

Christianity and Your Self-Esteem

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You've heard the precepts: "Only make decisions that support your self-image, self-esteem, and self-worth" (Oprah Winfrey), "Of all things God created, what He is most proud of is me. I am His masterpiece, his most prized possession" (Joel Osteen, part of a self-declaration), "Sin is any act or thought that robs myself or another human being of his or her self-esteem" (Robert H. Schuller). Such thinking is becoming so commonplace that it's influence can be found practically everywhere from popular magazine articles to public school educational objectives to the pulpits of neighborhood churches. As Christians, we need to determine whether elevating our self-esteem is a valuable part of our Christian lives or whether it is harmful. How does God want us to see ourselves?

A quote from Deepak Chopra that goes back to at least 1993 and that has been repeated many times asserts, "You alone are the judge of your worth and your goal is to discover infinite worth in yourself, no matter what anyone else thinks" (Deepak Chopra, *Ageless Body, Timeless Mind*, 1993). In this same book, Chopra tells his readers that among the assumptions that must be discarded is the idea that there is an objective world independent of the observer. The Bible, on the other hand, tells us that God created man and put him into an independent, objective world. In fact, it shows God Himself to be an independent observer and our Judge. Clearly, with his claim, Chopra is discarding the Creator God, the Righteous Judge, and—since he rejects objective judgment—he logically also sees no need for a Savior.

Chopra advocates what he calls self-referral, "which means that we identify with our inner self, the unchanging essence of our soul. Self-referral is an internal state of well-being that doesn't depend on external circumstances" (Deepak Chopra, "3 Steps to Glowing Self-Confidence") (<http://www.oprah.com/spirit/deepak-chopra-self-confidence>). Through self-referral, we can discover who we really are, that we are "infinite spirit, unbounded and eternal" (ibid.). So now, after discarding the true God, Chopra has described the human self in terms that fit only God.

The most serious problem with Chopra's self-referral is the fact that it blasphemously makes man out to be God. Another problem is that, however much you may look in the mirror and love what you see, or talk to yourself or meditate within yourself and come away with a

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feeling of how wonderful you are, that is merely your opinion. In other words, self-referral, by definition, is subjective. It is only your opinion of yourself and may have absolutely no basis in reality. Granted, other people's opinion of you may also not be true. But there is a place to get a true picture of ourselves.

No One Knows Us Better Than Our Maker

As it is written, "There is no one righteous; no, not one. There is no one who understands. There is no one who seeks after God. They have all turned aside. They have together become unprofitable. There is no one who does good, no, not, so much as one." "Their throat is an open tomb. With their tongues they have used deceit." "The poison of vipers is under their lips;" "Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness." "Their feet are swift to shed blood. Destruction and misery are in their ways. The way of peace, they haven't known." "There is no fear of God before their eyes."

Romans 3:10-18

God, who cannot lie (Numbers 23:19; Titus 1:2; Hebrews 6:18) gives us in His Word, which is truth (John 17:17), a very different picture of humanity from that presented by today's self-esteem preachers. In brief, God tells us that people are sinners who can do nothing good. We are not perfect spiritual beings who must merely realize and believe in our potential to live it. Of ourselves, we are wretches who are "dead in transgressions and sins" (Ephesians 2:1). As Romans 5:12 says, "Therefore, as sin entered into the world through one man, and death through sin; and so death passed to all men, because all sinned." All human attempts to establish our own righteousness are to God "as a menstruation cloth" (Isaiah 64:6, *LITV*).

So, contrary to the false claims of Deepak Chopra and his pals, there is an objective reality we can go to in order to see our true selves. He is called God. In His revealed Word, the Bible, God tells us that we, and all humans, are sinful, evil, and bad. We cannot rely upon our own subjective knowledge of ourselves; only God knows what we are really like: "The heart is deceitful above all things, and it is exceedingly corrupt: who can know it? I, the LORD, search the mind, I try the heart, even to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his doings" (Jeremiah 17:9-10).

Is this knowledge of our sinfulness a terrible thing we must turn from? Is it psychologically unhealthy? Must we think good things about ourselves and concentrate on what personal transformation coaches such as Chopra call our infinite worth? No. One of the most spiritually healthy things you can ever do is to realize your sinfulness, your worth being on a par with a flatworm, your goodness as having the value of filth. Why? Because it is the first step in showing you the real solution to your dilemma.

Jesus Christ, the Righteous

God has provided the complete and perfect solution to our wretchedness: "What a wretched man I am! Who will deliver me out of the body of this death? I thank God through Jesus Christ, our Lord!" (Romans 7:24-25a). The Bible tells us, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

The eternal life this promises goes far beyond the fiction promoted by the self-esteem promoters: "Behold, how great a love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God! For this cause the world doesn't know us, because it didn't know him. Beloved, now we are children of God, and it is not yet revealed what we will be. But we know that, when he is revealed, we will be like him; for we will see him just as he is" (1 John 3:1-2).

The Lie that Jesus Died for You Because of Your Value

Some will ask, "If I am so completely sinful and without value, why did Jesus die for me?" The answer commonly given by many Christian preachers, even those who aren't considered self-esteem teachers, is that Jesus saved you because of your great worth. Preachers often put it this way: "Do you want to see how valuable you are? Look at the price Jesus paid for you." True, man is an amazing creature made in the image of God. But he fell. The Cross doesn't signify our worth. It testifies to God's astonishing love. God sent His Son to die on the Cross to save those who are completely unworthy of being saved. Our salvation is grace upon grace. Not only do our works not earn our salvation, neither does anything inherent within us earn it.

The tax collector of Luke 18 did not pray to God about his self-worth and how he was God's most prized possession and deserved God's blessings. He beat his breast and prayed, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" (verse 13).

What's the Harm in Overestimating Yourself?

When it comes to objects outside of ourselves, we can easily see how overestimating can lead to serious consequences. For example, we can see how if a jet fighter pilot overestimates what his aircraft can do, he may very well be killed in combat. If a mountain climber overestimates how much weight his rope can hold, he may overstress it, cause it to fail, and plunge to his death.

Many self-esteem gurus would say that high self-esteem presents no danger. Because we are perfect spiritual beings, they say, we cannot overestimate ourselves. High self-esteem is merely seeing ourselves for who we really are—people who are second to no one and who can achieve whatever we desire as long as we believe in ourselves. But believing in lies is unhealthy and dangerous.

Not seeing ourselves for the fallen and broken sinners we truly are can lead to frustration, disappointment, and serious failures in our lives. Rather than helping people have happier lives, high self-esteem can cause them to have problems in their relationships with others. Serious psychological studies of people with high self-esteem have found that "self esteem is an effective predictor of negative problem solving behaviours in close relationships" (Rusbult, C. E., Morrow, G. D. and Johnson, D. J. [1987], Self esteem and problem solving behaviour in close relationships. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 26: 293-303. doi:10.1111/j.2044-8309.1987.tb00792.x). High self-esteem seems to lead to more violent behavior (especially when the inflated ego sees itself threatened) and the popularity of self-esteem in America may be a cause of high rates of violence in America (<http://www.emotionalcompetency.com/papers/baumeistersmartboden1996%5b1%5d.pdf>). High self-esteem causes people to blind themselves to the possible negative consequences of high-risk behavior ("Self-esteem, self-serving cognitions, and health risk behavior") (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/11130737>), and individuals with high self-esteem were seen by others as having poor social skills and to be psychologically maladjusted ("Overly positive self-evaluations and personality: negative implications for mental health") (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/7608859>).

Inflating children's self-esteem can also have negative consequences. Maureen Stout, Ph.D., an instructor of education at the University of British Columbia and author of *The Feel-Good Curriculum: The Dumbing Down of America's Kids in the Name of Self-Esteem* says, "According to the self-esteem movement, if you can't give a child an A, it's going to oppress her.... But grades are not a punishment. They're a helpful and productive tool" (Stephanie Wood, "The Secret to Self-Esteem," *Parenting*)

(<http://www.parenting.com/article/the-secret-to-self-esteem>). As Albert Mohler says of efforts to boost self-esteem in children, "...telling children they are doing well when they are actually doing poorly is a destructive lie that misleads the student and, if anything, leads to even further frustration" ("The Self-Esteem Myth") (<https://albertmohler.com/2005/02/08/the-self-esteem-myth/>).

The Biggest Harm of the Self-Esteem Movement

At its core, the self-esteem movement is an anti-Christian, anti-Gospel lie. It says that we are inherently good and need only to discover that for ourselves. That is a lie. Lies imprison us. The lie that we are not sinners but inherently good binds us to a way of seeing ourselves that will never improve our real dilemma. Jesus, on the other hand, told believers, "You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free" (John 8:32). That truth includes the fact that man is a fallen creature, a sinner who is utterly unable to save himself. The Gospel also includes the truth that despite our sinfulness, God will save us and give us eternal life with Him if we will only trust in His Son as our Savior.

Are Christians to then walk around like whipped dogs with our sins ever before us? Not at all! We are to leave our burden of sin at the foot of the Cross when we first believe. Psalm 103:12 tells us, "As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us." Free from sin and condemnation, we can now walk peacefully and productively in our new life because we put our confidence and esteem where it belongs—in Jesus Christ.

Knowing what we have been saved from and who now lives in us, and holding to the hope of the resurrection and glory, we believers can live happy, abundant, loving, and productive lives. On the other hand, the philosophy of the self-esteem teachers is a God-rejecting, Gospel-rejecting lie that leads people to put smiles on their faces as they step into hell. It has no place in the life of a Christian and ought never be heard in a body of believers.