

# Is Self-Esteem a Biblical Concept?

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Throughout the history of the Christian church there has been an ongoing debate and confusion over how we should view ourselves in light of the Fall and the restorative grace of God. The issue has been further complicated since the birth of psychology as a pseudo-scientific movement at the turn of the 20th century, with its emphasis on the need for positive self-regard.

Careless attempts to fuse psychological theories with biblical principles have often resulted in great suspicion of any teaching which smacks of psychology. We are left to wrestle with the uneasy tension between the apparently opposing concepts of self-denial and self-acceptance; self-love and self-renunciation; self-affirmation and self-crucifixion; self-worth and self-abasement.

A biblical survey of the term ‘self’ reveals that the vast majority of references are cloaked in negativity. Terms like ‘self-confidence’, ‘self-will’, ‘self-seeking’, ‘self-indulgence’, are cases in point. A study of Ellen White’s writings creates a similar picture. It is therefore legitimate to ask whether the concept self-esteem should be rejected as a psychological construct or embraced as biblical truth.

A dictionary search for the word ‘esteem’ reveals the terms, respect, regard, appreciate, approval, honour and value. The suggestion that we are to love ourselves implies that we should not only accept ourselves but also value who we are. This seems to fly in the face of traditional Christian theology, which has placed the emphasis on self-denial rather than self-love.

Self-affirmation and self-love are often viewed as antagonistic to the true message of the gospel. Passages like 2 Timothy 3:2-4, place those who love themselves in the same category as the “boasters,” the “proud,” and the “haughty.” Paul’s view appears to be compounded with references like the following from the pen of Ellen White: “Self-esteem and self-sufficiency are killing spiritual life . . . when this proud, boasting self-sufficiency and this complacent self-righteousness permeate the soul, there is no room for Jesus” (*Testimonies for the Church* vol.5, 538-9).

However, discussions related to self-esteem are often muddled by a failure to clearly define words and meanings. For example, it is evident from the above reference that Ellen White equates the term self-esteem with sinful pride and arrogance. However, words and meanings are dynamic and change depending a host of factors including time and place.

The idea of a healthy self-concept is not foreign to the writings of Ellen White. Self-esteem, defined in terms of a healthy sense of personal worth, finds its equivalent in her concept of “self-respect.” This self-respect is destroyed by indulgence in sin, culminating in a “loss of self-appreciation (*Mind, Character and Personality*, vol. 1, 257).” She also stated that, ‘While we should not think of ourselves more highly than we ought, the Word of God does not condemn a proper self-respect. As sons and daughters of God, we should have a conscious dignity of character, in which pride and self-importance have no part” (*ibid*, 260).

The modern-day concept self-esteem refers to the way we evaluate personal acceptability and worthiness to be loved, which carries with it pleasant or unpleasant feelings. It is strongly related to the way we perceive other people's view of us. Unfortunately, due to our fallen condition and the 'legacy of shame', which originated in the Garden of Eden, we place too much importance on other people's evaluation of us rather than God's evaluation.

So, how should we evaluate ourselves? The value of an object is indicated by the price people are willing to pay. For example, while opinions vary over the aesthetic beauty of the Mona Lisa, estimates place the value of the painting at around \$800 million - for paint on canvass.

We are of immense value to God. Jesus declared that He came to "give His life a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). Paul states that we are "bought with a price" (1 Corinthians 6:20, 7:23). Peter adds that we "were not redeemed with corruptible things . . . but with the precious blood of Christ" (1 Peter 1:18-19). Our self-worth is not based on any intrinsic value in ourselves, it is based on the value that God places in us. To say that we are unworthy is legitimate, but to say that we are worthless is an insult to God, for the Cross is the definitive statement of the value God places in man and is thus the basis of Christian self-esteem.

The Bible evidently recognizes that the way we view ourselves has a profound effect on how we relate to others and even to God. Numbers 13 relates an incident in which the children of Israel lost faith in God's promise to lead them into the Promised Land. Ten scouts having 'spied' out the land of Canaan and seen the occupying giants, declared, ". . . we were as grasshoppers in our own sight and so we were in their sight (v33)." Their grasshopper self-image paralyzed them with a sense of their own inferiority. Solomon recognized the reality of self-concept when he said, "For as he thinks in his heart, so is he (Proverbs 23:7)."

The view that we should value ourselves in no way contradicts the biblical command to self-denial. In Matthew 16:24-25 Jesus clearly states, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me. For whosoever desires to save his life will lose it, whosoever loses his life for My sake will save it." The 'self', which needs to be constantly denied, is our sinful nature, which must be kept under subjection to the Holy Spirit. However, David Carlson states the case well when he comments, ". . . although the old self has died with Christ, we still need to affirm that we still have a self, an identity, a personhood that has been reclaimed, renewed and resurrected by Christ (Counselling and Self-Esteem, 28).

A lack of self-esteem, self-worth and self-acceptance can effectively disable people from achieving their full potential and this is applicable just as much to those inside the church as outside. Lack of self-esteem is said to lead to feelings of inferiority, depression, anxiety, resentment and fear, whereas positive self-esteem is linked with good mental health and well-adapted personality. We are told that, Many who are qualified to do excellent work accomplish little because they attempt little . . . One reason of this is the low estimate they place upon

themselves. Christ paid an infinite price for us, and according to the price paid, He desires us to value ourselves (*Messages to Young People*, 192).

It is a false humility, which constantly demeans and devalues self. The Bible states that there is "no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1). That includes no condemnation of ourselves. We are told, "It is not pleasing to God that you should demerit yourself. You should cultivate self-respect by living so that you will be approved by your own conscience and before men and angels (*Mind, Character and Personality*, 260).

An anonymous quote from ancient wisdom says, "A man should carry two stones in his pocket. On one should be inscribed, 'I am but dust and ashes.' On the other, 'For my sake was the world created,' and he should use each stone as he needs it."