
Pride, Humility, and Self-Esteem

I'd like to look at what constitutes biblical self esteem or self love. But first I want to examine what biblical self esteem is *not*.

First of all, biblical self esteem or self love is not a sense of superiority.

Not far from where I live in Southern California, there is a church sitting just off the freeway with a big sign that says: Southern California's largest bus ministry. Now I know absolutely nothing about that church. I don't know if it's liberal or evangelical. I assume that it's evangelical because liberals tend not to have busses. I really don't know. I know absolutely nothing about that church except that it claims Southern California's largest bus ministry. Each time I drive by I'm a little troubled, because the implication is that "Our bus ministry is better than everybody else's; we're better than you."

Biblical self esteem is not lifted up or elevated. In fact, the New Testament concept of pride literally means "puffed up", "lifted up", "elevated" or "haughty". It's like this puffed cereal that you get; you think you've got something, but if you crumble it down, you've just got a few kernels in your hand. That's what pride means — it's puffed up, it appears to be more than it really is. Biblical self love or self esteem is not superiority. In I Corinthians 13:4 Paul says "love is not puffed up".

Secondly, biblical self-love is not self-will. We all know people who always have to have their own way. As a matter of fact, some of you who are married know this better than some who are not. You met your spouse-to-be and thought, "My what an aggressive, confident individual." Right? Good ideas, and everything. Now that you're married to that person what do you call him or her? Stubborn. Now isn't it interesting how bright, confident, aggressive persons suddenly become stubborn, just by the act of marriage. Of course, what really happens is that we find out that underneath those bright, good ideas sometimes is a person who really doesn't have a good self-image — a person fighting to have his or her own way to cover

up underlying insecurities. This person decides that tonight you are going out to eat; he or she decides the time, the place, what time you are leaving, what you are going to eat, what the children are going to eat, how the children are to behave while you are eating, and when you are ready to go home. Many of you will serve on a church board with somebody who has to have things his or her own way.

It's interesting that many things are actually the opposite of a healthy, biblical sense of self-esteem — like superiority and self will. They masquerade under a false sense of self esteem in order to hide an underlying lace of the same thing. Titus 1:7 says the church leaders should not be self willed, must not be given to stubbornness and self will or having to have their own way. It takes a person who feels pretty good about himself or herself to be able to speak up and share personal opinions, but then go along with the majority. You don't have to feel very good about yourself to be stubborn; as a matter of fact, it helps if you don't feel good about yourself. It's easier to be stubborn, because you're going to fight to prove that you're right; you're panicked that you may find out that you're not right. Biblical self love or self esteem is not self willfulness.

Thirdly, biblical self love is not selfishness. We all know people who are selfish. They try to garner everything to themselves. The Scripture says if you have two coats and somebody is in need, give one away.

Philippians 1:7 tells us that some even preach Christ out of selfish ambition. That's still true in our day isn't it? We all know people who preach Christ — people who can build the biggest church, the most successful ministry, the biggest salary, the most prestige, the most status. Isn't there within your denomination a status attached to certain churches in the conference? I work with a lot of pastors — I'm thinking of one in particular — who has his eye on the three or four major churches in his denomination. He knows where he wants to go; he's got them all sorted out. He's got his plan to get there. I think he probably will. He is so involved in this you see, that along with a healthy desire to minister, there's also the undue building up of his own ego. He's preaching out of selfishness.

Fourthly, biblical self-love is not self-centeredness. We all know people who always have to be the center of attention. They have to be the life of the party, they tell the jokes, or they dress in a way to call attention to themselves. They have to somehow be the center of attention. This is very natural for an infant; a baby is the center of

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attention. Babies come into the home; they cry and you are there; they're hungry, you feed them; they're cold, you clothe them; they're hot, you unclothe them. Whatever the baby needs, you provide. Somebody ought to write a book entitled, "The Infant, the King". The infant literally controls the whole family. But ideally, as we mature, we grow out of this self-centeredness and we learn to be one of the group. But people with a false sense of self-esteem often have to maintain it through a self-centered style of living.

But if biblical self love is not superiority, self will, selfishness, or self-centeredness, what is it? Let me point out four aspects of biblical self-esteem.

A little boy in his typically messy room put a big sign on his door that read, "I'm me and I'm good, 'cause God made me and God don't make junk". That's not the best grammar, but it's good theology. I'm me and I'm good, because God made me and God doesn't make junk. The first aspect of biblical self esteem or self love is seeing yourselves as bearers of the image of God.

Secondly, biblical self love is valuing ourselves as equally important members of the human race. In I Corinthians 12:12ff, Paul likens the body of Christ to the physical body. He says that not everybody is an ear or a mouth, because we need different parts of the body of Christ, just like we need different parts of the physical body. In other words, every part is important.

One evening a few years ago we had a few friends over, and we decided to go around the living room and find out what part of the body of Christ each person was. Immediately we knew who the mouth was — that was obvious. Then somebody was the feet — this lady always went someplace. Somebody else was the ear — a fantastic listener. We went around the whole group and came to the last person — Bea, who is a very sharp person, but really has a problem with her self image. She is a bright person, has a lot of contributions to make, and is a good Bible teacher.

We said, "What part of the body of Christ are you, Bea?"

"Oh, I don't know," she said hesitatingly.

"Come on, what are you?" we asked.

After some encouragement she said, "I guess I'm just a little toe."

As friends, we immediately tried to be helpful. We suggested to her that it's very important to know that without the little toe you couldn't count beyond eighteen. We really came up with some very helpful thoughts. Later a physician friend told me what the little toe

actually does. The little toe helps keep the whole body in balance. Isn't it interesting that she selected what she thought was the single least important part of the body to be her part, and it happened to be the part that holds the whole body in balance?

That is often true in the church, and it will often be true in the church in which you minister. The people who are up front, who are on the committees or lead this and that may not be the people who hold things together at all, although I am sure they think they are. It may be people behind the scenes, those with the gift of helps, the gift of hospitality — any number of gifts — that make things run smoothly. Part of helping the members of your congregation develop healthy attitudes toward themselves is to help them to be aware of their gifts.

We have a real problem in the church, in that we have been seduced into the world's way of looking at this. If you were to go over here to the University of Kentucky and have an outreach to some students, who would you get to give a testimony? You would get the captain of the football team, right? You wouldn't select some third team scrub that never plays to give a testimony and say how great Christianity is and how everyone ought to become a Christian. Or if you're witnessing in the sorority, who are you going to get? You're going to try to get the beauty queen to give her testimony, right? The resulting implication is, if you will trust Christ, you will become more athletic and better looking. If you're going to have a testimony meeting for business men, who do you get to give a testimony? You get the person who started tithing and his business tripled. How many testimonies have you heard by somebody who started tithing and went bankrupt? You don't ask for that kind.

But our promises are not for financial blessings in this life, and I am convinced that you can start tithing and go bankrupt. That may be in God's plan. He may be trying to teach you something. What happens is that we elevate certain gifts. People who have these gifts start feeling a kind of false sense of pride, and the rest of us end up feeling inferior. Who becomes the board member in the church? The successful businessman, basically, not necessarily the people who are most spiritually mature and qualified. If someone can run a good business, we say, "Hey, he'd make a good elder; he'd make a good deacon; he'd make a good board member." We often get people who have a minimum of spiritual maturity but are successful out there in the world, and then we make them our spiritual leaders. The

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implication for the rest is, “I could never be a deacon, elder, or leader in my church because I don’t run a million dollar business.” We have been seduced into the world’s way of looking at gifts, and we think that if we don’t have some of these public type gifts that somehow we aren’t very significant. Part of a biblical sense of self esteem is realizing that we are all equally important members of the human race in general, and specifically, of the body of Christ. We need to find our own gifts, and we need to help others find theirs.

Thirdly, biblical self love or self esteem is seeing ourselves as objects of divine love. In John 15, Christ says to his disciples, “As the Father has loved me so have I loved you”. That’s a verse we all know. But have you really ever let it soak in in terms of your self image — to realize what Christ is saying? God, the Father, loves me with the same kind of love that He has for his own son, Jesus Christ. Have you ever let that soak in? That you are loved precisely the same way that Jesus Christ was loved by God the Father? I don’t think you can let that soak in without it doing something for your self image. Biblical self love is seeing ourselves as objects of divine love.

Fourthly, biblical self love is seeing ourselves as objects of others’ love. We are commanded to love one another. We have all heard and perhaps preached messages on loving one another, but how many messages have you heard on the Christian virtue of receiving love? Isn’t it sometimes more difficult to receive love than to give it? But for every lover there has to be a lovee. There are two sides of the coin. Let’s say we locked the doors here and heard a message on loving another. Whom are you going to love?

You say, “Well let’s go out there and love them.”

“No, the doors are locked. Whom are you going to love?” Well, half of us would have to be on the receiving end.

Implicit in Christ’s command to love one another is the fact that we all need to be loved. Sometimes as Christians we think that we shouldn’t have a need to be loved; we ought to just love God. I John 4 says, “Herein is love, not that we love God but that he loves us.”

You would be amazed at the number of people who come to me and say, “Dr. Narramore, my problem is that I don’t love the Lord.”

Without knowing anything else I can say, “Your problem isn’t that you don’t love the Lord; your problem is that you don’t know how much He loves you.”

“Herein is love, not that we love him, but that he loves us.” In other words, being the recipient of love is just as important as loving.

Somebody sings a beautiful solo and you say, "I just really appreciated that". What does that person say?

Something like, "It wasn't me, it was the Lord that did it."

That sounds very spiritual, but it's just not true. If I were to stand up here and sing and tell you it was the Lord that did it, you'd know that I was lying. But if it were someone with more music ability than I, you would tend to believe them. But it wasn't the Lord that did it at all. The soloist is exhibiting an inability to accept genuine compliment and appreciation. Non-Christians can't say that, so what they say is, "Well, it was nothing." When we say "it's the Lord," that's just the Christian way of saying, "It was nothing."

Now, what is the truth of the matter? The Lord did create persons with the potential for this or that and they developed it, but they may have developed that gift because their mothers forced them to sit there and practice two hours a day while they hated every minute of it. Or they may have developed it because they really wanted to; they may be singing because they love the Lord and want to use their gifts to impact others; or they may be doing it for the money. See what I am saying? It's difficult to be on the receiving end. How much more truthful to say, "Thank you, I appreciate that, and I appreciate the opportunity to share my love for the Lord through my music ministry." We're afraid that we're somehow going to take the glory away from God. No. We know that ultimately we have an ability because He created us. And we need to learn to be the recipient of other people's love.

For those of you who are going into the ministry, one of the most difficult things will be allowing yourself to be vulnerable enough to admit that you need love. People are going to put you up on a pedestal; they're going to expect you to have the answers, and it's going to be very difficult for you to find somebody that you can go to and say, "I have needs." If there is anything that will make your ministry more effective and lessen the likelihood of your dropping out of the ministry for some personal or family reason, it will be your having one or more close Christian friends in whom you can confide.

By the way, don't hide behind the pulpit and behind the idea that the minister can't play favorites. How many did Jesus choose? Twelve. Wasn't that being a little selfish? Out of all the people He could have chosen, He chose twelve. You might think that's bad, but do you know what? He had three favorites out of that group. What if the pastor had three friends he was especially close to? Do you think

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that would be a problem? But it gets worse; there was one who Christ called “the beloved”. There was one of the twelve that Christ was extra close to. What I’m saying is that we need close friends to whom we can give love and from whom we can receive love.

The secret is, of course, that you don’t play favorites when it comes to making decisions in the church. But there is a difference between having a deep personal friendship and playing favorites. You may have to educate people in your congregation to that fact. Beyond that, you’ve got to get over your own fear, because frankly, to say “I need love” makes us a little vulnerable, and we don’t always like that. We need to learn to become the objects of other people’s love.

In summary, I would suggest that biblical self love or self esteem is obviously not some ecstatic emotional experience. It’s not, “Oh, I’m just the greatest thing that’s ever happened to me.” It’s not some form of erotic love: “I look in the mirror and I really turn myself on.” Biblical self love or self esteem is a deep abiding attitude of self regard or self respect that’s based on seeing ourselves as God sees us. This also allows us to see other people as God sees them. With that brief understanding of biblical self-love, let’s turn to the problem of pride.

Isn’t pride a sin? It surely is. Turn to Jeremiah 48, a very interesting passage on pride. In this chapter, Jeremiah is pronouncing woes upon the Moabites because they are a very sinful people. The essence of their sin, says Jeremiah, is pride. I want to look at three aspects of the Moabites’ pride that I think speak fundamentally to what pride really is.

Chapter 48, verse 7 reads, “For because of your trust in your own achievements and treasures . . .” I would like to suggest first of all that pride involves a certain attitude toward oneself — an attitude of self-sufficiency. Self sufficiency says, “I can do it myself; I can trust in my own achievements and treasures.”

In Jeremiah 48:26 we read “For he [the Moabite] has become arrogant toward the Lord so Moab will wallow in his vomit and become a laughing stock.” A second aspect of pride is a certain attitude toward God — an attitude of arrogance: “Who needs you, God?” Of course, this is just a flip side of self-sufficiency: “If I can do it all myself, then I don’t need God or anybody else.” So secondly, pride involves a certain attitude toward God — one of arrogance or autonomy.

Thirdly, in verse 27 the Prophet says, “Now is not Israel a laughing stock to you or was he caught among thieves, for each time you speak

about him you shake your head in scorn, 'oh, those Israelites.'" Pride involves a certain attitude toward others — an attitude of scorn or superiority.

Haven't you ever looked down on anybody else in your class? "Well, you know that so and so. He's from this church or that. He's from this place or that. You'd expect that from somebody from there." Or, "She's from this college or that. They're all alike; we've got a hundred of them running around here. You've got to make allowances for them because you know what they're like over there." Or "He went to that other seminary. You know how those Methodist seminaries are." We put them down with just a little scorn, a little sense of superiority in our voice. Pride!

The antidote to pride is healthy, biblically based self esteem. When you see yourself as God sees you, you don't have to put other people down. You can see them as God sees them.

Let's talk then finally about the other major issue — the issue of humility. We are enjoined in Scripture to be humble. Following the same format as we did with self esteem, let's look first at what humility is *not*. Then we'll look at what it is.

Many people think that humility is an admission of inferiority. Humility is not inferiority.

I used to work with a lady, Mary Lou, in a Christian organization. Every once in awhile Mary Lou would come up and say, "Bruce, isn't God great?"

I'd say, "He sure is, Mary Lou."

And she would say, "Aren't we terrible?"

And I wouldn't say anything, so she assumed that I agreed with her, and she'd go on about how terrible we are. She'd say, "Don't you just wish that everybody else around here realized how terrible they were too?"

Her feeling was that if somehow she could make us out as not good enough, then God would be great. She would follow through by saying, "Aren't we awful, and isn't God good?"

What she was trying to do was make God feel better about Himself. As though He needed any help. There are Christians who take the words of John the Baptist, who said of Christ that He must increase and I must decrease, to say that I've got to make myself nothing to make God good. It's not a matter of saying, "I'm no good," or "I'm inferior." God doesn't want that. It's a matter of acknowledging who gets the glory from our lives. So first of all,

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humility is not inferiority.

Secondly, biblical humility is not underestimation or negation of our abilities. Let me read a passage from Romans 12. We all know verses 1 and 2: “I urge you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies . . .” Let me read verses 3 through 6:

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 . . . For just as we have many members in one body, and all the members do not have the same function, so we who are many are one body in Christ and individually members one of another. And since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let each exercise them accordingly.

Isn't it interesting that in the context of “let no man think more highly of himself than he ought,” Paul goes right on to point out that we all have gifts and we are to exercise them according to the grace of God? Paul is saying that we avoid being superior when we realize that we're all gifted by God, and that we're to exercise the gifts that God in His sovereignty gave to us. So humility is not underestimation or negation of our God given gifts.

Thirdly, humility is not passivity. I grew up in a little farming community in Arizona. In the town was a general store, a service station that's been closed for 20 years, and one church, the Baptist church in which I grew up. The most successful farmers and ranchers in that area, including my father, were not active in church, though they would go occasionally — Christmas, Easter, weddings and funerals. My dad went to all the weddings and funerals because he was in a little quartet that sang at all such affairs.

There were two men in that church who were active leaders; they held the church together. But neither one of them were successful farmers or ranchers. They had the smallest farms. They had the least well kept properties. Their fences were the most likely to be down, and I kind of grew up with the feeling that a competent, aggressive occupation does not fit with being a consecrated Christian. Church leadership was left to a couple of males who were a bit passive in the work or to the women in the church.

Some time ago I was teaching an adult Sunday School class of about 200 in a large church in Southern California. The topic was humility. I decided to do a little research, and I asked everybody

there to think of the most humble person they knew. Then I asked them to write down the first five thoughts that came to mind about that person. I had two hundred people writing five statements about what humble people were like. I took home all 1,000 statements, tallied them up, and broke them down into categories. The findings were very interesting. The most frequent, descriptive statement about humble persons was that they were loving. That's biblical. That fits. I agree. But do you know what the second most frequent comment about humble people was? They were quiet, passive, and unassuming. Not once out of 1,000 statements did anybody describe the humble person they knew as either one, intelligent, or two, aggressive. So if you want to be humble, but you happen to be intelligent or aggressive, forget it — the two don't mix.

Remember, this is no backwoods church I polled. This is a church in an upper middle class area, filled with professional people. But notice how I asked the question. I didn't say, "Write a biblical definition of humility." If I had many of them could have given a good answer. But I said, "Think of the most humble person you know and then describe that person." In other words, I wanted to know how they were really thinking. There are many people who have an image of humility as somehow passive and quiet. Humble people, in their minds, let people walk over them and aren't too assertive. By the way, there are many women that believe that's their role in life — to let their husbands tromp over them; they believe that's being humble. But the Scriptures say that's not so. Humility is not passivity. Christ, in the temple, was certainly not passive.

Finally, humility is not self-hatred. Colossians 2 is a very interesting passage. I want to highlight two verses. Verse 18: "Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize by delighting in self abasement . . ."

In the first century church a lot of people were running around punishing themselves and acting spiritual. They had what they called "pole sitters." These people would sit up on a pole all day, suffering for Jesus. But the interesting thing is that their poles were in plain sight, so everybody that walked by would see that they were suffering for Jesus.

Paul says,

Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize by delighting in self abasement, the worship of angels, taking a stand on visions you have seen (verse 18) . . . These are matters which

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have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence (verse 23).

The church father, Origen, is said to have castrated himself so that he could teach women religious instruction without being tempted. You sense a bit of self punishment, probably over the guilt that he experienced over his lust. But many of us have ways, not physically perhaps, of punishing ourself. We do it mentally in the form of depression and neurotic guilt. Humility is not self-hatred.

If humility is not inferiority, underestimation of our abilities, passivity, or self-hatred, what is it? I suggest that it is four things.

Having listened to many sermons on the wilderness wanderings, I had always heard that the purpose of the wanderings was to teach Israel faith. As I read Deuteronomy 8, I noted that that was apparently not the only reason. Chapter 8 of Deuteronomy, verses 2 through 4, read:

And you shall remember all the way which the Lord your God has lead you in the wilderness these forty years, that he might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments or not. And he humbled you and let you be hungry and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know; that he might make you understand that man does not live by bread alone, but by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord. Your clothing did not wear out on you, nor did your foot swell these forty years.

Now what is the purpose of the wandering in the wilderness? One of the major purposes was to teach the people of Israel to be humble. One of the major aspects of this was their recognition of their need of God. God actually let them be hungry. Why? So He could show them that He could meet their needs. In other words, God let them know that they needed Him.

Verse 7 says, "For the Lord your God is bringing you to a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and springs, flowing forth in valleys and hills . . ." And skipping down to verse 11, we read, "Beware lest you forget the Lord your God, by not keeping his commandments and ordinances and his statutes which I command

you today; lest, when you have eaten and are satisfied, and have built good houses and lived in them . . .” When you get out of student housing and have your own parsonage, when your herds and flocks multiply, when your silver and gold multiply and all that you have multiplies, then be careful that your heart doesn’t become proud and that you don’t “forget the Lord your God who brought you out from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery . . .”

Listen to verse 15: “who led you through the great and terrible wilderness, with its fiery serpents and scorpions and thirsty ground where there was no water, who brought water for you out of the rock of flint. In the wilderness, he fed you manna . . .” It is not that you were unable to find your way through that wilderness; you sure made do in a hard situation when there wasn’t any water. It’s fantastic the way you got food when you were about to starve. No, humility is recognizing your need for God. He led you through the wilderness, He brought you water out of the rock. He fed you with manna. Verse 17 says, “Otherwise you may say in your heart, ‘My power and the strength of my hands made me this wealth.’” God was warning Israel’s people that they might become like the Moabites, trusting in their own achievements and treasures. The opposite of pride is humility, recognizing our dependency upon God. “But you shall remember the Lord your God, for it is he that is giving you power to make wealth; that he may confirm his covenant which he swore to your fathers as it is this day” (verse 18). Humility is obedient dependence on God.

Thirdly, humility is realistically evaluating our capacities. In Romans 12:3 Paul says, “let no man think more highly of himself than he ought.” He doesn’t say let us all think as lowly of ourselves as we can. “Let no man think more highly of himself than he ought” is what he says. Have a realistic evaluation of our gifts.

Fourthly, humility is being willing to serve. Shortly before Christ’s crucifixion, you remember the stories: the disciples were arguing over who was going to be the greatest. Christ is about to go to the cross and His disciples are sitting around arguing about who is going to be the greatest in the Kingdom. Christ rebuked them: “The kings of the Gentiles lorded over them; and those who exercise authority over them are given the title ‘benefactors’. But you are not to be like that; instead the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves” (Luke 22:25-26). Humility is being willing to serve others.

It’s interesting to me that in the whole biblical discussion of

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humility, not once is there any suggestion that you should be inferior, passive, or act as though you have no gifts or abilities, that you are not lovable. The biblical emphasis on humility is recognizing our need of God, a willingness to be obedient, having a realistic evaluation of our God-given gifts, and being willing to serve.