foundation for resolving some of the conflicts and misconceptions brought about by our self-centered culture. Self-esteem is primarily culturally defined, and in our culture we have been taught to have distorted views of ourselves; either too high or too low. Both views bring about excessive concerns and preoccupations about who we are.

As we grow in developing a healthy, biblical self-esteem we are able to lay to rest destructive feelings toward ourselves and not need to continually struggle with self-esteem issues. This reduces our tendency to focus on ourselves. Only then are we able to concentrate on loving God, loving others, and serving Him with minimum distraction. But to do this we must internalize God’s view of who we are and come to accept ourselves as He does.

Some Christian writers have attempted to deal with these issues by unduly emphasizing our goodness, our inherent value, and our need to feel good about ourselves. Others have overreacted to these excesses by condemning the self and all emphasis on loving and accepting our selves. Both extremes are unbiblical and potentially destructive.

The issue of self-love illustrates this. Some writers mistakenly say that the command to “love your neighbor as yourself” implies a command to love ourselves, which it does not. But other authors, reacting to this misinterpretation, say that all self-love is of the devil, and that self is our worst enemy. What does God say about it? His Word assumes that the normal person loves

himself with *agape* love. The Scriptures give at least eight references to loving ourselves in which self-love is seen as a positive value. The only negative reference to self-love is 2 Timothy 3:2, where *philautos* rather than *agape* is used, which carries the idea of “selfish” (Expositor’s Greek Testament). In Ephesians 5 the husband is commanded to love his wife “as Christ loved the church” and “as he loves himself.” It also says, “He who loves his wife loves himself,” implying that this is good.

We talk of the “self” as though it were a part of us. In the Greek, all biblical references translated “self” clearly indicate that the self is the total person. For example, to have self-love is to love the whole person for whom Christ died because of His great love for us. Is this unbiblical?

What does self-love in the biblical sense actually mean? The biblical use of *agape* implies a choice to work for the good of someone. Self-love means to work for our own good, and this “good” is biblically defined in terms of what pleases God. This eliminates pride, selfishness, indeed all sinful attitudes and actions. It means that to truly love our selves is to work for that which glorifies God in our life. It is to want for our selves what will produce the greatest eternal blessing.

This concept of self-love resolves some apparent conflicts in the Word. To love our selves requires that we deny self, for only in self-denial will we save our life and avoid losing it eternally (Luke 9:23-25). It means that we will “hate” our life in this world in order to “keep it for eternal life” (John 12:25). To truly love self means to be crucified with Christ so that He who loves us might live in us (Galatians 2:20). It means to consider our life worth nothing, if only we may finish the race (Acts 20:24). It requires that the only focus of our life be to love others as Christ loves us, with a self-sacrificing love (John 15:12,13). I submit that true biblical self-love is measured by our degree of Christ-likeness, which implies humble self-denial.

What about self-esteem? Is this concept biblical? There are no commands to esteem ourselves. In fact, Romans 12:3 says, “Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought.” But it goes on to say, “rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you.” It takes faith to see ourselves realistically, i.e., as He sees us.

The basis of our self-esteem is God’s work in our lives. He created us and severely warns us not to look down on His workmanship (Isaiah 45:9). He then re-created us as His work of art for the purpose of doing good works (Ephesians 2:10). While we can honestly esteem ourselves as His workmanship, our focus must be on His work and not on anything we have contributed. First Corinthians 4:7 and 2 Corinthians 4:7 emphasize this: “What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?” “But we have this

treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.” So our self-esteem must be immersed in humility, focused on God, and expressed in good works if it is to be truly biblical.

So, are we to spend time thinking about ourselves, and to consider the quality of our self-esteem? My answer is “Yes!” But our focus must be primarily on God and His work for, in and through us. This is a major focus in His Word. The N.T. gives us over two hundred positive descriptions of who we are and what we are like in Christ. I believe He gave us this teaching, first for His glory as we appreciate the scope of His grace, and secondly so that we can appreciate who we are in Christ, not in pride but in humble gratitude to Him.

As we grow in seeing ourselves as He sees us and in accepting ourselves as He accepts us, we will focus less and less on us and more and more on Him. This is the ultimate purpose of our efforts in this area, so that we might “live a life worthy of the Lord and may please Him in every way, bearing fruit in every good work, growing in our knowledge of God” (Colossians 1:10), and that we might continue to “fix our eyes on Jesus” (Hebrews 12:2).