

Biblical and Psychological Perspective on Self-Esteem Pt. 3

By Bruce Narramore

Dr. Bruce Narramore:

Glenn, that comment reminded me of the psychologist who was asked if he'd ever met a normal person. And replied, "No, but I'm sure if I did I could cure him."

I was also thinking of a story of a young minister who was filling in--this is not the same gentleman that we spoke of Tuesday morning--but was doing pulpit supply while a pastor was away. And he looked at the rear of the auditorium, and there a stained glass window had been broken out, and they replaced it temporarily, finances being the way they are in the church these days, with cardboard. And as he began his remarks he said, "You know I feel a little bit like that piece of cardboard, a kind of a substitute for the real thing." And he brought his message which, frankly, was not that good. And afterwards, one of the kindly, elderly ladies of the church came up to him said, "Sonny, I want you to know that we didn't think you were substitute at all. We thought you were a real pain."

[Audience "awes" then laughs]

That one takes a little longer.

These last two days we have been talking in more general terms about some biblical foundations for self-esteem. I would like today to try to pull this together in a bit more of a practical way to our daily lives. Stories are told of a gentleman in the neighborhood who had a reputation of just loving children, and loved all the kids in neighborhood. Nearly every

neighborhood has someone like this. You know, the children all gravitate to their home and he's kind of a hang-loose type. One day he poured a new driveway, cement driveway, and you know how children are. And he came out the next morning, there's a footprint here, and a handprint there, and so on, so on of such and such. And he saw this, and he was very irritated. He got up on the wrong side of the bed or something; he's really angry, and he started ranting, and raving all over a neighborhood, "Wait till get my hands on those kids," and someone noticed this, and thought it was quite out of character for a guy with a reputation for loving children. So they ask him, "well what's the matter, Brother Jones, I thought you love children?" He says, "I love them in the abstract, but not in the concrete."

[Audience laughter]

Well, this morning I'd like to take some of these abstract principles and bring them down a little more concretely. I've been talking about self-esteem in a broad way, a general way; suggesting that according to scripture we're both highly significant and deeply sinful. But I would like this morning to apply this to several specific areas of our self-concept, or the attitude that we hold toward ourselves. Basic areas of emotional need--and I want to relate this, not so much on a verse by verse way, but to some basic doctrinal themes, just to kind of whet your appetite to do some, some independent thinking on it.

The first basic human need is a need for love, or acceptance, or belonging. I will not go into length, other than to suggest that every person who has ever been born has been created with a need to be loved, and need to belong, and to need to feel accepted. And these needs are met, as I understand scripturally, in two ways: within the body of Christ, within the home, the family; in

other interpersonally. And then in our direct relationship with God. And certain doctrines seem, to me, to be specifically related to the idea of relationship, belonging, and love. And perhaps most important of these is the whole concept of son-ship. We're told in 1 John 3:2, "Beloved, now are we the sons of God." And in this great truth, that we are in fact God's adopted children, we have a terrific resource both for our own sense of belonging--there's someone that I belong to.--but also as we seek to minister to others, to root their self-esteem in the area of this need for a sense of love and belonging; is that they are the sons of God. The Psalmist writes in Psalm 28:10 "when mother and father forsake me, then the Lord will take me up." When those that are nearest and dearest to me on a human level, and we all have hurts, God will take me up. The doctrine of election, being among basically a Calvinist group this morning, has a great deal to say about our sense of belonging. This just didn't happen, and it's not even something that we basically decided, but God chose us; we're His elect. The whole biblical concept of redemption. The fact that Christ was willing to step into history to give his life to redeem is, too buy us with a price, to purchase us, speaks to our sense of belonging, and love, and acceptance.

Another basic human need that we have talked about more generally this week is the need for a sense of significance; to see ourselves as important people of value and significance. As I mentioned Tuesday, I think our sense of significance is ultimately rooted in the doctrine of creation. I think, secondarily, our significance is rooted in redemption. I'd like to elaborate a bit on that. There are those who would say, "You know, when you become a Christian, then you become worth something valuable or significant." And I think that confuses a bit the ultimate source of our identity, our sense of self-esteem, is the fact that we are created. At salvation we gain a sense of great, gained, imputed righteousness. And this extends even to our methods, our approach in evangelism, I think. There are those who would say, "You know, trust Christ and

become something." And there is certainly a truth to that, but more basically do we not say to them, "God made you. And you're a significant human being. Whether or not you acknowledge Christ or not as your savior, you are still a significant human being." In other words, your ultimate sense of significance is rooted in the fact that you are created by God. Now let me tell you how you can relate to him on a personal basis, so you can experience the fruits of the fact that you are created in the image of God. So that our ultimate sense of significance, I believe, is rooted in creation. But secondarily, certainly in redemption.

Let me read a paragraph from a strong systematic theology that speaks so much to the idea of significance, "Christ," as it applies to the atonement, especially: "Christ's death for man, by showing the worth of humanity, has recreated ethics. Christ's death for man by showing the worth of humanity--" notice that the worth of humanity does not come after redemption, it was because man was valuable to God that Christ even died. "Christ's death for man by showing the worth of humanity has recreated ethics. Plato defended infanticide as, under certain circumstances, permissible. Aristotle viewed slavery as founded in the nature of things. The reason assigned was the essential inferiority of the enslaved. But the divine image in man makes these barbarities no longer possible to us. Christ sometimes looked upon men with anger, but he never looked upon them with contempt. He talked to women, he blessed the child, he cleansed the leper, he raised the dead." Then he uses an illustration from Robert Burns, "walking with a nobleman in Edinburgh, met an old fellow, an old towns-fellow from Ayr, and stopped to talk with him. The nobleman kept waiting, grew restive. And afterward reproved Burns for talking to a man with so bad a coat. Burns replied, 'I was not talking to the coat, I was talking to the man.'" And here, rooted ultimately in creation, secondarily in the fact that we were redeemed, is the foundation for seeing ourselves--and those we are called to minister to--as highly significant.

A third basic emotional need is a need for a sense of right-ness. Or worthiness. That feeling of, if we can use a common term, "I'm okay." That there's, things are now right within. And of course our doctrine's now of justification and union with Christ have an immense amount to say. We, our sins are paid; Romans 8:1, "There is therefore now no condemnation to him that are in Christ Jesus." First John 2: 1 and 2, "my little children," once again picking up on the idea of son-ship, "these things write I unto you that you might not sin. But, if any man sons, he has an advocate in the father." In other words, the problem of guilt is solved. And we are set right, with a feeling of worthiness, through Christ's atonement for our sins, through imputed righteousness, and through forgiveness of sins. All of, all of these relate so deeply to the concept of being in Christ--and this is such a goldmine of practical truth in the concept that the believer's in Christ. It has to do with our sense of rightness or worthiness.

A fourth basic human need, emotional need, is the need for a sense of competence: "I can do things, I can function." No one likes to feel incompetent, and certainly God created us as talented people. It seems to me at least two doctrinal areas are especially important here. The first one, again, is creation. It is because we are created in God's image that we are gifted. God is all-knowing, we have knowledge. God is all powerful, we have some power. In most areas of God's character, you and I reflect a certain degree of that. But equally important, with the fact that we are created in God's image, to give us a sense of confidence, is the whole process of sanctification--that we are indwelled by the Holy Spirit. Paul says, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." So the believer has a sense, a twofold sense of competence, "I am created in God's image, I am gifted therefore, and also I am indwelled by the Holy Spirit who empowers me."

And fifthly and finally, in the area of security. Now confidence is more of an internally, "I can do it." Security is more how I feel within my environment. Are things going to fall apart tomorrow, or do I have a basic sense of security? Well certainly the doctrine of eternal security is as a basic foundation for a sense of personal security. The fact that we are sealed with the Spirit, the scriptures tell us, and the fact that we're indwelt by the Spirit. But a whole other area of theological thought is the sovereignty of God. What does more: to give of the child of God a sense of security, to really know that God is sovereign. And these difficult things that come into our lives, as we're told in Romans 8:28-29, can work out for the good because we're in the process of being conformed into the God's image. That whatever the trial, whatever temptation, whatever the frustration, that God is sovereign.

Personally, I think that the sovereignty of God is one of the most critical areas in terms of emotional health. It has to do with anxiety. If you really believe God is sovereign, and you have learned to live that out in your life, you don't worry a great deal about what's going to happen in the future. If you really believe God is sovereign, you solve the problem of guilt because Christ paid the penalty for our sins, and you don't continue to engage in a process of self-punishment because Christ is already paid, if you really believe in the sovereignty of God. So in many areas of our emotional life, in terms of security, the scripture speaks.

Then I would just like to suggest that in all of these areas is our need for love and acceptance; our need for confidence, our need for a sense of significance, a need for a sense of security, worthiness, or rightness. In each of these areas, our understanding of the church, ecclesiology, and how the body of Christ functions has something to say, because as we are told to bear one another's burdens, to love one another, to correct one another, to encourage one another, are we not making real, to one another, aspects of God's character? And truths that he is

trying to communicate with us? As we love one another, we are actually showing God's love, communicating his love, to one another. As we encourage one another, are we not building up each other's confidence? As we care for one another, are we not providing in a tangible way security that God has provided? When God says he is going to take care of his children, he means that the other children are supposed to help take care of the widows and the aging. So as we care for each other we, in a sense, put feet on many of these doctrinal truths.

Well this is, once again, a brief survey. But you see what I am saying, then, that in each area of our emotional life there are some very important theological concepts that--this is one of the beautiful things to me about being a psychologist who is Christian, that as I study the Scripture, and frankly I must tell you I get some my greatest kicks out of reading theology textbooks, some of them that you dread. Because once you get through having to study it to study it, and you go through it to see how it applies to life, you'll find that the theology can be alive if you're not trying to prepare for an exam. Now, I realize we have to do these things, and I'm not suggesting we can throw out the exams, but I get excited when I go back to some of our theology texts and read through it, and say "Now what are the implications of this for changed lives," not for doctrinal orthodoxy, although that's the place to begin, but for changed lives. And I would just encourage you as a psychologist; the scripture never gets old to me, in terms of lives. I've yet to find a human problem the Scripture does not speak to very clearly. And I would just like to leave you with that challenge as you go about your ministry; to search the scripture for relevance to people's emotional lives. Cause after all, this is what Christ came to do: change lives, to relate ourselves to him, to restore ourselves to him, to ourselves, and to our fellow man.

Well, we have a few minutes left. And let's just open it up for some questions. I'd like to limit it to the material that we've covered this week, essentially, because we could go many

ways. And if there are areas that perhaps I skimmed over, or you had a question about, just raise your hand here and we'll take about five minutes and try to tie some loose ends together. Yes, sir.

Speaker 1:

Yesterday you talked about [inaudible]

Dr. Bruce Narramore:

I think valuing ourselves as equally important members of the human race, I mean there that we are all gifted by God. If you look from God's perspective, we are all equally important. And he has gifted each one of us in the way that he chose. Now when, in Philippians, Paul tells us to "esteem others more highly than ourselves." I think that is, in terms of humbly acknowledging, "Hey, if we're getting in line," and I don't mean you know a line to the cafeteria, although that certainly may be part of it, that we say to others, "you go first." That if there is an opportunity for somebody else to do something, that we will encourage them to do it and give them the opportunity. It means that we are not tied up focusing on ourselves and our own needs, but we are focusing on the needs and opportunities of others. Paul says in Romans, "think no more highly of yourself than you ought." Now it doesn't say you think more lowly of yourself than you are. In other words, he says have a realistic estimate of yourself, and then prefer others. Alright, some others. Yes.

Speaker 2:

To summarize: the elements of self-esteem that are founded in creation are the elements of self-esteem that are found in the scripture are that [inaudible]

Dr. Bruce Narramore:

Perhaps there's only one that is totally different. The element of rightness, or worthiness, is founded in recreation; entirely in the Atonement. In others words, we have no righteousness based on creation. Righteousness comes at the atonement. In probably every other area both creation and redemption speak. The fact that we are significant because we are created in God's image creation speaks. The fact that we that Christ is willing to die for us says that he saw us as important or he wouldn't die, he didn't die for the animal kingdom. So, both speak to nearly every area in somewhat different ways, but the area of rightness and worthiness, not worth but worthiness, are grounded in recreation. Yeah, some others. And feel free to expand, you know, a bit on this or application if you wish. Yes.

Speaker 3:

[Inaudible]

Dr. Bruce Narramore:

Yes. Good. Alright, this is a good question. Frankly, the reason I focused more on the significance is I think, as evangelicals, we tend to focus more on the sinfulness. And so, in terms of time, if I got to be off balance I'd rather be off balance in that way, because I think we tend not to focus on that as much. Let me say that you never in your ministry help anybody by minimizing the extent of man's sinfulness. There is sometimes, especially among my psychological colleagues, the tendency to say "well I don't want to undermine self-esteem, so I'll minimize the sinfulness." And you never get anywhere because the sin-problem is not resolved by minimizing it. It's resolved by facing it and recognizing what Christ has done for us at the

cross. So that I am one who is very committed to the concept of depravity, which I believe means that every area of our life is influenced by sin; including my prayer life, and my Bible study, and my evangelism. That in all of this, there is never a time that sin is not somehow operative in our lives. I believe in all of our motives are somehow selfishly tainted. But you see, when you believe in the complete efficacy of the Atonement you can be ruthlessly honest in facing sin because they are paid for, it is a settled issue. So that I think that that's part of it.

The other part is holding in mind the fact that sin does not destroy our value and our worth, no matter how sinful we are, it does not destroy a value or our worth. Because, when Christ die? While we were in our sins. What sin does is arouses our sense of rightness, or our guilt, or worthiness. So if we keep in mind that significance is not destroyed by sin, righteousness is, and if we keep in mind that you do not solve problems sin by minimizing them, or calling them mistakes, or frailties, or human weaknesses, or whatever. And by the way, we all do this in different ways. You know the Armenian friends call it a human frailty; a weakness in the flesh. We Calvinists say "well you know, we all sin and you've got to sin a little bit to prove your doctrines right." You know, and we say it "you know, I can't help it," or whatever it is. But we, you know, I don't care what our theological perspective is. We all tend to find ways. Now we psychologists say it's a normal human emotion. A lot of the things my psychologist friends say are normal human emotions, the bible calls sin. And so do I. So you don't help the sin problem by minimizing it. On the other hand, facing sin straight on never impugns someone's sense of worth. So you always have to hold in balance. Yes.

Speaker 4:

[Inaudible]

Dr. Bruce Narramore:

Yeah I'm saying that why is human life important? Why does man have a sense of dignity? Is it because he evolved over millions of years, through chance, and here we are in a few more million years we'll look back and say you know, "boy look at what people were like back then." And somehow out of that I say I'm an important person. No. It's that that God chose to create me. He said I want someone to fellowship with, and I make them in my own image; and this gives us a sense of significance, and value, and identity, that our identity is rooted in the fact that we are not chance beings in a meaningless universe, but we are purposeful creations of the living God.

Speaker 4:

[Inaudible]

Dr. Bruce Narramore:

That I would not, venture into those troubled waters of the full meaning of the image of God. I tend to not look at the image of God. I would say, simply in terms of certain faculties, if that's what you mean. And I realize that we can look at the image of God in a relational way, in a faculty way, in a moral way, and frankly, I--theologians are divided on that and I would not have the gall to jump into that area other than to say that within any of your major theological trends and ways of looking at things, whatever it is, the image of God still speaks to man's significance.

Speaker 5:

[Inaudible]

Dr. Bruce Narramore:

All right, for those of you in back who didn't hear, the question is that: I have spoken in terms of the sovereignty of God relating to mental health, and do I find that Armenian in theology is bad for mental health? I'm rephrasing this word.

[Audience laughter]

But as a psychologist I try to be as honest as possible, I think that's what you were saying and I think, I think, that's what he was thinking.

[Audience laughter]

My general experience is that theology in itself usually does not damage mental health, but it may reinforce a pathology. Let's say that somebody is terribly insecure, and they come under a pastor who is continually dangling the believer with threats of losing his salvation, that is going to reinforce it. I might say that, having married the daughter of a Methodist minister and having many good friends in Asbury and throughout the Holiness movement, that those of us on the Calvinist inside tend to overestimate this, and we seem to think that, you know, your average non-Calvinist is just walking around in fear and trembling that they're going to lose salvation every day--and they really don't. They talk about the security of the believer as long as we're walking in fellowship with the Lord. And so what I'm saying is that the healthy Armenian tends not to pose a problem with this at all. It's when a pastor may distort it in the presence of a person who is already prone to insecurity. And I would say the same can happen with any evangelical

tradition. The same thing could happen in our Calvinist tradition, which is subject to similar distortions in other areas.

All right. Our time is gone. I'd be happy to chat with some of you afterwards. I want to thank you for the opportunity. It's just been a real joy. I look forward to some future interactions. Let's have a time of prayer.

Lord, I thank you for bringing us here. I just sense the, the variety of gifts, the unique ways you work to, to bring us together to prepare for your service. We pray that we can put all of this in a broad frame of reference; that we're really talking about who you are and who we are. I pray that we may get a clear glimpse of who you are as father, as creator. And that in the light of this we can see ourselves as, as your children and your servants. We will have a love to reach out to others. That you have chosen to send your son to purchase us out of slavery to their sins. I ask these things in the name of Christ. Amen.