

The Gospel and Self-Esteem

By Chris Roberts

Dangerous Claims

What does God have to say about our self-esteem or our self-worth? It is not unusual today to hear that God has quite a bit to say. The idea seems to be that because God declares his love for us and refers to his children as his treasured possession we ought to think of ourselves in exalted terms. In other words, if God loves me, doesn't that mean I must be something special? If God sees me as lovable, shouldn't I see myself as lovable?

The end result is an emphasis on self. All of God's actions are interpreted in terms of their effects on my psychological state. "God loves me, I must be lovable. God died for me, I must be worth dying for. God chose to use me in his work, I must be competent to carry out that work." This leaves us with a gospel that performs a therapeutic function, making man feel better about himself.

This also leaves us with a decline in teaching or language that goes against the gospel of self-esteem. Some things are still called sin. Most evangelicals will say abortion and homosexuality are sins. But the wrongdoing I commit is not said to be sin - "It is a mistake, a goof, a character flaw, a rough spot. I make mistakes, you make mistakes, but God loves us so don't worry so much about those mistakes."

The problem is, none of these claims of self-affirmation can be found in Scripture. Like many distorted teachings, there are elements of truth, but the overall teaching is wrong, deceptive, and dangerous.

The Danger in Modern Thinking

"Whoa there, preacher man. What do you mean wrong, deceptive, and dangerous? In an age when so many people are depressed, how is it dangerous to help people feel good about themselves?"

First, it is dangerous to claim anything that runs contrary to God's teaching, and we will see later what God's Word has to say about God's love and man's worth. In God's Word we will learn that we are not as lovable as some people would have us think.

Thus we have the second problem. If preachers, teachers, and speakers are telling us how valuable we are but Scripture tells us otherwise, where does that leave us? And why, if people are being told over and over of their own self-worth, do people continue being so depressed? We live in one of the most amazing periods in human history. Technological accomplishments stagger the mind. With our advancements have come huge increases in the availability of mood-altering drugs, access to counselors and psychiatrists, countless books and journals written to help people

feel better - and yet we live in one of the most depressed times the world has ever seen. In our churches, the gospel of self-esteem has been going full force but our people are, if anything, even more depressed than before.

The problem is cognitive dissonance, trying to hold two ideas that contradict each other. On the one hand we are being told we're special, we're valuable, we're worth loving. On the other hand we have a sense that this just isn't true. We see our mistakes and flaws and goofs and know they are more than minor character issues, they cut to the core of who we are, leaving us people who really are not all that lovable. While voices all around tell us how lovable we are, we feel unlovable, even more unlovable because we wonder why we cannot see the value others say we should see. Thus the gospel of self-esteem leaves a person in a spiral of depression. This can only be corrected with a biblical view of self and of God's love.

Third, the claim is wrong, deceptive, and dangerous because it upends the focus of God's work. When the Bible tells us about God's love it is meant to draw our eyes *away* from *ourselves* and *toward Christ!* Purveyors of the gospel of self-esteem are working against the gospel by directing attention away from the source of our good news. God's love should never provoke a response of self-admiration. Those teaching the gospel of self-esteem would never call it self-admiration but what else is it?

The good news of Jesus Christ was not given so that we might feel better about ourselves, the good news of Jesus Christ should cause us to take our eyes off of ourselves entirely, focusing instead on Christ. We feel better because Christ has become the center of our being and he is truly glorious and magnificent and precious and valuable. The gospel of self-esteem is wrong, deceptive, and dangerous because it keeps self, rather than Christ, the center of our attention.

Love for the Unlovable

One of the best-known verses in the Bible is John 3:16: *For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.* The gospel of self-esteem says, "See how much God loves you? He loves you enough to send his Son. You must be pretty special!" But what does Jesus actually say about people? Just a few verses later Jesus adds, *And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil.* God loves the world, but the world is full of wicked people who love darkness rather than light. No sooner do we read about God's love than we also read that man is decidedly unlovable.

Ephesians 2 presents the same picture. Ephesians 2:1-3 describes us as festering corpses, dead from rebellion and sin. Filthy, revolting, unlovable. Then 2:4-5 says, *But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ - by grace you have been saved...* God's love is shown right next to man's depravity. Even when we were those festering corpses, God's love

toward us was great and he saved us from our sins, making us alive with Christ. There is nothing in us for God to love which is why his love is an act of grace.

One more. Throughout Isaiah the prophet ranges between chastising and exhorting a rebellious people to turn and be faithful to God. Isaiah rings loud and long with the faithfulness and goodness of God, but also proclaims the justice of God and declares there will be judgment against sin. But the call to Israel is always the same: *Return to me, for I have redeemed you* (Isaiah 44:22). God's love for Israel is not proof that Israel is lovable, it is despite their being unlovable.

Isaiah 41:14 contains both chastising and exhorting and is also one of the greatest challenges to the gospel of self-esteem, the belief that God wants you to feel good about yourself: *Fear not, you worm Jacob, you men of Israel! I am the one who helps you, declares the Lord; your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel.* Far from encouraging Israel or building the people's sense of self-worth, God refers to them as a worm. But despite their being worms, God loves them and helps them and redeems them.

Many more examples could be given. Nowhere does the Bible speak to elevate man's self-esteem but it frequently does the opposite. The good news of the gospel is that God took something as completely unlovable as me and loved me anyway and saved me despite my foul stench.

Earlier I said, "the claim is wrong, deceptive, and dangerous because it upends the focus of God's work." Now we see how it upends the focus. The good news of God's love is meant to move us to Christ. If we preach the gospel in any way that makes a man think better of himself, we have not preached the gospel. The Bible means to drive a man to his knees in repentance over his sin and awe because of God's mercy and grace. Our preaching and teaching and evangelism should do the same.

Always, always the focus is on God. That he loves us is an amazing mystery of grace. His love for us is real, and in the next section we will see how we ought to respond to his love, but it is a cruel deception of the gospel of self-esteem that says his love ought to lead us to feel better about ourselves.

Responding to the Love of God

At the end of the last section I said that the gospel of self-esteem delivers a "cruel deception." Saint Augustine helps us see the reason why. In his *Confessions* he says, "...to praise you is the desire of man, a little piece of your creation. You stir man to take pleasure in praising you, because you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you." While the gospel of self-esteem initially points people to God, it does so in order to point back at self. God is the means to help us feel better about ourselves, to help us find rest in ourselves, to help us soothe our troubled consciences. But since we were created to find our rest in God, the gospel

of self-esteem can never deliver satisfaction and contentment. Even as it claims to help people feel better, it leads people deeper into darkness.

Rest can never be found by seeking knowledge of self-worth. We are created with one driving need: to worship the living God. Until we have him, we will not be satisfied. Unless we are consumed with him, we will not be satisfied. Until he is our delight, we will not be satisfied. *Delight yourself in the Lord*, the Psalmist says in Psalm 37:4, *and he will give you the desires of your heart*. When God is your delight, you will get what you desire - you will find rest in God.

Part of what makes the gospel amazing is that through Jesus Christ we have the possibility of rich, deep, soul-satisfying fellowship with God. The gospel is not about self-esteem but the gospel does tell us over and over that God loves us. His love for us is real and because of his love and mercy and grace he sent his Son to die for us so that we might have life with him, in him, and through him. Our response to his love ought never be to join him in loving ourselves; our response ought to be love for him.

God is the chief object of our love, as reflected in the great commandment of Matthew 22:37-38: *You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment*. Other people are collectively (and individually!) the second object of our love, as shown in the second commandment of Matthew 22:39: *And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself*. The idea of this second command is not to stir self-love but to promote the golden rule: do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

Love is our response to love. In 1 John 4:19 we are told, *we love because he first loved us*. From love comes worship and obedience. We worship him, glorifying him, because we want the world to see our great Savior. Love champions its object. I love my wife so I speak affectionate things to her and tell others about her. I love my kids so I praise them and tell people what amazing things they have done. I love God and he is much more magnificent than they so I ought to focus on him with my whole being, praising him with my life, lifting him up and doing all I can to direct every eye toward him, sharing with the world his majestic acts for me. This is worship.

We are obedient to him because we know our obedience pleases him. Obedience is a sign of a child's loving heart. Disobedience shows only hardness. In a homily on 1 John 4:4-12 Augustine issued a famous - and famously abused - line: "Love, and do what you will." A short time later he says, "let the root of love be within, of this root can nothing spring but what is good." When our love is genuine (keeping in mind that not everything called love really is love), and our actions are motivated by our love, our actions will be good. In all things we do our motivation has nothing to do with self-esteem or self-worth, our focus is wholly on Christ. This is the cure to depression and low self-esteem: to be so drawn to Christ that self isn't even in the picture.

In John 15:1-11 Jesus gives the “recipe for happiness,” the means by which our joy is made full. It is not by being satisfied with self, it is by dwelling in the love of God and living for him:

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.”