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Equipping, Enabling, and Encouraging Marketplace Leaders

Lookin' For Esteem In All The Wrong Places

Country western singer Johnny Lee recorded the song "Lookin' For Love." The lyrics go "*Lookin' for love in all the wrong places, lookin' for love in too many faces.*" The same is true for many of us as we go "lookin' for esteem in all the wrong places."

To esteem something is to set a high value on it, to regard it highly, and to prize it accordingly. So self-esteem is to set a high value on ourselves, to regard ourselves highly, and to prize ourselves. We see this focus on "self" all around us; the self-awareness books and seminars, and the self-improvement industry all teach us to get in touch with our "inner selves" to find happiness, confidence, and self-esteem.

The self-esteem crusade is rampant with its insidious tentacles reaching into the classrooms of our own children. In my daughter's first grade class the school offered an hour long self-esteem class three times a week. Parents were told attendance was not mandatory, but no alternative was given for parents who didn't want their 5-year old children to get "self-esteem" training. In a school of nearly 500 children my daughter was the only one not in attendance. She spent this hour in the library reading her favorite books.

Why not let her attend you may ask? First, because on close examination the course material was thinly disguised Eastern religion complete with relaxation exercises, visualization, centering, developing spirit guides, etc. Of course the material didn't use those exact words but the techniques they were professing were unmistakably similar. Second, self-esteem is the wrong focus for our children, and for us.

The "me" generation of the 60's spawned most of the self-esteem culture. There was "free love," marijuana, incense, transactional analysis, and a host of cultural changes that encouraged people



to focus on themselves; their needs and their wants. Perhaps the closest Biblical parallel would be life in Sodom or Gomorrah.

Our business culture is not immune to the “self-esteem” advocates. There are dozens of seminars and consultants who in the name of increasing employee morale, sensitivity, or improved productivity teach us to get in touch with our “inner selves.” They tell us that if “I’m OK, You’re OK.” They say that we can’t value others until we value ourselves. The key to self-esteem they say, is to focus on liking yourself. The humanist psychologists made popular the concepts of personal identity, positive self-image, self-actualization, self-esteem, and self-worth.

What psychobabble! We would all be a lot better off if we valued ourselves less, and God more. Can you imagine Jesus saying that he was greater than the Father? Can you imagine Jesus trying to find value in others by liking himself more? Or can you imagine Jesus becoming “self-actualized” by visualizing himself dying on the cross? If you have a hard time bringing these pictures up in your mind then you know that “self-esteem” as proffered by the world is not the Biblical solution.

The one thing that humanistic psychology and Biblical Christianity agree on is that we need to get to know ourselves. Humanist psychologists say we need to get to know ourselves so that we can feel good about ourselves. Whereas Biblical Christianity teaches us to know ourselves so that we might turn away from ourselves, and towards Jesus Christ.

Grandpa’s Milk Stool

When I was little my Grandfather still had cows on his farm. I remember every morning he would herd the cows into the barn, and begin the process of milking them. He always sat on a curious little three-legged stool. It seemed a precarious perch because if the legs weren’t the same length, or if he put the stool down on uneven ground he could tip over quite easily.

In his book, “*Building Your Self-Image*,” author Josh McDowell describes three human emotional needs and compares them to a milk stool:

- the need to be loved, accepted, and to have a sense of belonging;
- the need to feel acceptable, to have a sense of worthiness; and
- the need to feel adequate, to have a sense of competence.

McDowell asserts that if any of these three emotional “legs” is damaged a person’s self-image is affected. Someone with a low sense of worthiness may compensate in life by trying to be exceptionally competent. They might become workaholics to balance their poor self-image. Whenever our “balance” is off we try to compensate in another area.



Psychology versus Christianity

Where humanist psychology and Christianity disagree is how to develop a strong sense of belonging, worthiness, and competence.

Psychologists Adler and Maslow created hierarchies of need. Adler created a model of three steps (security needs, significance needs, and satisfaction through power) while Maslow's model had five (physiological needs, safety and security needs, love and belongingness needs, self-esteem needs, and self-actualization needs).

Self-Love

Both Adler and Maslow believed that man needed to move up the hierarchy in order. For example, you couldn't feel or give love until you had all your needs for security met. They believed that man could not love others until he first learned to love himself.

The Bible provides a completely different view. For example, rather than saying we need to love ourselves before we can love others, the Bible says we should loathe ourselves; *"Then you will remember your evil ways and wicked deeds, and you will loathe yourselves for your sins and detestable practices"* (Ezekial 36:31).

Jesus instructed the apostles to love their enemies, *"But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you"* (Luke 6:27-28). Not only are we to love our enemies, but we are to do good to them, bless them, and imagine this, pray for them! Nowhere in this teaching does Jesus make an exception for us in loving others only when we have learned to "love ourselves" first.

Jesus goes on to reinforce the need to love our enemies, *"If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even 'sinners' love those who love them. And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even 'sinners' do that"* (Luke 6:32-33). Again, there is no teaching that says we need to love ourselves before we can love others. In fact we are directed to love our enemies regardless of whether we have learned to love ourselves.

Self-Image

Biblical Christianity and humanistic psychology also hold opposite views when it comes to self-image.

Psychologists tell us we need to have a high self-image. Not a realistic self-image mind you, but a high self-image. They say we need this inflated self-image to counter the effects of our negative surroundings.



We cannot find these teachings in the Bible. In fact, God's word cautions us to have accurate, not inflated self-images. Paul wrote to the Galatians, "*If anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself*" (Gal. 6:3).

Paul warned the Romans not to think too much of themselves; "*Do not think of yourselves more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself in sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith that God has given you*" (Romans 12:3).

Whatever skills and strengths we have they were given to us by God, and we should be careful not to think of ourselves as better than others. Rather, we should consider ourselves soberly in light of the faith that God has given us.

Getting Started

We have discussed the world's view of the importance of self, and hopefully you see how the world view does not match the Biblical view. If we discard the world's notion that we need to worry about our self-esteem, and that we cannot love others until we first love ourselves, how then are we to live? What is God's plan for our emotional health?

Over and over in the Bible God says we need to deny ourselves and focus on Him. How do we stay focused on God? One way is to learn how to lead humble lives.

The idea of being humble is pretty foreign to most of us in the business world. We have been raised with slogans like "you've got to toot your own horn," and "you first, after me."

To be humble means to be low minded, not proud, haughty, or arrogant. God wants us to be humble not proud, "*God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble*" (James 4:6). If we want God's help rather than His opposition then we need to lead a humble life.

James goes on to describe the proper attitude, "*Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom*" (James 4:7-9).

Here are seven steps taken directly from this passage that will help us get our focus on God, and off of ourselves.

1) Submit yourselves

The first step is to submit ourselves to God. Matthew 6:10 says *His* will be done, not *my* will.

You cannot come before God as a humble servant until you are willing to submit yourself to His will.



2) Resist the devil

The expression, “The devil made me do it” doesn’t cut it. God says He gives us the power to do all things through Him, and that includes resisting Satan. When Satan tempted Jesus, Jesus answered him with scripture and Satan left (Matthew 4:1-11). When we are tempted to do a shady deal, or act in some other way that we know is not honoring to God we must stand firm and resist the temptation.

3) Come near to God

Think of your closest friend. Hours and hours are invested in making that relationship a rich and rewarding one. A relationship with God is much the same; we must spend time developing the relationship. We must come to God through reading and studying His Word, through hearing the Word (church and Bible studies), and through prayer. When we come to God He promises to come to us.

4) Wash your hands

Temple priests were required to wash their hands before entering the tent of meeting or giving a sacrifice. The washing of hands was an outward sign of an inward spiritual cleansing. James’ admonishment is that our outward actions must be pure. Whether at work, in the community, or in our homes, we must live lives of integrity honoring to God.

5) Purify your hearts

Have you ever known someone who said nice things to your face but stabbed you in the back when it benefitted them? James is warning us that we cannot be double minded; we cannot serve both God and manna. The attitude of our heart is just as important as our actions. Some people serve at church, and put on a happy face that says they enjoy helping the poor or less fortunate. In reality they are serving out of a sense of obligation. Have you ever encouraged someone at work to do something you knew was not in their best interests? Rest assured God knows the attitude of our hearts.

6) Grieve, mourn, and wail

Sin separates us from God, but a repentant heart restores us. When we fail we should admit our mistakes immediately to God. We should also realize that the sins of others keep them from a close relationship with God, and this is indeed something to weep over.

7) Serious commitment

James was not prescribing a dejected, humorless life when he said, “*change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom.*” Rather, he wants us to understand the seriousness of a life-long commitment to a relationship with God. Many people in James’ day thought happiness and success were signs of a close relationship with God. But remember what happened to Job? Job was wealthy, powerful, and had a large family. When he lost his family, his wealth, and his power his friends turned on him. Job’s own wife suggested that he curse God and die. But



through it all Job remained focused on God. Job even prayed for the very friends that had turned on him. God subsequently restored Job's fortune and his family.

One Final Thought

Jesus, instructing the disciples said, "*Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted*" (Mat. 23:12). It's pretty clear; if we want to be exalted by man we should lead prideful, arrogant lives. If we want to be exalted by God we should lead humble lives.

Don't look in the mirror for esteem, you're far too fallible. Don't look to family and friends for esteem, they are just as fallible. Rather, be like Job who through the best of times and the worst of times, looked up to God preferring to have God's esteem rather than man's.

In his book, *The Winning Attitude*, author John Maxwell notes a formula for spiritual success, "*If you want to be distressed, look within. If you want to be defeated, look back. If you want to be distracted, look around. If you want to be dismayed, look ahead. If you want to be delivered, look up!*"



Words to Ponder

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.” (Heb. 12:1)

“The person who looks up to God rarely looks down on people.”

“The Lord is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him.” (Lam. 3:25)

“You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.” (Jer. 29:13)

“But if from there you seek the Lord your God, you will find him if you look for him with all your heart and with all your soul.” (Deut. 4:29)

“The best way to stand up before the world is to kneel down before God.”

“As the eyes of slaves look to the hand of the master, as the eyes of a maid look to the hand of her mistress, so our eyes look to the Lord our God, till he shows us his mercy.” (Ps. 123:2)

“In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.” (Mat. 5:16)



Cases in Real Life

Bob was a salesman in a specialty industry. His territory covered the entire western United States. Because of his skill and the demand for his company's products Bob made a very comfortable living. He owned a very nice home where he lived with his wife, two children, and a loyal dog.

Bob and his wife took family vacations to expensive resorts every year. They had the best clothes, jewelry, and cars. They attended church on a regular basis.

One evening when he returned from a two-week sales trip Bob's whole life changed. His wife announced that she didn't know what she wanted out of life anymore, and wanted him to move out and take the kids with him. This, she felt, would give her the opportunity to "find herself." Reluctantly, Bob packed up his things and his children and moved into an apartment.

His wife started to see a psychiatrist. At first the sessions were twice a week, but they were quickly stepped up to daily sessions. She was having trouble finding herself so she continued to distance herself from her husband and children.

The stress of seeing his life crumbling around him caused his productivity to fall off at work. His sales commissions got smaller and smaller.

His wife decided that she could find herself if she went to a very expensive live-in clinic. So she packed her bags and left for a 12-week stay at the clinic, at a cost of \$3,000 per week!

While his wife was in the clinic, Bob had to stay close home to take care of the children so all his road trips were cancelled. His income fell precipitously. Soon the bank called to foreclose on his home mortgage.

Bob's wife came home from the clinic having "found" herself. She wanted the children back in her life, but a divorce from Bob. They just weren't compatible anymore, she said.

Then Bob's boss called. Not enough business in his area anymore, and too many complaints from the customers, he said, Bob's services were no longer needed.

With his family gone, his assets depleted, and with no income to support himself Bob suddenly turned to God. He attended church to listen to God's word rather than just warm a seat. Bob joined a small group of men who met weekly for Bible study and prayed for each other's needs.

Bob's emotional health began to stabilize. He got a new sales job. A small territory in which overnight travel was unnecessary. The money wasn't great, but he was able to keep his apartment and put some money away. Best of all, he could see his children every day.



The more Bob studied the Bible the more he wanted to learn. He signed up for classes at a nearby Bible college. He prayed, studied, and began serving as a lay pastor at his church.

Bob's wife started to see the changes in his life. She saw that despite the difficult times he endured he wasn't bitter. In fact, he was cheerful, confident that God would see him through all his trials and tribulations.

She wanted to have this kind of confidence. Despite twelve weeks in the clinic she realized she had only found herself, not God. She asked Bob for help. He took her to church and began to disciple her. They joined a couples Bible study. In a few weeks she found herself caring less about herself, and more about her relationship with God. She also found herself wanting to take care of her children and her husband.

The difficult trail they face is not over. But every day they face it together with the assurance that God is with them, helping them every step of the way.



Personal Review

Most of us struggle with our need to have a sense of belonging, worthiness, and competence. Forming new habits is a function of deciding what to change, knowing how to change, and making the change. Reflect on the questions below. Write your answers out on a piece of paper.

- 1) Where is your treasure? Are you concerned most with storing up treasure here on earth or in heaven? Remember you cannot serve both God and manna. Write down your examples.
- 2) Do you have a sense of belonging, worthiness, and competence? Are any of these out of balance?
- 3) What spiritual gifts has God blessed you with?
- 4) How can you use those gifts to serve others?

Now that you've got a legal pad filled with notes from your answers to the above questions go back and summarize them into a few basic areas; principles that are important to you. To help make these principles a part of your life follow the five action steps below:

- 1) Get some 3" x 5" cards. At the top of each card write out the principle that you want to apply in your life (For example "Balance between work and family," "Use my gifts in service," etc.).
- 2) On each card write out scriptures that remind you of the changes you want to make and some that will strengthen your commitment to change.
—Keep these cards with you all the time. Whenever you have a moment review the principles and the scriptures.
- 3) Act now. Procrastination is the biggest reason most people never make the changes they would like to make. They never get started. On the bottom of each of your cards make a list of little steps you can take or things you can do to activate the principle. If your principle is to serve others then make a list of ways you might serve others. Take action today. Call someone and offer your services. If your principle is to get close to God, then begin reading your Bible today, begin memorizing scripture. Most important, *do it today!*
- 4) Set dates now to review your performance. You've made a commitment to change. Set a date for a month from now to review how you're doing.
—As you review each card make note of how you're doing on the back.
- 5) Set another review date for another month and go through the process again. Continue the monthly reviews for a total of six months. Thereafter have a review with yourself every three months.



Key Points:

These nine key points will help you remember the basic elements of an emotionally balanced life:

- **Be confident.** God can and will help you through difficult times.
- **Don't compare yourself to other people.** God made you on purpose for a purpose. Don't worry about how you compare to others. Focus on God's plan for you.
- **Focus on God's grace not criticism from others.** God loves and accepts you just the way you are. Accept wise counsel from others while you keep working on God's plan.
- **Don't condemn yourself when you fail.** If God doesn't condemn you when you fail why should you?
- **Don't associate with people who are always negative.** Negative people will bring you down to their level, positive people will bring you up to theirs.
- **Help others by accepting, loving, and encouraging them.** Every person alive can be strengthened by acceptance and a word of encouragement.
- **Relax and be patient. God isn't through with you yet.** God's perfect plan includes perfect timing. Don't expect to become perfect overnight.
- **Have realistic expectations of others.** You're not perfect and neither is anyone else. God gave each of us different gifts. Have realistic expectations of people based on their gifts.
- **Make sure what you say and do is a reflection of God's presence in your life.** You are a light unto the world. Do what you can to show others what God's grace is all about.