



Pilgrimage:

A Newsletter of Christian Spirituality

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SELF-ESTEEM

Low self-esteem is an affliction of epidemic proportions in our age. Everywhere around us we find people who do not believe that they are good and worthy people. Often they are perfectly willing to admit that they hate themselves. All the signs of the epidemic are here: manifold pop cures for depression, abuse of alcohol and drugs, a high suicide rate, cults which purport to give meaning to life. The fact is, we find it terribly hard to feel good about ourselves.

It is ironic that all this self-degradation coincides with a culture that emphasizes self-fulfillment, almost to the exclusion of all other values. Even as we strive for self-fulfillment, we find no basis upon which to respect ourselves. (Ironic though this is, it points us towards the truth about human life: we will never find fulfillment so long as we seek it only for self. It is only when we live for Another instead of self that we will find what we seek.)

The usual secular cure for problems of self-esteem is to build up the ego. "You're not really such a bad person. Think of all the good things you have accomplished in your life. Think of your good points. Think how bad most people are, how self-centered. You're not like that or you wouldn't be here trying to change." The prescription is to accentuate the positive. We are to try to change our self-image so that we see the good things about ourselves, and downplay the bad things. We may even be advised to learn how to be more assertive, so that we can get what we want (and thus what makes us feel good) from other people.

The problem with such an approach -- and the reason why it only helps up to a point -- is that we are sinners. While we all have our good points, and have all accomplished something worthy of praise, we are also sinners who have done wrong. This is an irreducible fact of human existence. We can deal with it in various ways. We can deny that it is true: asserting that all we do is good. This requires considerable self-delusion, for all evil consequences of our actions must be attributed to other people or to circumstances beyond our

control. It is hard to maintain such a view for long, since it is not supported by reality.

Another approach (sometimes found in secular psychology) is to say that there are no "oughts", no moral imperatives. Our guilt is then an illusion, and there is really nothing wrong with us. This too requires self-delusion, because we know deep down that right is not the same as wrong, and all is not a matter of indifference. Even if we succeed in convincing ourselves that there are no "oughts", the life we are left with is pretty empty, since we have eliminated virtue. What is there to live for except pleasure? Devotion to anything other than self (including family, country, honor, integrity) is purely arbitrary, having no inherent value. We simply do as we wish.

Or we can try to convince ourselves that no one is perfect, and we should not expect to be perfect ourselves. This sounds plausible on the surface, but it has a fatal flaw: guilt. We are in fact guilty for our sins. The fact that everyone else is also guilty does not mitigate our guilt in the least. It simply means that we all need to do something about it. It is not just that we feel guilty: we really are guilty. We have done things wrong and deserve to be punished for them. We know intuitively that we deserve to die because of our sins, though we rarely admit this to ourselves. We can try to talk ourselves out of the guilt -- and some psychologies try to do this -- but even if we succeed in not feeling guilty, we have not really done anything about its root, the objective guilt. That is like treating the pain of a bleeding wound in the leg with morphine, without doing anything to heal the wound.

The secular solutions to the problem of self-esteem all fall short of what is needed. This is not surprising, since any attempt to understand man's nature apart from the truth of the Christian revelation is doomed. That is like trying to complete a jigsaw puzzle with only half the pieces. In the Christian faith we find the solution. It is a solution completely compatible with our experience of ourselves. It also gives us a self-esteem which cannot be threatened by anything that we do or that happens to us: it gives us a security unavailable anywhere else.

The first step in the Christian solution is to admit that we are indeed sinners. When we get depressed over our failures, the temptation is to say to ourselves, "You're not really so bad." Sometimes, however, what needs to be said is, "Of course you're a sinner. What did you expect, a saint?" We need to admit the reality of our sin and that we are responsible for it. We sense that we are not supposed to be this way -- and so it is. We are now broken, sinful, estranged from God and from ourselves. And the brokenness is something we are unable to repair, try as we might. Nothing we can do can undo the evil that we have done. The past is a burden to us, one which we cannot throw off.

Sometimes we are tempted to think that our sins are not really so bad: others are much worse sinners after all. Then we must remind our-

selves that even one sin is enough to cut us off from God, enough to require the Cross of Christ to repair it. We are tempted to think that since we are no worse than most people, God will let us into heaven, and even reward us for our virtue. The cure is to compare our righteousness not with other people's, but with God's. Ours is still far short of God's righteousness, and His is the only righteousness that will be in heaven.

Or we are tempted to think that if we do everything right from now on, and go to Church every Sunday and say our prayers, we will make up for all the past. That temptation is answered by the Cross which alone atones for our sins. We can add nothing to Jesus' work. Our only hope is in the salvation that God offers us.

In short, our real position is that of sinners in need of redemption from God. If we are to have a true self-esteem, we must accept the reality of our situation. We must be honest about our sin and our inability to do anything about it. Of course, if we look at our sin apart from grace, apart from God's offer of redemption, we are bound for despair. Our sin then appears as something overwhelmingly destructive: we are worse than nothing with no hope of ever being anything else. We are sinners without redemption. We can see no self-worth, even in the good things we have done, for even they are always tainted in our motivation or execution.

So even as we are honest with ourselves about our sinfulness, we must also be honest about what God does for us. He loves us. Even as we are sinners, He loves us. The Cross of Christ is the irrefutable evidence of that love. "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son" to die upon the Cross. He loves us as we are. He does not pretend that we are so good that we merit His love. He does not ignore our sin or pretend that it isn't there. He does not deny that the evils we have done are evils. Instead, He takes the burden of them all upon Himself. In His love, He forgives us all that we have done to Him by our sin. His love heals us, if we will allow it.

And it gives us the basis for self-esteem. We are to regard ourselves as He regards us. We are to imitate His love for us in loving ourselves. This means that we must acknowledge and accept our sinfulness. We cannot ignore it or gloss over it or pretend it isn't really evil. We must face it squarely, as Jesus faces it from the Cross. And then we must forgive ourselves, as we are forgiven. We cannot cling to our sin once we have faced it: heaping wretchedness upon ourselves. That is a denial of God's power and willingness to redeem our sin. It is an assertion of our pride (that my sin is too great to be forgiven) against God's love.

Our self-image is to be based on God's image of us. He sees clearly who we are -- the evil and the good together -- and loves completely. If we will imitate this approach, we will have nothing to fear in the matter of self-esteem. For we will esteem ourselves greatly because we are loved by God. Indeed, His Son has given His life that I may live. I am made worthy by such love! If I believe in the

Cross I cannot doubt the love, even at those times when I don't feel very lovable. And no sin can ultimately interfere with His love, and thus with my self-esteem. Every sin is still bad, of course, and wounds God's love. We will hate and fear sin for what it does to our Beloved. But when we sin we will repent as quickly as we can, and seek God's forgiveness. We will seek that restoration of the communion of His love.

Only when we base our self-esteem on our deeds can we be threatened by sin and stupidity. This is what most people do, of course, because most people don't really believe in God's mercy. But if as Christians we accept that He saves us without our earning it, then the way is open for us to love ourselves as God loves us. If we get angry or depressed when we do something wrong -- especially something particularly stupid or something bad we have been trying to correct in our lives -- that means that we are basing our self-esteem on our deeds and not on God's love for us. It is time not just to repent of the sin, but to try to reorient how we think of ourselves in relation to God. If we try to earn our own self-respect we are undoubtedly trying to earn God's respect as well. His, however, comes only as gift: ours must come that way as well.

Just because it is a gift does not mean that self-esteem is easy for us. We often resist it because we do not want it on God's terms -- the only terms on which it can be ours. We don't want to face our sinfulness. And we want to accomplish our worthiness by the strength of our arm and the cunning of our wits. We want it our way and not His. So we waste our effort chasing self-esteem where it cannot be found. It is only when we give up the chase that it can be ours.

Receiving our self-esteem as part of the gift of God's love for us will help us along in our Christian lives by keeping that central truth of the Gospel before us: salvation is God's free gift to us. It has the added benefit of giving us a sound basis for friendship. We will be able to accept our own imperfections and the hurts that these are bound to cause in a relationship. We will also be able to accept the imperfections of the other, being hurt by them perhaps, but not responding with surprise or anger. In other words, true Christian self-esteem allows us to truly esteem others as well as ourselves.

Since we live in an age which tends to deny human responsibility for sin, we need to be that much more ready to assert the truth about sin and redemption. The full acknowledgement of sin and our responsibility for it leads not to despair (as one might expect) but to its redemption by grace. By facing it we can be freed from its terrible burden. We can then know just how much God loves us. And knowing how much He loves us, we learn how worthy we are of our own love. Then our self-esteem is based on God's act, His love for us, and cannot be threatened by anything that we do.

