
Biblical Self-Esteem in an Age of Narcissism

by Dr. Bruce Narramore

It is a special privilege to inaugurate this lectureship in pastoral counseling and psychology. This is an area that is very dear to my heart, because what more is the pastorate than understanding and dealing with people? All our theological study is ultimately designed to impact the individual life.

There is a Scripture that is a favorite to many of us: "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God." I was given a Bible for a lecture I gave yesterday. As I was thumbing through it, I noticed someone had underlined the first half of the verse: "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God"; but as is so true I think, in the evangelical culture, there was no comment on the last half of the verse which says "that it is profitable for doctrine, reproof, correction and instruction of righteousness." In other words, why do we learn the Scripture? Not because we are learning doctrine to be orthodox, but because we are learning doctrine to apply the Word of God to the people of God.

There is nothing more appropriate than a lecture series that will focus specifically on ministering to the individual needs of the parishioners to whom you are called to minister.

I would like to address then the topic, "Biblical Self-Esteem in an Age of Narcissism". The focus is upon two concerns of mine that I trust are of common interest: the first is the past failure of the evangelical church in helping people to develop a healthy, positive attitude toward themselves. As a matter of fact, in some cases we were quite guilty of encouraging people to undermine a healthy sense of self-esteem. We often focused so much on our Christian ministry to others or on our future with God, that we failed to help people

Dr. Bruce Narramore, professor of psychology and founding dean of the Rosemead Graduate School of Psychology in Pasadena, California, is a graduate of Westmont College, Pepperdine University, and the University of Kentucky and has studied at Talbot and Fuller Theological Seminaries.

struggle with some very basic problems involving their attitudes toward themselves.

However, in the last ten years or so we've begun to address these issues in many segments of the church. Now there is a new concern; in our rush to help people feel good about themselves, we are in danger of taking an essentially secular, humanistic viewpoint on personality functioning, baptizing it with a verse or two of Scripture, and passing it off as Christian. Consequently, I fear that what we may think of as the biblical esteem may be just a reflection of some of the selfish narcissistic concerns of our society.

So I would like to address this basic issue of the attitude that Christians should hold toward themselves and how this attitude differs on one hand from a neurotic feeling of inferiority that is sometimes equated with humility, and on the other hand from a sense of pride, selfishness or narcissism.

Let's begin with a couple of definitions. Let me suggest that self-esteem simply means the basic sense of value, significance, or worth with which one regards himself or herself. I am going to use the word self-concept, self-esteem, and self-image relatively interchangeably throughout the discussion.

What about narcissism? I like to define narcissism as a condition. In my notes, I first wrote a "pathological condition", but I won't go quite that far. Nevertheless, I really think it is a bit pathological. *Narcissism is a condition in which one attempts to regulate his or her level of self-esteem through inordinate attention to one's self and the gratification of his or her needs and wishes.* The narcissistic personality is getting a lot of press these days in the secular literature. A representative book which some of you would find quite challenging is called *The Cult of Narcissism* by Christopher Lash. It is an excellent and incisive commentary on today's society.

The narcissistic personality is characterized by an orientation to receive rather than give. The focus is on what I want or what I need rather than on what someone else wants or needs. There is a focus on immediate gratification. "I want what I want when I want it." There tends to be a lack of true intimacy, and a tendency to use relationships, especially relationships with the opposite sex, to temporarily enhance one's own feeling of self-worth, esteem, or value. In other words, there is a tendency to use others so we may feel better about ourselves.

There is also a tendency to limit interests to the present. The

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narcissistic personality has very little concern for the past or the future and tends to live in the present. There tends to develop, above all, a poverty of inner life, a sense of emptiness, a void that the narcissistic person tries to fill by a round of activities, by calling attention to himself or herself, or by using others to gratify his or her needs and wishes. Narcissistic persons are those who superficially seem to like themselves; on the outside they are getting a lot of attention and may seem to be happy, but when you look beneath the facade, they are lonely, empty, selfish persons who find it necessary to go through life doing things to call attention to themselves. Narcissistic persons get others to gratify their needs because of their own personal emptiness. This is a shallow substitute for a biblical sense of self-esteem and self-worth.

With those introductory remarks, let me talk then about two inadequate views of self-esteem and then turn to a Biblical foundation for a healthy sense of self-esteem.

There are two inadequate approaches to self-esteem. The first is the secular humanistic perspective on self-esteem. I don't say that the secular humanists have not taught us a great deal or provided us with valuable information. Most of our psychologists today are either in the behavioral or in the humanistic, existential camp — men like Carl Rogers, Abraham Maslow, Sidney Jarrard — people who have been very influential in the psychological literature. These men have a great deal to say about having a healthy self-image: "Learn to love yourself. Learn to accept yourself. Learn to like yourself."

Perhaps the secular humanistic ideal is best portrayed in the little story of *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*. For those of you who have not read the story, Jonathan is a seagull who gets tired of the hum-drum affairs of life — flying back and forth, eating and sleeping, doing the things the average seagull does. So he sets about on a self improvement program and begins to practice flying maneuvers that the typical seagull doesn't do. He gets up too high, takes a dive a little too steep for a seagull, and crashes into the water. Now he's a daring bird; he gets up and practices that maneuver again until he has mastered it. Another day he crashes into the cliff and nearly kills himself, but he pulls himself up by his bootstraps, or whatever else seagulls pull themselves up by, and practices the course again. Finally, he has mastered it, and he gets so good that he finally reaches seagull heaven. Later, he is talking to one of his disciples, Fletcher Seagull. "Fletcher," he says, "you too can become a perfect, unlimited gull.

You need no God because we are all gods.”

In a very beautiful, literary way the author captures the essence of the humanistic ideal that persons have within themselves everything they need to grow and mature. They are like flowers and all they need to do is plant the seed, fertilize and water it, and it will naturally grow and blossom. This is the view that many non-Christians have of human personality — that we are, at best, positively good, as Maslow would say, or at worst, neutral.

There are a couple of problems with this. The first is obvious: if we are so good, why all the problems? If you look at human history and we are really this great, you would think that we would have gotten our act together by now. There is a basic pragmatic problem with this view of life. There is also a Scriptural problem. Jeremiah 17:9 says, “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?” The Scripture says that we are sinful. In addition, I would suggest a third problem with this secular humanistic perspective that says “love yourself”. This is a little more basic, because it gets down to the underlying assumption underneath the humanistic ideal. It is the assumption that human beings are just one more link in the evolutionary chain, an accidental product of a collection of atoms with no real meaning or purpose in life. It is upon this foundation we are supposed to say — love yourself, see yourself as a creature of value and significance. The foundation is an extremely shakey one upon which to try to build a sense of human dignity.

Bertrand Russell, the great humanist thinker, was more accurate, more intellectually honest than many people writing today in the area of psychology and mental health, when he carried the results of this humanistic philosophy to their logical conclusion. He suggested that rather than resulting in some positive self-esteem or rosey glow, man is the product of causes which had no pre-vision of the end they were achieving; that his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and beliefs are but the outcome of an accidental collection of atoms; that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling can preserve an individual life beyond the grave; that all the labor of all the ages, all the devotion, all the noon-day brightness of human genius are destined to extinction in the vast depth of the solar system; that the whole temple of man’s achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of the universe in ruin. All these things, he suggested, if not quite beyond dispute, are yet nearly so certain that

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no philosophy that rejects them can hope to stand. Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul's habitation henceforth be safely built. This then is the foundation upon which the secular humanistic theorist is attempting to build a healthy sense of self-esteem.

If the secular perspective on a positive sense of self esteem is sadly lacking, unfortunately many Christians' approaches are just as seriously lacking. In my own experience I tend to find that for every secular heresy there is an equivalent Christian heresy, usually just about 180° around the circle. The Christian alternative to secular humanism is what I call "Christian wormism." Haven't we all been touched in one way or another by Christian teachings — in literature, poetry, and hymnology — that somehow say "You're no good, you're no good"?

It has been said by those who have been in tropical lands that there is a difference between a snake and a worm when you attempt to step on them. A snake rears itself up and hisses and tries to strike back — a true picture of self. But a worm allows you to do what you like with it — kick it, squash it under your heel — a picture of true brokenness. Is this what Christ was willing to become for us — a worm? This is what Christ calls us to be — worms for Him and with Him. Now this is the exalted Christian calling, you see, to become worms for Jesus. Needless to say, this leaves something to be desired.

But don't we all encounter a tad of this? Somehow if you are to be humble, you should not like yourself. I think there is great confusion in the Christian church over what humility really is; many of us think we have to degrade and tear down ourselves and lose self-respect if we are to be truly humble. These are the two extremes.

Let us turn then to what I would see as the Biblical alternative to these.

First of all, I would suggest that the Scriptures see us as highly significant persons.

Secondly, the Scriptures portray us as deeply fallen persons — deeply fallen and sinful.

Thirdly, the Scriptures portray us as persons who are greatly loved and restored.

Highly significant, deeply fallen, greatly loved and restored.

There are those today who are saying that we should love

ourselves. They look to Christ's statement in response to the question, "What is the greatest commandment?" He replied, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and your neighbor as yourself."

These persons take the last portion, "Love your neighbor as yourself," and say, "Now what Christ was really saying here is that you need to really love yourself and have a good self image, and when you do, you will just naturally radiate love for others."

There is a truth to the principle that if you have a good attitude toward yourself, you will have a good attitude toward others. But frankly, I'm a little skeptical of the exegesis. I am of the impression that if Christ had really wanted to say that, He could have said it. He communicated clearly enough that He could have easily said that the most important think after loving God is to have a right attitude toward yourself; love yourself and out of that will flow an abundant radiant love for others. But He didn't. He seemed to assume in this passage that you would love yourself. It is not always true that we do, but the assumption here was that we would. His focus was not on how to love ourselves but how to love others. I am somewhat concerned by all the books that say "Christian, love yourself" and make this verse the foundation for self-esteem. What I would like to do is back off from that and suggest six reasons why we should see ourselves as highly significant. I am going to speak about Biblical foundations for a positive sense of self esteem.

The first foundation is the fact that we are created in God's image (Genesis 1:26-27). It is significant that the very first thing God chose to tell us about our nature is that we are created in His image. Have you ever thought about all the things that God could have told us about human nature? He could have said some will be tall, some short, some smart, some not so smart; some will be nice, some not so nice. But He didn't. The first thing He said was that we are created in the image of God. I think that must always be the ultimate foundation for our sense of self esteem.

Secondly, we are given dominion over the earth (Gen. 1:26-28). We are instructed to be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, subdue it and rule over it and over every living thing. God didn't put Adam and Eve there in the garden and say, "Adam, now you stay out of the way. You know how you are — you're a little clumsy — so let me run the show." He put them there and said, "Be fruitful, multiply, replenish the earth, subdue it." We were put here, in other words, as God's

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appointed rulers over planet earth.

The European theologian, Eric Sauer, in a very helpful book, *The King of the Earth*, makes this comment on Genesis 1:28:

“These words plainly declare the vocation of the human race to rule. Far from being something in conflict with God, cultural achievements are an essential attribute of the nobility of man as he possessed it in paradise. Inventions and discoveries, the sciences and the arts, refinement and ennobling, in short, the advancement of the human mind, are throughout the will of God. They are the taking possession of the earth by the royal human race, the performance of a commission imposed by the Creator by God’s ennobled servants, a God-appointed ruler service for the blessing of this earthly realm.”

Thirdly, we are the apex of God’s earthly creation. Psalm 8:4-5 reads, “what is man that thou art mindful of him . . . thou hast created him a little lower than the angels and crowned him with glory and honor.”

Have you ever had the experience that I’ve had of hearing a pastor expound on that verse — going on for the next thirty minutes to tell you what an insignificant, worthless being man is? The pastor didn’t get that sermon from the last half of the verse which says, “Thou hast created him a little lower than the angels and crowned him with glory and honor.” This, I believe, refers prophetically to Jesus Christ, but also to the entire human race. There is a beautiful truth in the passage: God has located us lower than the angels, yet higher than the animals. Lower than the angels speaks to our dignity, value, our significance; we are the apex of God’s earthly created order. On the other hand, the fact that we are higher than the rest of the animal kingdom speaks also to our sense of self esteem. There is in that the potential to avoid feelings of superiority — the temptation to be like God. That was the essence of Adam’s and Eve’s sin.

There is also the potential for avoiding inferiority — “I am no good.” I am like a wretched animal. God in His providence has located us at this precise place in His creation, lower than the angels, yet higher than the animals. We are the apex of God’s creation. In the days of creation, God formed a beautiful, fantastic creation that could mirror much of His power, His omnipotence, His ordered intellect;

but He was still not satisfied, because creation could not in itself reflect all of His character. It could reflect some of His grandeur, but it couldn't reflect the aspects of His righteousness, His love, His holiness. There was something more that God needed to create: the human soul that could share His love, that could share in His life, that could reflect His character. We are the apex of God's created order. Think of the great contrast between that and the concept of being worms for Jesus.

Fourthly, we were purchased at a high price. The purchase price speaks to the value of the object. God didn't look down at man's sin, look over at Satan, flip him a quarter and say "I want to buy back the human race". I Peter 1:18-19 says "you were not redeemed with corruptible things like silver and gold, but with the precious blood of Christ." Christ paid the ultimate price to purchase us out of sin.

Fifthly, we have angels watching over us. The Scriptures do not tell us a great deal about what angels do. We know that even little children have angels watching over them. Psalm 91 says that God will give His angel's charge over us to keep us in all our ways. We are important enough to God that He has angels looking out for us.

Sixthly, we have eternity prepared for us. In John 14, Christ says to His disciples, "I must go away. I go to prepare a place for you and when I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you unto myself, that where I am you may be also." Christ is preparing a place for us to spend eternity with Him. Doesn't that speak to your significance and value — the knowledge that an almighty God is preparing a place for you to spend eternity with Him?

Having looked briefly at some of the biblical foundations for a positive sense of self esteem, let me suggest that you don't need to turn to one or two verses like "love your neighbor as yourself" to find a text as a proof text and then leap off into the sea of man's ideas. There is a consistent thread of biblical revelation speaking to the significance of human beings. Is not this the foundation of all Christian ethics? Why do we look very carefully at the issue of abortion? murder? theft? adultery? Are not all of these based on the value of the human soul? The entire Christian ethic grows fundamentally out of the fact that every human person is a bearer of the image of God.

But Scriptures say that we are deeply fallen. Romans 3 says that all

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have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

I say to Paul, “Paul, you know that gets a little heavy. I’m a psychologist. I want everyone to feel good about themselves. Isn’t there something else you can say?”

“There is none righteous, no not one,” he says.

“Well, maybe Paul has a bad attitude, a bad self concept,” I say, “Let’s ask somebody else. Jeremiah, what do you think?”

“The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked, who can know it?”

“James, what do you have to say? After all, people do a lot of good things.”

“Well, if you’re guilty of one point, you’re guilty of all,” say James.

You see, the Scripture says there’s another side of the coin, that although we are highly significant, we are also deeply fallen. Now, I must say that some of our friends have not done us a terribly big favor in the understanding of depravity. Sometimes in so focusing on the concept of total depravity, the image is man and woman as worthless. What do you think about when you say totally depraved? The skid row bum, the alcoholic, the murderer, the rapist, Hitler, or some distorted personality?

I want to suggest what the extent of our sinfulness is, whether we use the word depravity or sin or not. But first, let me suggest what the fact that we are sinful does *not* mean!

1. It doesn’t mean that we’re devoid of any good qualities or abilities. There are many people who have all sorts of fantastic abilities and gifts.
2. It doesn’t mean that we’re totally without any desire to do the good or the right. A lot of non-Christians are doing a lot of good things. Some of them are more loving than some Christians we know.
3. It doesn’t mean that without the direct intervention of the Holy Spirit we would all be prone to every sort of sin.
4. It doesn’t mean we would all be bums on skid row.
5. It doesn’t mean that we’re worthless to God.

What *does* the fact that we’re sinful mean? If I understand the Scriptures, the fact that we’re sinful means that every aspect of our being is impacted by the presence of sin — every aspect. Physically, spiritually, emotionally, every aspect of our life is impacted in some way by sin. Even, by the way, our most godly theologizing. Why is it that well meaning people who love the Lord and are committed to

His word differ on some very basic theological points? Well, we can give one obvious answer. The other fellow is wrong. But I would suggest that probably a more basic answer is we are both wrong in some degree, because our intellect is fallen. No person has ever existed whose intellect is not fallen.

The fact that we're sinful also means that we have absolutely no righteousness to commend ourselves to God in terms of His holiness — no righteousness that can satisfy the demands of a holy and righteous God. There is a tendency, however, to equate a lack of righteousness with the lack of value, significance, or worth. Since we are sinful, therefore, we are worthless. Not so!

This leads me to a third point, that we are greatly loved and restored. Romans 5:8 tells us that God showed his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us. Where were we when Christ died? In our sins. Why did Christ die? Because we were righteous and deserved it? No, but because we were of immense value and significance to God. Christ didn't die for the animal kingdom. He didn't die for the trees. They weren't worth it. They were not that significant to him, although they participate in the redemption of the whole creation; Christ died for humanity.

Let's say you had a son or a daughter who had totally rejected the Lord, had ruined his or her life, was on heavy drugs and into the grossest sins you could imagine. You are the parent. Does this child lose value or significance to you in your eyes? Does he or she become worthless? Or would they not still be of such immense value that you would want to reach out to them in their sin? As a matter of fact, wouldn't you probably be willing to give your life if you knew that it could turn your child around? And that, precisely because they are so important to you. You see, even in our sinfulness Christ died to purchase us for Himself, precisely because we were valuable and significant to Him.

Francis Shaffer says that one of the greatest problems in the church is that we have lost sight of the fact that man is wonderful. He goes on to say: "For 20th century man this phrase, 'the image of God,' is as important as anything in Scripture, because men today can no longer answer that crucial question, 'Who am I?'"

In his own naturalistic theories, with the uniformity of cause and effect in a closed system, and an evolutionary concept of a mechanical chance parade from Adam to man, man has lost his unique identity. In contrast, as a Christian, I stand in the flow of

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history, I know my origin; my lineage is longer than the Queen of England. It doesn't start with the battle of Hastings. It doesn't start with the beginning of good families wherever or whenever they lived. As I look at myself in the flow of the space-time reality, I see my origin in Adam, and in God's creating man in His own image. When we base our identity on the fact that we are created in the image of God, redeemed by Christ, indwelt by the Spirit, destined to spend eternity with Him, it lifts us from a despair and despondency and self-hatred so that we can think of ourselves as individuals of dignity, value, and worth.

When that happens, we are able to relate to others as persons of worth. When we lack a healthy sense of self esteem, we tend to do one of two things. We either look up at others and try to associate and identify with them, or we find it necessary to put them down. Many people are going to put you way up there on a pedestal, because if they can get you high enough they figure that they can share a little bit in it. There is something interesting that goes with that however; at the same time they do this, they also hold resentment because they may feel they're above you, and they're going to find some other way to put you down.

If you lack a healthy sense of self-esteem, you may select a marriage partner under those conditions. Perhaps we all do that a bit. We don't feel quite as good about ourselves as we would like, but we find this fantastic lady or this terrific fellow and he or she makes us feel so good about ourselves. Marrying this idealized person, however, just lifts our self image for the short run. After a while of living together, you realize that if the spouse is up there, that means that you are down here, and of course you don't like it. So you start chopping away at that person to get him or her down to your size.

A lot of family counseling situations have precisely that dynamic. Someone has married out of a poor self-concept. A client of mine, a pastor's wife as a matter of fact, said that she had tucked herself underneath her husband's tail feathers. She was getting her identity from him who was way up there. But after a while the resentment began to build and she wanted to chop him down. If you don't feel good about yourself, you can chop other people down low enough that, by comparison, you look pretty good.

You will see this dynamic in every relationship in life. You will see it with your professors. Some of you are going to put your professors up on a pedestal. Many professors like that, you see,

because maybe they don't feel good enough about themselves to admit that they're just as human as anybody else. You'll see it on your church boards. There are going to be people there who don't like themselves; they are either going to have to put everybody else down, or they're going to have to have a minister who is "God". Anything less and they won't be satisfied. You will do it to your children. Your children are going to stand up and say "no" and you will be threatened; you'll want to put them down rather than to listen to what they want to say.

Now you see that the reason self image is so important is not simply because we need to have a good attitude toward ourselves; it is so that we'll have a proper attitude toward everybody else. As a matter of fact, the research indicates that even your image of God is impacted by your image of yourself. There's a rather healthy body of literature now that suggests that in a recent study of several hundred teenagers, the teenagers who had good images of themselves could see God as loving and forgiving. The teenagers who had poor self concepts tended to see God as unloving, distant, angry and unforgiving.

So when we are talking about self image, we are not talking about a nice little psychological option. We are talking about how we view the God of creation and the creation of God, how we view ourselves and everyone else that we come in contact with. Can we value others as significant persons? It is very difficult to do that until you have valued yourself as a significant creation of God.