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# Challenges

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## The Cult of Self-Esteem: Turning the Cross Upside Down

By Jeff Bonzelaar, Executive Director

One of the more popularly held myths—one that I myself propagated for many years—goes something like this: We act in harmony with our self-portrait. Behaviors flow out of identity. “Who” you are determines “what” you do.

If we have positive self-regard, we will act in positive ways. But if we see ourselves negatively, we will act in ways which confirm this. We will perform poorly, even in ways destructive to others and ourselves. So, if we want to change for the better, we have to work on our self-image.

A few weeks ago I was reading an article in the *Detroit Free Press* (9/11/05) about Brighton Hospital, a rehabilitation program for addicts, which supports this claim. The story described how, in part, the hospital brings patients to health. One of the key factors has to do with self-esteem enhancement. Therapist Virginia June says that to “counteract years of self-loathing, . . . we love them until they learn to love themselves.”

This sounds nice, but it’s not Scriptural. Nowhere in the Bible are we called to love or esteem ourselves. If anything, just the opposite is stressed. We’re told to humble ourselves, to think more lowly of ourselves. We’re prone to self-conceit. The very essence of human depravity is our bondage to self-love and self-worship.

- “Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment.” (Rom. 12:3)
- “If anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself” (Gal. 6:3)
- “Humble yourselves before the Lord” (Ja. 4:10)
- “And he said: ‘I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven’ (Mt. 18:3-4).

If anything, we place too much value on ourselves. We put too much stock in our importance. We love ourselves too much. Psychologist David Myers concludes after years of research that, “The most common

***“Our problem is not poor self-image; our problem is preoccupation with self.”***

error in people's self-images is not unrealistically low self-esteem, but rather a self-serving bias; not an inferiority complex, but a superiority complex."

I am not saying that there is no value in healthy "self-esteem." How you see yourself does impact how you behave.\* But my argument is that positive self-regard has less an important role in shaping behaviors than we might think. How you see God, in fact, is the real issue. Unless this matter is primary in the quest for behavioral change, any improvement in a person's life due to increased self-esteem will be shallow and short-lived.

You may ask, What about Jesus' statement in Lk. 10:27, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself"? The conclusion reached today is: Loving yourself is a command. However, Jesus is not calling for self-love; He assumes self-love. Jesus never entertained the notion that there could be someone who didn't "love" (i.e., care for and have an interest in) himself.

Paul puts it like this in Eph. 5:29, "No man ever hates his own flesh." Masochists and suicidalists are no exception. Masochists hurts themselves because of the strange pleasure they find in hurting themselves or in the care and attention they receive afterward. Those who commit suicide do so to minimize the pain they can no longer stand to bear. Such behaviors are born ultimately out of a love for self, however twisted that love is.

So what is? Author and pastor John Piper writes, "The root of mental health is God—seeing God as God and enjoying God as God. The healing of the soul takes place in beholding splendor rather than in beholding self." True happiness is the result of being illumined by the Spirit to see and savor the infinite beauty of God in Christ.

Real, lasting, personal transformation occurs as we apprehend the glory and majesty of God. "We all, with unveiled faces, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another" (2 Cor. 3:18; KJV). John the Apostle writes, "We shall be like Him, because we shall see Him just as He is" (1 Jn. 3:2; KJV). The psalmist puts it like this: "Those who look to him are *radiant*" (Ps. 34:5; NIV). In other words, those who see God "shine, sparkle, glow, . . . they are made cheerful."

We talk about self-esteem when we should be talking about Christ-esteem. The Christian gospel is the good news about the "glory of Christ, who is the image of

God" (2 Cor. 4:4). The main message of the gospel is that he is very great and that we are very small. It is not about me and my significance—the "champion" within. The good news is about Jesus Christ and his wonderful, matchless, breath-taking magnificence.

True conversion enables us to see the glory of Christ and changes our focus from self to him. The Spirit's work of regeneration in our hearts frees us from our bondage to self, and we are given a new capacity to see spiritual beauty and to savor the glory of God. Jonathan Edwards (1703-1759) comments, "The first effect of the power of God in the heart in *regeneration*, is to give the heart a Divine taste or sense; to cause it to have a relish of the loveliness and sweetness of the supreme excellency of the Divine nature"

"The love of God for sinners is not his making much of them, but his graciously freeing and empowering them to enjoy making much of him," declares Piper. This is our salvation. "Those who look to him will live" (see Num. 21:8 and Jn 3:15 where "look" and "believe" are used interchangeably).

## CONCLUSION

We need to be redeemed from our man-centered instincts and develop a God-centered picture of reality—otherwise, we will distort everything we see—including and especially Christ's work at Calvary. Instead of seeing the cross as an indictment against our sin and celebration of undeserved grace, we boast, "Oh how valuable I must be that Jesus died for me!"

Friends, the cross is NOT about our value but God's. God had a view to his glory when he put Christ on the cross. Christ was put forth so that the glory of his righteousness (i.e., justice) would not be compromised when he forgives sins. "*He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus*" (Rom. 3:25, 26).

May the Spirit give us "power . . . to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that (we) may be *filled to the measure of all the fullness of God*" (Eph. 1:18-19).

***"So just as self-hate is NOT the problem; self-love is NOT the solution."***

\*The correlation between self-image and behavior is disputable. We all know of people who have accomplished great things with low self-esteem. Conversely, we have seen people with positive self-regard perform far below their capabilities and potential and even in self-destructive ways. Dr. Paul C. Vitz, professor of psychology at New York University writes, "The research shows that measures of self-esteem have no reliable relationship to behavior, either positive or negative."

*"We turn the cross upside down when we proclaim that Christ's death affirms our worth rather than*

**—Testimony—**  
Greg Roberts

"I am the sixth child of thirteen brothers and sisters. My parents were good people who served the Lord and raised us in a loving Christian home. My early years revolved around the church. I sang in the youth choir. I was a junior usher and helped in the clean up and maintenance of the church.

My parents worked hard to make ends meet but because we had such a large family, there were times when we could not afford the things that other families could. I envied my friends and began to resent them for having more than I had. I also grew jealous of my older brothers who were constant competition for my dad's attention. The least little bit of affection shown to them made me feel totally rejected. My resentment and anger grew until I convinced myself that my father didn't love me and I no longer loved him.

I began losing interest in church. To avoid going I would hide in the house until everyone left, or I would sneak out early in the morning before they woke up — anything to distance myself from my family. I decided it was time to step out and be my own man. I thought I knew what was best for me and no one was going to tell me how to live.

I joined a gang and it wasn't long before my life revolved around hanging out and getting high. I was always in trouble with the law and spent lots of time in the juvenile detention center.

At one point my parents sent me to Virginia to live with my grandmother hoping that would help, but I ran away and went right back to the street life I knew. The next 32 plus years were spent in and out of jails and treatment centers. I would get clean for a while but go right back out.

In 1984 I moved to Michigan hoping that a change in

location would help me stay away from drugs. I met a nice girl, got married and things did get better. I reconciled with my father and began seeing my family again.

My mom died in 1985 and I lost my dad three years later. It was more than I could take. I went back to the drugs to deal with the pain. This time the alcohol and marijuana were not enough so I started using heavier drugs.

My wife stayed with me for a while, but when she realized she couldn't make me stop, she left and filed for divorce. I eventually lost my home and job. I was reduced to living on the streets and sleeping in cars, spending every day trying to find a way to get high.

I was convinced that my life would never change and there was no hope. But the gospel seeds that were planted in me as a child began to take root. I remembered my father's talks with me about Jesus Christ. I knew I needed to surrender my will to Him.

Through everything my family and church never stopped praying for me, and on September 3, 2004, my pastor arranged for me to enter Life Challenge. My new Christian journey has been a blessing. I am receiving and learning God's Word on a daily basis through classes, chapel, and scripture memorization. Through prayer and devotional time, I am developing the relationship with Christ that my father spoke about. It's not always easy, but I put my trust in Christ, and He is faithful.

I completed the program in August and am now doing a 6-month internship. I am anxious to see where God will lead me. I am hoping to go into some kind of outreach ministry where I can share with others what Jesus has done in my life."



Basking in His beauty,

*Jeff*



P.S. We recently had a team of 16 men from our program involved in demolition and cleanup at a church in Pascagoula, Mississippi. The damage done by Hurricane Katrina was almost more than some could bear. We were grateful to have had the opportunity to serve those in such tremendous need. A special thanks to the people of Brightmoor Christian Church for underwriting this project.