

# Self-Esteem



## How Can I Feel Good About Myself?

The Christian Basis for  
Proper Self-Esteem

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## Foreword

"Nobody loves me ... Everybody hates me... I'm going down the garden to eat worms..."

I don't know where I first heard that little jingle. But it's a good one to sing at a pity-party, because it exposes a well-worn truth. If you can just find a way to corner people, stop them in their tracks, pin them down and make them honest, you soon discover that an embarrassingly high percentage of ordinary, capable, loveable human beings secretly don't like themselves very much. Or, in some cases, actually detest themselves.

Now, while I've never felt that bad about John Cooney, I have, I must

confess, wasted large chunks of my life feeling very disappointed in me. And I suspect you're no different—especially on bad-hair days.

We're all guilty, aren't we, of stinkin' thinkin'—"*Who am I? I'm no good at anything! I've tried, but nothing works! I could never do that! I wish I was someone else!*" And we could all use a once-a-month check-up from the neck up.

Which (you've guessed, haven't you?) is just what this booklet is intended to do ...

I have, on occasions, allowed myself to dream of a much more healthy world ... a world in which all people, from earliest childhood on, are taught that they're unique and one-of-a-kind. But then I'm reminded that life-changing truths like this aren't just taught—they're *caught!* And that I'll never convince anyone else (my wife, my kids, my grandkids, my friends) that *they're* special unless I'm deep-down convinced that *I* am.

So may the words on the pages that follow be therapy, and not just theory. And may they come alive for you and the people you're close to.

**John Cooney** Founder/editor, Grapevine magazine

## Part 1—Clearing the ground

### Introduction

In one of his *Grapevine* newsletters, Editor John Cooney quotes Stephen Glen, an advisor on child development to several US presidents. "The thing I celebrate every morning," writes Glen, "is the incredible capacity God has given us to rise above our past...rise above our parents...rise above our teachers...rise above our environment...and create whole new worlds of opportunity and possibility in every moment of our lives.

"But to avail ourselves of this," he says, "we must come to believe three things. Otherwise, that potential remains only potential:

"First, I must discover that **I'm a capable person** who can think and learn and change. I don't always have to follow what others do—but I can, through the grace of God, set a new course for myself once I believe that's possible.

"Second, I must believe that my existence counts for something...that I matter...that the life within me has some **significance** in the scheme of things - greater than just the daily task of surviving. The human being was created

with an unquenchable quest to find significance and meaning, a purpose somewhere in life. The human being is the only creature on this planet for whom the need to be needed, the need to have a purpose in life, is greater than our will to survive. We're the only creature we know of who will become anorexic, suicidal, literally give up the will to live, if we believe our lives don't matter anywhere to anyone.

"Third, I must believe that, although I can't always determine what happens to me in life, **I can always determine how I let that affect me.** And there is, in the end, much I can do through my actions, choices, prayers, commitments and faith to ultimately influence the events of my life—I am not a passive victim of fate, luck or circumstance."

I am sure that all my readers would agree with those statements. Wouldn't it be great if we all had this sort of self-esteem? And yet, sadly, it seems as if a large proportion of today's society struggles with the problem of a low self-image. Glen himself says, "The challenge we face is how to re-establish these beliefs in a generation of kids who doubt them more than any other generation in history." Dr. John Sturt, a well-known New Zealand doctor and counsellor, says that probably 80% of Kiwis have a problem in this area. A woman operator at a secular youth centre in New Plymouth tells how they have had to take down all the mirrors. She says, "People complain that kids these days won't look at them in the eye. Kids who come here can't even look at themselves in the eye."

Norman Vincent Peale, in *Power of the Plus Factor*, tells how he came across a tattoo studio in Kowloon in Hong Kong. In the window, among samples of words or images one could have tattooed on one's body, were the words *Born to lose*. Peal says:

*I entered the shop in astonishment and, pointing to those words, asked the Chinese tattoo artist, "Does anyone really have that terrible phrase, **Born to lose**, tattooed on his body?"*

*He replied, "Yes, sometimes."*

*"But," I said, "I just can't believe that anyone in his right mind would do that."*

*The Chinese man simply tapped his forehead and said in broken English, "Before tattoo on body, tattoo on mind."*

One French philosophy student expressed it like this:

*God is dead,  
Marx is dead,  
And I don't feel too good myself either.*

## Results of low self-esteem

Most of our feelings about ourselves are built into us in childhood. If we were fortunate to have loving parents who conveyed our worth in their relationship to us, and if we grew up in a safe environment with positive relationships with peers, teachers and role models, then it is likely we will feel reasonably good about ourselves. However, if faced with negative influences in childhood, it may not take much to tip the balance the other way. A recent study of 15,600 American school students, grades 6 to 10, showed that bullying is widespread in their schools. Duane Alexander, director of the research, says, "People who were bullied as children are more likely to suffer from depression and low self-esteem, well into adulthood." Whatever the causes of low self-esteem, the effect on our future lives can be very significant.

In her book *Your Child's Self-Esteem*, Dorothy Corkville Briggs, educator and child counsellor, says:

*Your child's judgment of himself influences the kinds of friends he chooses, how he gets along with others, the kind of person he marries, and how productive he will be. It affects his creativity, integrity, stability, and even whether he will be a leader or follower. His feelings of self-worth form the core of his personality and determine the use he makes of his aptitudes and abilities. His attitude towards himself has a direct bearing on how he lives all parts of his life. In fact, self-esteem is the mainspring that slates every child for success or failure as a human being.*

Stephen Covey, in *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, tells a classic story of how people's attitudes towards us can affect our view of ourselves, and consequently our behaviour, particularly so when we are young. In a school in England a computer was accidentally programmed incorrectly. In academic terms, it labelled a class of 'bright' children 'dumb' and a class of supposedly 'dumb' children 'bright'. That computer report was the primary criterion used by the teachers for their teaching programme with the children at the beginning of the year.

When the school administration finally discovered the mistake five and a half months later, they decided to test the children again without telling anyone what had happened. The results were amazing. The 'bright' children had gone down significantly in IQ test points. They had been seen and treated as mentally limited, uncooperative and difficult to teach. The teacher's perceptions had become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

But scores in the supposedly 'dumb' group had gone up. The teachers had treated them as though they were bright, and their energy, their hope,

their optimism, their excitement had reflected high individual expectations and worth for those children.

No doubt there are other factors at work in society that contribute to the low value we put upon ourselves. As Arnold Toynbee put it, technology demotes persons into serial numbers, "punched on a card and designed to travel through the entrails of a computer." Ethnologists like Desmond Morris tell us that human beings are nothing but animals, and behaviourists like B. F. Skinner say that we are nothing but machines programmed to make automatic responses to external stimuli. But whatever the reason, the effects on our lives become only too obvious. Joan Lloyd Guest, in an article *Feeling Worthless...and How to Get Over It*, in HIS magazine says:

*Low self-esteem is destructive. It can affect all aspects of our lives: it can contribute to our fear of rejection (which causes us to avoid closeness); make us respond to loved ones with anger and defensiveness; keep us from communicating our true feelings; keep us isolated, unable to be vulnerable; and affect our physical health by causing digestive disorders or high blood pressure.*

*Worse yet, a poor self-image often feeds a vicious circle. The very things we do because we feel worthless tend to make us less desirable to friends and family, thereby cutting us off from the warmth we desperately seek. This cycle can spin a person into a deep depression.*

Well-known Anglican minister, David Watson, quoted one student psychiatrist who had spent many years dealing with militants, radicals and extremists, who said, "Psychologically I have found most student extremists hating themselves as intensely as they hate the establishment."

Though it is risky to generalise, and low self-esteem is a problem that has no regard for a person's gender, it may be a larger problem for women. Missionary wife Jean Boardman said that she had met very few self-assured women anywhere in the world. She called this low self-esteem the biggest block in the Christian life. Women, she said, see themselves in relationship to others. They are by nature the nurturers, but they face the danger of placing too much emphasis on the way others see them. It is significant that, according to results of a survey reported in *The Week*, (put "*The Week*" in italics) in 2000, 72,000 women in the UK had plastic surgery in pursuit of youth and beauty. One in three women admit to having considered surgery and NatWest say that a fifth of all bank loans are taken out to pay for cosmetic surgery.

## **Two kinds of self-love**

Before going further it would be well to look at the question of what proper self-esteem, or self-love really is. When Jesus was asked what the greatest moral commandment was, he replied by quoting two commands from the Old Testament. **“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself”** (Matthew 22:37-39). Many have understood this second commandment as including a command to love ourselves. However, this is a misreading of what it actually says. We are not commanded to love our neighbour *and* ourselves, but *as* ourselves. In other words, the statement naturally assumes that we have a certain desire for our own wellbeing, and the command is to have an equal concern for the wellbeing of others. Self-love is not a virtue that Scripture commends, but one of the facts of our humanity that it recognises and tells us to use as a standard. So what should this concern for our own wellbeing entail?

To get a proper perspective it is necessary to look at the nature of human beings as God created us. In the two booklets *God’s Vision for His Family the Church* and *Who Am I? Finding My True Identity as a Human Being and as a Child of God* I have explained in some detail the biblical picture of the nature of God and of people. God is a relational being, existing from eternity as three persons, Father, Son and Spirit, in loving relationship with one another. In creating us in his likeness (Genesis 1:26, 27), God also made us relational beings, intended to exist in a loving relationship with him and with one another as additional members of his family. Our true wellbeing will come from sorting out those relationships. In the second of those two booklets I have also looked in some detail at the fallenness of our human nature. In turning away from God we have become centred upon ourselves rather than upon God and others. It is this inversion of our true nature, what we were intended to be, that is the cause of all our problems, our problems with ourselves and our problems with others.

If this picture, given to us in the Bible, is an accurate one, then it stands to reason that any idea of self-love or self-esteem that does not get us turned around and cause us to be as equally concerned for others’ wellbeing as for our own is not going to be in our own best interest. Neither, may I say, will it be in the interest of others. In other words, a self-love that leads to *selfishness* is not going to do me any good. However, a proper self-esteem that leaves me feeling comfortable with who I am and frees me to give myself in service to God and to others, is the kind of self-esteem we are looking for. This booklet is written on the assumption that the view of human beings given in the Bible is an accurate one, and therefore any view of self-esteem that does

not include being turned around and getting into a loving relationship with God and others will achieve nothing of lasting value.

It is in this respect that we see the weak spot in the psychological theories of such well-known psychiatrists as Fromm, Maslow and Carl Rogers. Fromm, in his well-known book *The Art of Loving*, concludes, by various social and vaguely historical arguments, that the God professed by Christian theology is an illusion. He completely neglects the major body of Christian writing on love. Maslow, in his major work *Motivation and Personality*, discusses love between the sexes, but has no discussion of Christian love. Carl Rogers, in his best-known contribution to personality theory and psychotherapy *On Becoming a Person*, has no treatment of love at all! Where love is defined, it tends to be 'simply as the fulfilment of the patient's emotional requirements' rather than in terms of a person subordinating 'his needs and interest to those of others, to someone...outside himself' (to quote Lasch's critique in *The Culture of Narcissism* of the conception of love that is common among modern-day 'therapists'). *Agape* love (from the Greek word used of Christian love in the New Testament), on the other hand, always includes the ingredients of sacrifice and service on behalf of another.

In fact, this is the major weakness of the whole human potential movement. Peter Marin, in his article *The New Narcissism*, argues that the 'worldview emerging among us' centres 'solely on the self' and goes on to show how the new therapies spawned by this movement teach that 'the individual will is all powerful and totally determines one's fate' so intensifying the 'isolation of the self'.

Walter Trobisch, in his book *Love Yourself*, sums up the two kinds of self-love like this:

*One difficulty lies in the fact that the word self-love has a double meaning. It can mean self-acceptance as well as self-centredness. Along the same line Joseph Piper in his essay "Zucht und Mass" stresses, "there are two opposing ways in which a man can love himself: selflessly or selfishly. Only the first is self-preserving, while the second is self-destroying."*

*An example of self-love in the negative sense is illustrated by the Greek myth about Narcissus. He was a youth who, while gazing at his reflection in a well, fell in love with himself. Totally engrossed with his own image he tumbled into the water and drowned. From this myth the word narcissism is derived.*

The problem is that if we do not feel comfortable with who we are, then we will spend more time focusing on ourselves, trying to find our true identity, searching for satisfaction and meaning. Self-doubt, or worse, self-hatred, invariably leads to self-centredness.



A different problem is the tendency to think too much of ourselves. A. W. Tozer, in *The Pursuit of God*, writes:

*The labour of self-love is a heavy one indeed. Think for yourself whether much of your sorrow has not arisen from someone speaking slightly of you. As long as you set yourself up as a little god to which you must be loyal there will be those who will delight to offer affront to your idol. How then can you hope to have inward peace? The heart's fierce effort to protect itself from every slight, to shield its touchy honour from the bad opinion of friend and enemy, will never let the mind have rest.*

And, as Samuel Johnson once said, "He who overvalues himself will undervalue others, and he who undervalues others will suppress them."

Dennis Voskuil, a Reformed thinker who has written thoughtfully about Robert Schuller's positive thinking, states this in Christian terms. He says that the refreshing gospel promise is

*not that we have been freed by Christ to love ourselves, but that we have been freed from self-obsession. Not that the cross frees us **for** the ego trip but that the cross frees us **from** the ego trip.*

This freedom allows us to value our gifts and who we are, and at the same time to value our neighbour and their gifts with equal honesty. We can accept who we are without either vanity or self-depreciation. True self-esteem is free of self-delusion and self-congratulation. True humility is not thinking less of ourselves than what we are, but not needing to focus on ourselves at all because we are comfortable with ourselves and our focus is elsewhere.

Dale Ryan of Bethel Theological Seminary, in an article *Self-Esteem: an Operational Definition and Ethical Analysis*, says that true self-esteem is always accompanied by humility. He offers the following table as to how true self-esteem behaves in comparison with low self-esteem:

	High Self-Esteem and Humility	Low Self-Esteem and Arrogance
Framework for Interpreting Life-Events	Empathy	Self-Absorption
Motivation	Contentment	Anxiety
Response to Praise and Criticism	Honesty	Dishonesty
Response to Risks of		

Intimacy	Courage	Fear
Source	Grace	Legalism

Another model which some may find useful is the four stages in our growth in loving God and others as ourselves suggested by St. Bernard in the twelfth century. The first stage is *love of self for self*, which he assumes to be natural and good, unless it runs to excess, when it should be controlled by the command to love one's neighbour. The second stage is *love of God for what he gives*. This is loving God for his many blessings, forgiveness, love, comfort, guidance and so on. The third stage is *love of God for what he is*. In this stage God is loved purely for himself, because we "know how gracious the Lord is." Here he finds "no difficulty in obeying the command to love our neighbour. The man who loves like this loves truly; and in so doing he loves the things of God. He loves purely and without self-interest." The final stage is *love of one's self for God's sake*, that is, loving oneself as God loves every person.

A balanced perspective is given by David Myers and Malcolm Jeeves, both Professors of Psychology, in their book *Psychology Through the Eyes of Faith*. They write:

*To be self-affirming yet self-forgetful, positive yet realistic, grace-filled and unpretentious — that is the Christian vision of abundant life.*

Having explored what we mean by a proper self-esteem, let's look at the problem of how we can find it.

## Part 2—The basis of a proper self-esteem

### The creation of a loving God

According to Paul Vitz, the distinguished author of *Psychology as Religion: The Cult of Self-worship*, self-esteem is "primarily an emotional response to what we have done, and to what others have done to us." If self-esteem is primarily an *emotional* response, how can we find a view of ourselves that can help us to rise above all the negative influences that life may have dished up to us?" The place to begin is to grasp some *understanding* of who we really are and our true place in this universe.

The starting point for a Christian view of the value of all human beings is the doctrine of creation. We were thought up and brought into being by a loving God who created us "**in his own image**" (Genesis 1:27). Though we are not divine as some New Age religions suggest, we nevertheless have

divine characteristics that give us a value way beyond the rest of creation. God created us with the ability to live in a loving relationship with himself, a relationship that can extend through all the endless ages of eternity. This means that we have great potential to grow and develop all the unique qualities that have been given to each of us. The Psalmist catches something of the wonder of this as he contemplates the vastness of God's creation:

**When I consider your heavens,  
 the work of your fingers,  
 the moon and the stars,  
 which you have set in place,  
 what is man that you are mindful of him,  
 the son of man that you care for him?  
 You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings  
 and crowned him with glory and honour.  
 You made him ruler over the works of your hands;  
 you put everything under his feet...  
 O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth.**

(Psalm 8:3-6,9).

Of course, this gives us a much greater value than other views of human beings that are common today, such as the view that we are nothing but a programmed machine (behaviourists) or an absurdity (existentialists) or a naked ape (humanistic evolutionists).

I don't think I have come across a better statement of the Christian view of the value of humans than one given by Ron Sider in an article in *Christianity Today*. He says:

*Every part of God's creation is very good and very special because it results from the loving design of Almighty God...As persons created in the divine image we are very special. The dignity and worth of every human being flows from the divine decree, not human decision. Our essential dignity does not come from government fiat, social usefulness, or self-actualisation. It comes from the Creator of the galaxies who selected human beings alone out of the almost infinite multitudes of the created order to bear the divine image. No matter how poor and defenceless, old and weak, crippled and deformed, young and helpless, human beings enjoy a God-given worth and dignity that sets them apart from the rest of creation.*

Or, to make it a little more personal, as Paul Murrell put it in *Decision Magazine*:

I am in awe.  
 God  
 thought of  
 thunder, wind, oceans,  
 eclipses, auroras,

continents, ice caps,  
stars, moons,  
the universe,  
and me.

As one young victim of prejudice insisted, “I’m me and I’m good ‘cause God don’t make junk.”

History gives ample evidence that it is this truth more than anything else, wherever the gospel of God’s love and grace has taken root in human communities, that has enabled men and women to find the dignity to rise above their oppressive environment, to fight for justice and to work for the betterment of society.

And because God loves diversity, as we see all around us on this amazing planet earth, he created us in such a way that each of us would be unique. He designed the human DNA with its 3.1 billion sub-units, those bits that determine our personal characteristics, in such a way that there is no chance that two of us could be the same. There is one chance in 64 billion that someone will have the same fingerprint as you. There are many people who will be much more talented than you in many areas of life, but there is no one on this planet that has the unique combination of qualities that you have. In *One of a Kind*, Blaine Smith writes about his experience of going to seminary. He was proud of his intellectual ability and his musical talents. But when he got to seminary, he realised that those talents were not as exceptional as he had thought. There he found people who were both better students and better musicians. He realised that it wasn’t any one particular talent but his *unique combination of traits* which made him who he was.

John Cooney, in one of his *Grapevine* newsletters, captures this brilliantly with an item he found and rewrote many years ago (original author unknown):

***YOU’RE REALLY SPECIAL!*** *You really are! In all the world there’s no one like you. Never has been. Never will be.*

*No one has your eyes, your nose, your hair, your hands, your voice, your smile. You’re special!*

*No one anywhere has exactly your handwriting, exactly your fingerprints, exactly your tastes in food or music or TV. Since the beginning of time, there’s been no one who laughs like you, no one who cries like you, no one who sees things just the way you do. You’re special.*

*Look, you’re the only one on this planet who’s got your set of abilities. Sure there’ll always be someone who’s better at some of the things you’re good at—but no one in the entire universe has your unique combination of talents and skills, dreams and feelings.*

*No one else through all eternity will ever look, talk, walk, think or do the way you do. You're special. You're rare. And like anything that's rare, you're valuable.*

*That's why you don't need to copy your friends. You can accept—yeah, you can celebrate—your differences! You can risk being yourself.*

*Hey, you're no ACCIDENT. God made you special for a very special purpose. He's got a job for you that no one else can do as well. Out of all the billions of applicants, only one is qualified. Only one has what it takes.*

*That one is YOU...because you're special!*

I may be a little odd, but that's no hassle, for God loves odd things. Walter Trobisch, in his book *Love Yourself*, tells how many of his African friends find it easier to accept themselves as they are than many westerners. He says:

*I am reminded of one of my best friends, an African man, who is rather short. A well-meaning person once suggested to him that he wear shoes with higher heels in order to appear taller.*

*This was almost an offence to my friend. Hadn't God made him short? Why should he seek to change what God had created. He had accepted himself as he was, and loved himself with his height. I am sure that this complete self-acceptance is one of the reasons he can be such a good friend to me.*

I am reminded of a delightful story told of the British Prime Minister, David Lloyd George. He was introduced by the chairman of a meeting who said jokingly, "I had expected to find Mr. Lloyd George a big man in every sense, but you see for yourselves he is quite small in stature." Lloyd George replied, "In North Wales we measure a man from his chin up. You evidently measure from his chin down." We must learn to play the hand we have been dealt, not the one we think we should have been dealt.

George MacDonald once said:

*I would rather be what God chose to make me than the most glorious creature that I could think of; for to have been thought about, born in God's thought, and then made by God, is the dearest, grandest and most precious thing in all thinking."*

David caught something of the wonder of this in one of his Psalms:

**You created my inmost being;  
 you knit me together in my mother's womb.  
 I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;  
 your works are wonderful,  
 I know that full well.  
 My frame was not hidden from you**

when I was made in the secret place.  
 When I was woven together in the depths of the earth,  
 your eyes saw my unformed body.  
 All the days ordained for me  
 were written in your book  
 before one of them came to be.  
 How precious to me are your thoughts, O God!

(Psalm 139:13-17)

Shakespeare got it right when he wrote: "Who can say more than this rich praise, that you alone are you?" You are a divine original, not a cheap copy. When God had made you he broke the mould.

### The focus of divine love

There is another reason, even more important, as to why I am of infinite value. This God, who planned my existence and brought it into being, loves me with a passionate love. This is the major theme of the Bible. It begins in the Garden of Eden when God goes searching for a disobedient and lost couple. It culminates on the cross of Calvary where the Son of God pours out his life for a rebellious and lost humanity.

The Bible takes the question of our sin and moral accountability to God seriously. He is a God of justice who will judge evil. But against this backdrop is the incredible love of God who was willing to come into this world in the person of his Son<sup>1</sup>, and take upon himself the full penalty for all our sins. **"God showed how much he loved us by having Christ die for us, even though we were sinful"** (Romans 5:8). He not only died, but rose again, demonstrating his victory over sin and death, and today reigns as Lord. When we accept Jesus Christ as our own personal Saviour and Lord, then we receive total forgiveness and reconciliation. The third person of the divine Trinity, the Holy Spirit, comes into our lives and brings us into an experience of this love from the greatest Lover in the universe. **"God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us"** (Romans 5:5). It is not something we can earn by good behaviour, but a gift freely given, to be received by faith.

Canon Michael Green, in *New Testament Spirituality*, says:

*We are a delight to God. He desires us. He seeks our fellowship. Were it needed, he would die again for us. We never know ourselves to be truly loved until we know ourselves to be loved by God.*

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<sup>1</sup> I have examined in some detail the Biblical evidence for the Trinity, and the full divinity of Jesus Christ, in the booklet *Understanding the Trinity*.

It is this love that gives us true value. Anthony Hoekema is surely right, in his excellent little work *The Christian Looks at Himself*, that “the ultimate basis for our positive self-image must be God’s acceptance of us in Christ.” Theologian Helmut Thielicke says it well:

*[Human] greatness rests solely on the fact that God in his incomprehensible goodness has bestowed his love upon [us]. God does not love us because we are so valuable; we are valuable because God loves us.*

Someone has expressed it this way:

If God had a refrigerator, your picture would be on it.  
 If God had a wallet, your photo would be in it.  
 He sends you flowers every spring and a sunrise every morning.  
 He could live anywhere in the universe and he chose your heart.

This love does not require some kind of logical proof. It has been demonstrated once for all, for the world to see, through the cross of Christ and may be experienced through personal commitment to him. It is this that gives each human being infinite value. As Archbishop William Temple expressed it:

*My worth is what I am worth to God, and that is a marvellous great deal, because Christ died for me.*

It is the infinite value of the price paid for your forgiveness that gives you infinite value as an individual. **“It was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life...but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect...Through him you believe in God, who raised him from the dead and glorified him, and so your faith and hope are in God”** (1 Peter 1:18-21). And God does not make foolish investments!

Frederica Mathews-Green in *Christianity Today* tells the story of Deb, a lass who possessed low self-esteem. She had submitted to her boyfriend’s demands for sex, concluding that “without him, I’m nothing.” One demand led to another, and she gave in again when “he forced me to have an abortion.” It seemed the best course—she was a teenager, had no high-school diploma, and her boyfriend was facing cocaine charges.

They eventually married, then went through a radical transformation after a faith conversion. “Self-esteem can’t come from anywhere but Jesus,” Deb says: “He will love you in spite of your failings. If your self-worth is based on your looks, your parents’ love, the sense that you’re great, it will fail. All that will pass.”

As we grow in this faith, and begin to find out what the message of the New Testament is all about, so will our awareness grow of all that we have

been given in Jesus. In *New Testament Spirituality*, Michael Green tells how years ago he came across an anonymous sheet of paper describing Jesus as “My Best Friend”. It read as follows:

*He initiated our friendship.  
 He loves me unconditionally.  
 He believes the best about me.  
 He is always available when I need him.  
 He desires the very best for me, knowing what that is, and leads me towards it,  
 sometimes through difficult paths, but always supporting me and staying  
 close to me.  
 He never gives up on me.  
 He brings out my spontaneity and enjoys me.  
 He allows me to be free to come and go, never forces, never controls, never  
 manipulates.  
 He values me as a person and not merely for what I can do for him.  
 He opens up opportunities for me to know his other friends.*

Joe Kent tells in *Decision* magazine how he battled for years with low self-esteem, due to much ridicule he received in school. He says, “My self-esteem was shipwrecked long before I reached puberty.” Now, despite being a Christian for eighteen years he still has a struggle. However, with his understanding of the gospel and encouragement of Christian friends, he is learning to cope with it. He writes:

*I constantly tell myself that I am “deeply loved, fully pleasing, totally forgiven, accepted, and complete in Christ.”...God is healing my wounds. I have learned that receiving God’s approval is all that counts. The battle still rages, but God is right there in the midst of my struggle, carrying me through it. I believe that “with God all things are possible” [Cf. Mark 10:27]—and that includes healing my low self-esteem!*

There are two fairytales that wonderfully capture these truths. The first is the tale Rapunzel, the story of a young girl imprisoned in a tower with an old witch. She is, indeed, very beautiful, but the witch constantly tells her she is ugly. It is the witch’s strategy to keep the girl in the tower, imprisoned within herself. The moment of her freedom comes one day when she is gazing from the window of the tower. At the base of the tower stands her Prince Charming. She throws her hair, long and beautiful gold tresses, out the window and he braids the hair into a ladder and climbs up to rescue her. Rapunzel’s imprisonment is really not of the tower, but the fear of her own ugliness which the witch described so often and so effectively. However, when Rapunzel sees in the mirroring eyes of her lover that she is beautiful, she is freed from the real tyranny of her imagined ugliness.

The second tale is the musical *Man of La Mancha*. It’s a beautiful story about a medieval knight who meets a woman of the street, a prostitute. She’s being confirmed in her life-style by all the people in her life.



But this poet-knight sees something else in her, something beautiful and lovely. He also sees her virtue, and he affirms it, over and over again. He gives her a new name—Dulcinea—a new name associated with a new character.

At first, she utterly denies it: her old scripts are overpowering. She writes him off as a wild-eyed fantasiser. But he is persistent. He makes continual deposits of unconditional love and gradually it penetrates her understanding of herself. It goes down into her true nature, her potential, and she starts to respond. Little by little, she begins to change her life-style. She believes it and she acts from her new character, to the initial dismay of everyone else in her life.

Later, when she begins to revert to her old character, he calls her to his deathbed and sings that beautiful song, “The Impossible Dream,” looks her in the eyes, and whispers, “Never forget, you’re Dulcinea.”

When you respond to the love offered you in Christ and submit your life to him, a miracle takes place. You not only receive total forgiveness, but a new character by the presence of the Holy Spirit within you. The apostle Paul puts it like this, “**you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator**” (Colossians 3:9, 10). As you grow in the awareness of this transformation and the experience of his love, more and more old habits will drop off and you will begin to reflect your new character. Whatever else people may think of you or say about you, God now sees you as a beloved member of his family and anticipates the beauty of all he intends to make you through the transforming work of his Spirit. His purpose is that we should be “**transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory**” (2 Corinthians 3:18). We may not know the end result, but God does. “**What we will be has not yet been seen. But we do know that when Christ returns, we will be like him, because we will see him as he truly is. This hope makes us keep ourselves holy, just as Christ is holy**” (1 John 3:2, 3)<sup>1</sup>. It is knowing who I am in Christ that leads to a proper self-esteem.

### **Worth a great deal, though unworthy**

At this point it might be helpful to look at the difference between *worth* and *worthy*. All human beings have broken the laws of God and in that sense we are all unworthy. “**All of us have sinned and fallen short of God’s glory**” (Romans 3:23). However, no human beings are worthless. All are valued by God and may be redeemed if they will put their trust in Jesus.

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<sup>1</sup> I have explored further what it means to be a son or daughter of God in the booklet *Who Am I? Finding My True Identity as a Human Being and as a Child of God*.

How we view ourselves will depend to some extent on the moral choices we have made. Ravi Zacharias, a well-known Christian apologist, tells in *A Shattered Visage* the story of a businessman who described to him his memories of a life morally mangled. This man said:

*It started with my imagination that reinforced certain wrong desires. Then having made repeated choices that were clearly wrong, in betrayal after betrayal I convinced myself that what I had indulged in I needed. The more I convinced myself that I needed it, I soon redefined who I was as a person. Now, as I look at what I have become, I can no longer live with myself. I hate who I am. I am emotionally running, but I do not know where to go.*

The problem is that, to some extent, we have *all* made morally wrong choices. However, the wonderful message of God's amazing grace is that once we have repented, turned to Christ, and received his total forgiveness purchased for us by his death on the cross, we are both fully accepted and unconditionally loved. Though we continue to struggle with right and wrong as God begins to work on us, we are fully valued as *persons*. Edward Dayton and Ted Engstrom, in *Strategy for Living*, put it like this:

*The reason the Christian can pursue the goal of excellence is because his failure to achieve is not a reflection on his person. That is established. We are not measured in God's sight by our successes or our failures.*

God's grace (his *undeserved* goodness given us in Christ) humbles us by fully recognising our wickedness, yet does so without degrading us as it still declares our infinite value. At the same time it exalts us without inflating us, as it does not avoid the issue of our sin.

A good story illustrating the transforming power of God's grace is that told by Russell McGuiness in a recent issue of *Challenge*. Russell began committing professional robberies when he was 11 years old. Suffering from low self-esteem and with a family background that he likens to the white version of *Once Were Warriors*, he says he only ventured into crime to get attention. He felt it was something he could do well at—a skill that might finally give him the admiration and approval of his peers. In the 1970s he says he was on the police's most wanted burglar list, earning himself the nickname of the "Rubber Man." However, through living for some years with a devout Christian couple, his life went through a radical transformation and he was baptised in 1985, eventually becoming a staff member of YWAM (Youth With A Mission). However, he says, "I did a lot of church stuff because I still needed approval and recognition and the desire to be loved." The real change came in his life with a revelation of God's grace. He says, "It was sometime in 1997 that I realised the love of God as a father. I had a revelation of God's acceptance of me, just as me! It enveloped my

whole being. I didn't need to earn God's love or approval." He is now pastor at the Pakuranga Apostolic Church which he has called House of Grace.

To get a proper balance it is important to note that the New Testament not only speaks of our value and our natural *love of ourselves*, but also commands us to *deny ourselves*. I have not read a more balanced description of these seeming opposites than that given by the Anglican scholar and pastor, John Stott, in an article 'Am I supposed to love myself or hate myself?' in *Christianity Today*. I shall quote him at some length:

*What we are (our personal identity) is partly the result of the Creation (the image of God), and partly the result of the Fall (the image defaced). The self we are to deny, disown, and crucify is our fallen self, everything within us that is incompatible with Jesus Christ (hence Christ's command, "let him deny himself and follow me"). The self we are to affirm and value is our created self, everything within us that is compatible with Jesus Christ (hence his statement that if we lose ourselves by self-denial we shall find ourselves). True self-denial (the denial of our false, fallen self) is not the road to self-destruction, but the road to self-discovery.*

*So, then, whatever we are by creation, we must affirm: our rationality, our sense of moral obligation, our masculinity and femininity, our aesthetic appreciation and artistic creativity, our stewardship of the fruitful earth, our hunger for love and community, our sense of the transcendent mystery of God, and our inbuilt urge to fall down and worship him. All this is part of our created humanness. True, it has all been tainted and twisted by sin. Yet Christ came to redeem and not destroy it. So we must affirm it.*

*But whatever we are by the Fall, we must deny or repudiate: our irrationality; our moral perversity; our loss of sexual distinctiveness; our fascination with the ugly; our lazy refusal to develop God's gifts; our pollution and spoliation of the environment; our selfishness, malice, individualism, and revenge, which are destructive of human community; our proud autonomy; and our idolatrous refusal to worship God. All this is part of our fallen humanness. Christ came not to redeem this but to destroy it. So we must deny it.*

Stott adds the perceptive thought that it is the cross of Christ that teaches us both attitudes. On one hand it is the measure of the value of our true self since Christ died for us. On the other hand, it is the model for the denial of our false self, since we are to nail it to the cross and put it to death. (See Romans 8:13; Galatians 5:24).

Perhaps a true balance was given by a rabbi who put it like this:

*A man should carry two stones in his pocket. On one should be inscribed, 'I am but dust and ashes.' On the other, 'For my sake was the world created.' And he should use each stone as he needs it.*

It is this awareness of both our value to God, and our moral weaknesses which we share with all humanity (which should make us kind to ourselves and to others) that enables us to have a realistic opinion of ourselves. We don't need to put ourselves down. It is dishonouring to God to denigrate what he has made or the gifts he has given us. At the same time, we can't think of ourselves as better or more important than others. Paul says, **"I tell each of you not to think you are better than you really are. Use good sense and measure yourself by the amount of faith God has given you"** (Romans 12:3). J. B. Phillips translates this verse as, **"Have a sane estimate of your capabilities."** The Living Bible says, **"Be honest in your estimate of yourselves."** After all, God designed the human body so that we can neither pat our own back nor kick ourselves too easily! We also need to recognise and develop for his glory the gifts God has given to each of us.

And in order to feel comfortable with ourselves we need to be *growing* as Christians. We need to grow in allowing the Holy Spirit to do his work in transforming our character. Paul says that **"God's Spirit makes us loving, happy, peaceful, patient, kind, good, faithful, gentle and self-controlled"** (Galatians 5:22, 23). We also need to grow in our relationship to Jesus and our love and gratitude to him. Peter says, **"Let the kindness and the understanding that come from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ help you to keep on growing"** (2 Peter 3:18).

## Conclusion

Some time ago I came across a poem entitled *The Man in the Glass* in a booklet published by Alcoholics Anonymous. It goes as follows:

When you get what you want in your struggle for self  
And the world makes you king for a day,  
Just go to a mirror and look at yourself  
And see what THAT man has to say.

For it isn't your father or mother or wife  
Who judgment upon you must pass;  
The fellow whose verdict counts most in you life  
Is the one staring back from the glass.

Some people may think you a straight-shooting chum  
And call you a wonderful guy,  
But the man in the glass says you're only a bum  
If you can't look him straight in the eye.

He's the fellow to please, never mind all the rest,  
 For he's with you clear up to the end.  
 And you've passed your most dangerous, difficult test  
 If the man in the glass is your friend.

You may fool the whole world down the pathway of life  
 And get pats on your back as you pass,  
 But your final reward will be heartaches and tears  
 If you've cheated the man in the glass.

The glorious message of the gospel is that whatever your past may have been, or however many negative thoughts you may think about yourself, Jesus can change all that. He offers total forgiveness and a fresh start. He can begin changing you from the inside out so that you begin to feel OK, if not with that person you are, at least with the person you are becoming. He can develop your potential and give you a ministry to others that gives you a sense that your life is counting for something that will last. He will give you the assurance that one day his work on you will be complete and that you will know the greatest joy possible as you serve and worship him in his eternal kingdom.

I like good stories. I will finish with three of them. The first was told by Bill Young, a prison worker in Auckland, in *Challenge* weekly. He had met a bank robber whose father, a policeman, had tossed him a penny and told him, "This is you. You are the original bad penny and it's all you will ever be worth." Bill says:

*That happened to my friend when he was 15 and after that he was in and out of every prison in New Zealand and Australia for the next 20 years. But one day he gave me the penny, which I now have mounted in my office—he told me he didn't need it any more and today that man has gone straight.*

The second story is told by Ernest Jealous in his book *Gold in the Morning Sun*. It is the story of Ralph Webster. He was a young man, very strong and daring, with a reputation many envied. But he had lived for ill-gotten gain, enjoying the excitement of wits criminally pitted against society, law and authority. One day he stood in court as the magistrate said to him, "I have listened with much sorrow to this record of your life, and I've come to the conclusion that you are a piece of wasted humanity: you must go to prison again..."

Though he was proud of the fact that they had never managed to cow him by these repeated prison sentences, on this occasion those words "*a piece of wasted humanity*" burned themselves into his soul. He came out of prison in a more serious frame of mind and then he heard the message of the gospel—"Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. He is able to

**save them to the uttermost that come to God by Him**" (1 Timothy 1:15; Hebrews 7:25). And Ralph Webster came. He prayed; he wept—and the iron door of his heart opened to the love of God, as flowers open to the sun. He knew he was waste no longer.

The change in his life was radical. His companions were now the people of God, and, whereas he had carried such evil into the daily life of the neighbourhood, he now carried the grace of Christ. People who had once scorned him came to respect him for the integrity of his public and private life. He became a preacher of the gospel and a successful businessman. Before many years he had a lovely home in the same road as the magistrate who had sent him to prison and they became friends. One of his delights was to open his home to the evangelists of the Open-Air Mission of London and join them in telling the crowds on the racecourse "how great things the Lord had done for him" when they came for their race-week campaign.

One day the magistrate fell ill. It was serious; he knew that he was approaching the end of life's journey. Feeling the need of spiritual counsel, he sent a message, "Would Mr. Webster come up to the house and pray with me?" It was some time later, in the privacy of the sickroom that Ralph Webster had the joy of leading to Christ the very magistrate who, in committing him to prison, had once described him as a piece of wasted humanity.

The third story is told by Bob Gass, Georgia, U.S.A. It was told to him by a pastor, Clinton White. It concerns a remarkable man, a black surgeon in New York. This man told Clinton that he once suffered from ghetto-head! He described it as

*the oldest disease in my race. I was born in a ghetto! Despair was my constant companion; every day it told me **the system is stacked against you.** I'm one of 13 children. We lived on the fifth floor of a run down tenement. The street I played in was full of pushers, pimps, and prostitutes; men died old in their 20s of drug overdoses.*

*But something happened to me. One Saturday morning, alone in our apartment, listening to the 'Top 20' on the radio, a minister came on and read words of Psalm 118:5, "**I called on the Lord in distress, and the Lord answered me.**" I couldn't stop listening! That day I discovered two things—God was bigger than any problem I had, and I was not a prisoner of my circumstances, only a prisoner of my attitude. When he gave the invitation, I knelt in that dingy apartment and committed my life to Christ. I was only 14 years old, but that's the day my life began.*

He graduated from medical school the top of his class and today is one of the most respected surgeons in the North-East. He told Clinton: "Every day,

before making my hospital rounds, I fill my mind with God's word. Therefore, I never approach patients feeling hopeless, for I now know what God can do for them!" Many of his patients have not needed his surgical skills. They've been healed when he prayed for them.

The kind of self-esteem we have been talking about is one where you know you have been totally forgiven and fully accepted by the God who planned your existence. It involves a growing awareness of your infinite value to him. It is a self-esteem that enables you to accept unashamedly your strengths and weaknesses, and your capabilities. It includes an awareness that God is transforming you from the inside out and the assurance that one day you will be everything that God has planned and all that you could desire. It invites the challenge that, now being comfortable with yourself, you can now focus your attention on God's purpose for your life and how best you can do your bit to meet the many needs that you will find in the world around you.

If this is the kind of self-esteem you are looking for, then a good place to start would be to talk to God about it. You could well begin by praying a prayer along these lines:

*God, I want to thank you because, in your magnificent work of creating this universe, you thought of me. You know all about me; my successes and failures, what my gifts are, how my life can count for something meaningful and lasting, and where I fit in to your forever family.*

*I accept that Jesus died on the cross for my sins to reconcile me to God, because of his great love for me. I thank him for that.*

*I am sorry for my sins. I repent of them. I now accept your forgiveness and submit my life to Jesus as my Saviour and Lord.*

*Come into my life and begin the process of moulding me into all you planned that I should be and directing me in the path you have chosen for me.*

*Enable me to accept fully all that you have done for me and to be open to all that you want to do. In doing so, give me a love for you and for others that will enable me to look outwards rather than being absorbed with myself and my own needs.*

*Give me the courage and strength to live worthily of your love and to follow wherever you lead, until that day when I shall stand in your presence and be fully satisfied with all that you have made me.*

*Amen.*

If this should be a new decision for you, then get a good modern translation of the Bible and begin reading through the New Testament asking God to reveal more of himself and his plan for your life. Find a Christian fellowship where you can receive and give encouragement to others on the same journey.

**“Call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you will honour me.”**

Psalm 50:15