

# Biblical and Psychological Perspective on Self-Esteem

By Bruce Narramore

Dr. Glenn O'Neal:

Tuesday through Thursday Chapel of this week, Dr. Bruce Narramore, who is associate professor of psychology at Rosemead graduate school, here on campus. His subject for the week is going to be biblical and theological perspectives of self-esteem. The chapel committee figured that by this time in the semester, you might need a series on that.

[Audience laughter]

I'm sure that it will be of great benefit to all of us and we welcome you to Talbot chapel. May the Lord bless you this week.

Dr. Bruce Narramore:

Thank you, Dr. O'Neal. It is a pleasure to share with you; this is my first experience in sharing at the Talbot chapel since Rosemead merged, and I've been looking forward to this time together. I was thinking, as Glen was making a few remarks of introduction, through some of my preacher jokes and I was reminded of the gentleman who was filling in while the regular pastor was away on vacation, and he brought a Sunday morning message, and after the service was over he went to the rear of the auditorium to greet the people as they left. A little boy about seven or eight years of age came through the line and shook his hand and says, "Mister, it's too long. People went to sleep." Well he kind of shrugged it off because there's one smart aleck in every

crowd, and he went ahead and he met more people, and pretty soon he noticed the same little boy. This time the little kid came through he says, "Over our heads; we couldn't tell what you were talking about." He didn't know what to do, so he went on and he met the rest of the people, and sure enough at the end of the line: same little kid coming through again. This time the kid says, "So boring, our own preacher is a lot better." Well, afterwards one of the deacons or elders in the church noticed what was going on. So they came up to the pastor, visiting speaker, and said, "I just wanted to reassure you. I noticed little Johnny coming through making some comments and I want you to know you don't need to worry about what Johnny says, because he's just a smelly kid runs around repeating what he hears anybody else say."

[Audience Laughter]

So I trust you won't have those problems this week. I especially appreciate the opportunity of being with you for three days because it it'll give us a chance to get a bit more in-depth in some things, and personally I'm more of a teacher than a preacher. And so, I would like to just try to share some basic fundamental perceptions on the way we should look at ourselves. This idea of self-concept, self-image of course, is a big popular thing these days and for that reason I almost hesitate to speak on it because anytime you get into the kind of faddish things it's easy to kind of sneak into some--is this on? (Tapping noise) No. Can you hear me all right back there? No. Do we have someone in the control room that can--He's looking at the walls. He doesn't know any more than we do up here (laughs).

All right I'll just try to speak a bit louder, does that help?

Dr. Glenn O'Neal:

Yeah. Test of your projection.

Dr. Bruce Narramore:

Yes, yes. Now, I don't know, Glenn, I've never taught homiletics, but to us projection does not mean, I think what it does--(laughs).

[Audience laughter and applause]

Now where we're before we were so rudely interrupted? You know, the attitude we hold toward ourselves is so basic and psychological research indicates and it effects nearly every area of life. Marital fulfillment is positively related to self-concepts. Those with better self-concepts are more happily married. Self-concept relates to academic achievement. Kids with better self-images tend to achieve better in school. Self-concept is related to vocational fulfillment. Those with higher self, higher levels of self-esteem tend to perform better in their jobs. Those with high levels of self-esteem are better adjusted interpersonally. They're more likely to be chosen as friends than those with low self-esteem. So in almost every area of life, the attitude that we hold toward ourselves is vital and crucial. And I think as we see ourselves preparing for various facets of the Lord's ministry, one of the most fundamental things that we can do is think about the attitude that the people we are called to minister to hold toward themselves. Well as I survey the field, I think there are three general ways of looking at self-esteem I'd like to first look at two inadequate views and then what I see as a Biblical view.

Perhaps the most common in our day is the secular humanistic view, which I just like to call optimistic humanism. Which I think is best been portrayed, in a literary way, perhaps by the little book, Jonathan Livingston Seagull, and those of you who have read the book know, and those who do not: Jonathan is a seagull who gets tired just the humdrum affairs of life. You know, flying back and forth, eating and sleeping, and doing the things your average bird does. So he so sets up on a self-improvement program and he begins to practice is flying. And he takes a dive that's deeper than, you know, the average gull is supposed to do and he smacks into the water, and he gets back up, and tries it again until he practices that maneuver. One day he's trying some tricky maneuver any crashes in the cliff and he nearly kills himself. But, being a gutsy bird,

[Audience laughter]

He pulls himself up by his bootstrap, his bootstrap or whatever else seagulls pull themselves up by, and he practices again. Finally, he masters that, he gets so good at this, that he reaches seagull heaven. And when he's here in heaven, he's talking to one of his disciples, Fletcher Seagull. And he says this, "Fletcher remember that you too can become a perfect, unlimited gull. You need no God," capital G, "because we are all gods," small g. And in a very beautiful, literary way, he captures the humanistic ideal that man has within himself all that he needs to grow, actualize, mature, or whatever phrase we choose to use. And this is certainly the most widely accepted view of human nature within the psychological community in our day.

It's important, I think, that we as evangelicals think seriously about this because it is this teaching that our young people encounter in college in secular institutions. And there is a certain

appeal to it that we'll look at in a moment. Without belaboring the point though, there are serious problems with this. I think there are historical problems, theological problems, logical problems, and practical problems; and very briefly, the historical problem is: if we're so great, why all the problems? You know? You don't have to be an expert in world history to realize that somehow this optimistic view of human nature doesn't seem to be panning out over the course of history. There's a theological problem; the scripture makes it clear. As Jeremiah the prophet says, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked, who can comprehend it?" The scripture tells us that we're not basically good, that we are very sinful. There is a logical problem, however, that I think many times we as Christians fail to combat some secular, unbiblical ways of looking at things--perhaps out of a feeling of inferiority. But if you think about this secular humanistic view and what it is trying to do; the secular psychologist, operating from the humanistic assumptions, you can like yourself, you can love yourself. You have all this capacity to grow, and to develop, and to mature, and actualize. But what is the foundation upon which he is attempting to erect this view? The foundation is man is another link in the evolutionary chain. He's an accidental colocation of atoms. He's just a chance-being in a meaningless universe. And upon this foundation he's saying, therefore, love yourself. So you run into a very serious logical problem. And most secular thinkers are not very honest when it comes to this point. They don't push their assumptions back to their foundation and see where it really gets them.

Bertrand Russell was a rare exception, who followed his this view of man to its ultimate-- let me just read you about a paragraph quote from Russell who held this this humanistic view of man, but was honest enough to follow it back, or follow it out to its conclusion. He says this: "That 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 his beliefs, are but the outcome of

accidental collocation 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 noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast depth of the solar system, and that the whole temple of man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of the universe in ruins. All these things, if not quite beyond dispute, are yet so nearly certain that no philosophy which 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." See? "Only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair can the soul's habitation henceforth be safely built." You see, and this is where we are led if we are going to honestly live out a secular view of human nature. This is where we end up. So there is a serious logical problem with secular humanism.

Fourthly, there is a practical problem. And the practical problem is that you and I were not created to function autonomously; and the moment we as human beings attempt to root our identity in ourselves, autonomously from God, we take a horrible burden of responsibility, and that burden of responsibility is to prove that I am a significant individual. And the only way that we have to prove that is through our efforts in our comparison with others. So you immediately get into a legalistic mentality and morality, in which it is incumbent upon ourselves as individuals to achieve something in order to base our sense of self-esteem. This also means, if we operate on this economy, that if half of us are relatively successful in doing that because we have achieved. That the other half of the population of the world is destined to a lousy self-esteem because obviously there in the lower half. Most of us, of course, are not comfortable even being in the upper half. We'd like to be up in the upper 10%. But the practical problem with the secular view is it puts the total responsibility upon man to somehow conjure up enough, enough activity

and enough achievement upon which you try to judge himself a significant person. These I think you'll agree are serious problems.

Well for every secular heresy I usually find there's an equally off-base Christian-heresy, and in in the area of self-esteem I think the opposite for perspective of the optimistic humanism is what I call a pessimistic worm-ism. And you know, there are those within our Christian subculture who seem to, to glory in debasing man as God's creation. And I think out of a right motive, which is to show man's sinfulness and our need of God. There is a tendency to distort the scriptural understanding of man in a direction that makes man seem worthless or insignificant. Let me give an example, I won't tell you the source because it's the point I want to get across, not to knock any particular book. But one person writes "Those who have been in tropical lands tell us there is a big difference between a snake and a worm. When you attempt to strike at them, the snake rears itself up and hisses and tries to strike back. A true picture of self. But a worm offers no resistance. It allows you to do what you like with it--kick it or squashed under your heel; a picture of true brokenness. Jesus was willing to become just that for us: a worm and no man. And he did so because that is what he saw us to be: worms, having forfeited all rights by our sin, except to deserve Hell. And he now calls us to take our rightful place as worms for him and with him." (Sarcastically) You see, this is the exalted Christian calling to be worms for Jesus.

[Audience laughter]

Now. But you see, as in nearly everything, there is a mixture of truth and error here. Because we have forfeited our rights by our sins. That's true. And I want to make it very clear that as I talk about some biblical foundations for self-esteem I am not questioning at all the

extent of our sinfulness. I believe in the concept of total depravity. But I think we often distort that, because depravity essentially means that we are all sinful, that every area of our life is influenced by sin; we can do nothing to merit God's acceptance because we can have no, we have no merit in terms of righteousness. Depravity does not mean that we are not significant, that we are of no value. And you see many people equate if we're sinful, therefore we lack righteousness, and we also have no value or no significance. And we tend to lump these together. So what I'd like to do is to try to ferret that out a little bit.

So I'd like to turn, thirdly, to what I would call a realistic view of human nature--which I think is a biblical view of human nature. Which to, very briefly summarize, I would see us as being number one: highly significant, and number two: deeply fallen. And in the remainder of the time we have this morning, I'd like to briefly sketch out five or six biblical foundations for a healthy sense of self-esteem, and then we want to develop this and talk about some related issue and our next two times together. Many Christians today are saying you should love yourselves. Christ is asked "what's the greatest commandment?" in Matthew 22 and he says, "Love your neighbor; love Lord your God with all your heart soul mind, and your neighbors yourself." And many people of kind of jumped upon I believe a secular humanistic bandwagon and kind of taken this verse as their banner. "Love your neighbor as yourself," and they say "now what Christ really meant, of course, was that you must first love yourself. And then this will issue out in the love to others and toward God." Now that may or may not be true, but I am of the impression that if that's what Christ wanted to say, he could have said it rather plainly; and that you have to do it some kind of, you know, questionable hermeneutics to end up with the statement that Christ is really saying here that you love yourself, and this will end up in loving others. And I fear we have a tendency in the evangelical community to take an essentially secular point of view--in this

case secular humanism--baptize it with a verse or two of scripture, and pass it off as Christian. I really think that this kind of a lousy basis to build an idea of Christian self-esteem.

So what I'd like to do is go back to Genesis and suggest that, beginning here, there is at least a fivefold biblical basis for a positive sense of self-esteem. Number one: we are created in God's image. Genesis 1:26 and 27 it is significant to me that the very first thing God chose to tell us about ourselves was that we were created in His image. You know of all the things that God could have chosen to reveal to mankind; He could have started out by focusing on our sinfulness and said, "By the way, back there before that there was a time you weren't." But the very first thing that God chose to tell us about ourselves: that we were created in His image. To me this is the ultimate foundation for a positive sense of self-esteem that we are created in God's image.

Secondly, we're given dominion over the earth: Genesis 1:26-31. Erich Sauer's little book, *The King of the Earth*, elaborates on this point that God placed man here as his appointed ruler over planet Earth. Granted, we have rather failed in this task, but nevertheless, God put responsibility--he gave responsibility to mankind to have dominion over the earth. And by the way, the fact that we are Image Bearers, and this in itself we could go on for hours, but perhaps we just need to remind ourselves that the fall did not do away with the image. It distorted it, it marred it, but did not destroy it.

Even in the New Testament when Paul is writing the church at Corinth. He says, "Remember that you bear the image and likeness of God." You know if I were writing to the church at Corinth, that's not the way I would have addressed them. Frankly, you know, if you look at the kind of lives they were living. But Paul reminded them that they were Image Bearers the whole route of Christian ethics lies here in the fact that we are image bearers. Why don't you murder another person? He's a bearer of the image of God. Why don't you curse at another

person? He's a bearer of the image of God. Why is it that every place that Christianity has gone, the status of women and children has been elevated? Because they're seen as Image Bearers. Now, I'm not minimizing the fact that we have not always gone as far as we can, and that we have not, in fact, perhaps mistreated women and children also. But by and large Christianity is the more than anything else to elevate the status of women and children. Why? Because every human being is seen as an image bearer. I would suggest that the ultimate root of a Christian ethic here, in terms of interpersonal relationships, is that we see one another as Image Bearers. Secondly, we're given dominion over the earth.

Thirdly we are crowned with glory and honor. Psalm 8 verses 5-8, a passage referring prophetically to Jesus Christ, also referring to the entirety of the human race. The Psalmist asks, "What is man that thou art mindful? For that you have created him a little lower than the angels, and crowned him with glory in honor." And actually in this passage is a is the foundation not only for a positive sense of self-esteem, but a realistic biblical humility that man has a location; it is a little lower than the angels, but it is higher than the animals, and mankind has its place right here as a created image bearer. And if we realize that in fact we are not gods that tends to humble us. If we realize that we're neither are we animals, that tends to give us an awareness of our significance before God. Psalm 8.

Fourthly, we're redeemed with high price. We're redeemed with a high price. First Peter 1:18 and 19, for example, "you weren't redeemed with corruptible things like silver and gold." The purchase price speaks to the value of the object. God didn't look down at man in the sand, and look over to Satan and flip him a quarter and say, "I want to buy back the human race." You see, he paid the ultimate price and that price speaks to the value of the object. There are lesser

things that that God could have attempted. Of course it took Christ Holiness two to reconcile us, and he was willing to pay that price.

Fifthly, we have angels watching over us. The Scripture does not say a great deal about angels, and certainly I think a lot of the medieval theology with a bit off base in the concept of angels, but it does say that even little children have angels watching over them. So apparently angels have an active daily function in the lives of the believer, and does not this speak to our significance to God? That you have angels watching. Now some of you, that may not mean much, others probably have several angels--you know maybe a legion of them. But that God has angels appointed to watch over us.

And finally, we have eternity prepared for us. Now, personally I'd be satisfied just kind of sneaking in the backdoor and have a little corner over there, you know? But the scripture tells us Christ is preparing mansions for us; and who knows what that's going to be like in that glorified state. But does not that, also, speak to our value? That the Lord is going to a lot of trouble to prepare a place so that we can spend eternity with him. So as you begin to think through the scripture you see that the Christians basis for a positive sense of self-esteem is not rooted on one little verse taken out of context in Matthew, which of course, is a quotation from the Old Testament. But rather, it's interwoven in the whole fabric of divine revelation from Genesis 1 when we're told it were created in God's image to the last chapter Revelation where we're told that we're going to spend eternity with Him. Woven throughout the fabric of scripture is a repeated emphasis on the fact that man is highly significant.

Now, the moment that we begin to stress our significance the question arises: what about our sinfulness? What about biblical injunctions to be humble? Pride comes before the fall. And that's where I'd like to to begin tomorrow: is to attempt to address the question, how can we

reconcile these apparent biblical foundations for a healthy sense of self-esteem with biblical injunctions to humility and biblical statements on the sinfulness of pride? So we'll pick up there in the morning. Let's close in prayer.

Father, I'm grateful that you have created this in your image. I'm grateful that I can call you father and that in acknowledging you as father I immediately sense a source of identity; that my self-esteem is not rooted in my own efforts, in my accomplishments, in the changing influences of life. But it is rooted in the fact that I am your child, created by you. And I pray that you will enable these truths to sink deeply into the hearts of each of us here as we prepare our own lives for a ministry to others. That we might see ourselves as highly significant to you. That we might see those we are called to minister is highly significant--we might give them a vision of who they are and be with us as we go on these next two days to try to tackle some difficult questions. How do we resolve these seeming paradoxes? That we might retain an open mind; that we might be open to allowing your word to speak to us in practical and life changing ways. As these things in the name of Christ. Amen.