



COUNSELLING PEOPLE WHO BELIEVE THEY HAVE LOW SELF-ESTEEM

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(student)

Three basic questions:

1. What is your problem?
2. What does *God* say about your problem?
3. What does God say *to do* about your problem?

➤ What is your problem?

Case study—Midge:

*I'm a nothing I feel inferior My self-concept is just absolutely zero. That may surprise you, but it is. My whole life has been a big, fat zero. Nobody notices me, nobody likes me and nobody cares about me. I may as well be dead. I feel so inadequate. Even when I pray I can't find any relief. Probably the Lord doesn't even like me. But He is the one who made me this way, so maybe He does. (in Jay Adams, *The Biblical View of Self-Esteem, Self-Love, Self-Image*, 38)*

How do we counsel this girl?

The standard answer in Christianity in our era would be that the counsellor needs to help Midge raise her self-esteem. But is our era's love affair with self-esteem, self-worth, self-image, and self-love truly the biblical response to Midge's emotional distress?

Question:

Why would most Christian counsellors today say that Midge has low self-esteem? They, like the rest of Christianity, have embraced the popular self-love, self-esteem psychology of our day.

Paul Brownback (in 1982):

The marriage between self-love theory and the evangelical Christian has in fact been consummated. (The Danger of Self-Love, 14)

Definition:

Self-love means simply that a person has a positive attitude about himself, feels good about himself. That is, when a person thinks about himself he has a positive emotional response. Self-love, then, is basically an emotion or attitude. (Brownback, The Danger of Self-Love, 14-15)

Perhaps the simplest way to state it is this: "I am lovable, therefore I should love myself." (64)

A short history of the self-love doctrine:

(from Brownback, *The Danger of Self-Love*, chaps. 2-3)

William James:

The father of self-love theory was an American philosopher and psychologist named William James (1842-1910). He wrote of two kinds of self-love, one called *self-feelings* (warm affection toward self), and the other called *self-preservation* (a person's natural tendency to avoid unnecessary discomfort, pain, or suffering).

Existentialism:

In the 1900s, William James' self-feelings met and married a philosophy called existentialism. Existentialists like Jean Paul Sartre taught that each person defines his own truth, reality, and good. Sartre said, "Hell is other people." In other words, heaven is *self*—self-determination, self-pleasure, self-love.

Brownback:

People have always been selfish, but existentialism provided a philosophical justification for it. (The Danger of Self-Love, 33)

Existentialism upholds the right of the individual to do whatever he pleases. Self-theory grants him the right to be loved while he is doing it. (68)

Evolution:

Existentialism's philosophical justification for self-preoccupation easily joined hands with the theory of evolution. If man is the highest being on the ladder extending from the primordial ooze up to the celestial heights of godhood, then naturally we should love ourselves. We are, after all, the best thing around.

Eric Fromm:

In the middle of the 1900s, all these ideas intertwined in the speculations of a psychologist named Eric Fromm. Fromm theorised that self-love is the basic necessity of human existence.

*If it is a virtue to love my neighbor as a human being, it must be a virtue—and not a vice—to love myself, since I am a human being too. (Fromm, quoted in Brownback, *The Danger of Self-Love*, 76)*

Carl Rogers:

Rogers organised Fromm's theoretical self-love speculations into a practical system of psychology. Rogers taught that all men are inherently good and wise, and can find their own way in life if they only learn to accept and love themselves, freeing the natural goodness and wisdom within them.

Brownback's summary of Rogerian counselling:

*The therapist establishes a close relationship with the client, thus becoming a significant other to him. He then communicates to the client that he accepts him unconditionally. Because the client is receiving unconditional acceptance from a significant other, he now can accept himself unconditionally and can once again be guided by his perfect internal guidance system, his self-actualizing tendency. (*The Danger of Self-Love*, 81-82)*

Self-love doctrine enters Christianity:

Before the 1950s there was no Christian literature promoting self-love. A trickle in the fifties turned into a stream in the sixties and a deluge in the seventies. The history of Christian publishing shows that self-love swept from obscurity to prominence in two decades.

Brownback:

*A look at the copyright page of some of the more prominent volumes of the subject ... reveals the significant fact that the earliest date among them is 1974. It was about that time or perhaps slightly before that the Christian public's awareness of self-love was born. (*The Danger of Self-Love*, 12)*

Although self-love had never been taught in the church, the theories of Rogers, Fromm, and others were imported into the church by Christians who had studied psychology at secular universities. The result was a wave of books flooding the church with a novel doctrine: self love is the key to loving God and others.

As a result, virtually all emotional, spiritual, and moral problems were redefined in terms of low self-esteem or insufficient self-worth.

Key early Christian proponents of self-love and self-esteem:

James Dobson:

Thus, whenever the keys to self-esteem are seemingly out of reach for a large percentage of the people, as in twentieth-century America, then widespread "mental illness," neuroticism, hatred, alcoholism, drug abuse, violence, and social disorder will certainly occur. (Hide and Seek, 1974, 12-13)

If I could write a prescription for the women of the world, I would provide each one of them with a healthy dose of self-esteem and personal worth I have no doubt that this is their greatest need. (What Wives Wish Their Husbands Knew about Women, 1975, 35)

It has been my purpose to formulate a well-defined philosophy—an approach to child rearing—which will contribute to self-esteem from infancy onward. (Hide or Seek, 1979 version, 58-59)

H. Norman Wright:

You can't be happily married to another person unless you're happily married to yourself. (Focus on the Family radio interview, quoted in Bobgan, Prophets of Psychoheresy II, 165)

Walter Trobisch:

You cannot love your neighbor, you cannot love God unless you first love yourself Without self-love there can be no love for others. (Love Yourself, 1976, 11)

Anthony Hoekema:

Parents should also handle disciplinary problems in such a way as not to damage a child's positive self-image. (The Christian Looks at Himself, 1975, 116)

Robert Schuller:

Self-esteem is ... the single, greatest need facing the human race today. (Self-Esteem: The New Reformation, 1982, 15)

The human being is a glorious, dignified creature with infinite value. (quoted in Adams, The Biblical View of Self-Esteem, Self-Love, Self-Image, 83)

In 1982 Schuller, an American televangelist, published a book entitled, *Self-Esteem: The New Reformation*. A wealthy supporter paid to have a copy of the book sent free-of-charge to virtually every pastor in the United States. Schuller suggested that the church needs a reformation similar to the Protestant Reformation of the 1500s. This time, however, rather than the battle cry being *sola scriptura* or *sola fide*, the slogan should be *self-esteem*.

In fact, Schuller said that all of theology should be revised in light of self-love doctrine.

Examples:

[Hell is] the loss of pride that naturally follows from separation from God A person is in hell when he has lost his self-esteem. (Self-Esteem: The New Reformation, 19)

Once a person believes he is an 'unworthy sinner,' it is doubtful if he can honestly accept the saving grace God offers in Christ. (98)

What we need is a theology of salvation that begins and ends with recognition of every person's hunger for glory. (11)

Question:

Did these early Christian proponents of self-love derive their views from the study of Scripture?

Bruce Narramore's admission:

Under the influence of humanistic psychologists like Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow, many of us Christians have begun to see our need for self-love and self-esteem. (You're Someone Special, 1978, 22)

Jay Adams comments:

While admitting that it was the unbelieving psychologists from whom they took their lead, they have made every attempt possible to scrape up some biblical support. The Scriptures are ransacked and verses are twisted in order to give some sort of biblical credence to the theory. But the Bible is used not to discover what God has to say or what to believe; rather, the viewpoint was already bought and brought to the Bible when the biblical search began. That methodology is always dangerous.

... Christians called the Bible into service long after the system [of self-love] was developed by others who had no intention of basing their system on God's Word. (*The Biblical View of Self-Esteem, Self-Love, Self-Image*, 63, 65)

Secular evaluations of the self-esteem movement:

What God says in the Bible is the only evaluation that really matters, but it is interesting to note that many secular experts have acknowledged that the supposed connection between self-love or high self-esteem and successful, balanced living is completely absent in scientific studies.

The California Task Force on self-esteem:

In the 1980s the state of California in the United States sponsored a major study on the relationship between self-esteem and "healthy human development."

Dr. Thomas Scheff of the University of California (one of the authors of the study):

... thousands of studies have been done on self-esteem since World War II, but the results have been inconclusive. (quoted in Bobgan, *Prophets of Psychoheresy II*, 124)

Point:

Studies show that while sometimes people who act badly have a low view of self, many times they have a very high view of self. Prisoners on death row often score in the highest percentile on self-love tests.

Observation:

Christian psychologists' confident assertions about the essential place of self-esteem in the healthy development of a child or in a good marriage are, in fact, completely unproven and have no scientific basis at all. Such authors and radio personalities are using their titles and positions to promote unproven speculations.

Journalists' comments on the California Task Force:

David L. Kirk:

That new soon-to-be-released scholarly tome, The Social Importance of Self-Esteem, summarizes all the research on the subject in the stultifying boring prose of wannabe scientists. Save yourself the 40 bucks the book costs and

head straight for the conclusion: There is precious little evidence that self-esteem is the cause of our social ills.

... Those social scientists looked hard ... but they could detect essentially no cause-and-effect link between self-esteem and problematic behavior, whether it's teen pregnancy, drug use or child abuse. (quoted in Bobgan, Prophets of Psychoheresy II, 123)

Charles Krauthammer:

Indeed, today's conventional wisdom that drug abuse and alcoholism and sexual irresponsibility come from an absence of self-worth seems to me to be precisely wrong. Drugs and sex and alcohol have but one thing in common: They yield intense and immediate pleasure. That is why people do them. Indulgence in what used to be called vices is an act of excessive self-love. (quoted in Bobgan, Prophets of Psychoheresy II, 136)

➤ **What does God say about your problem?**

Many counselees (not to mention counsellors) will need to have the unbiblical teachings of the self-esteem movement refuted before they can move to God's solution to their self-focused thinking. (Resources: *The Danger of Self-love*, Brownback; *The Biblical View of Self-Esteem, Self-Love, Self-Image*, Adams; *The Bible and Self-Love*, Joel James)

Brownback:

To get the reader [or counselee] over the initial shock of the suggestion that self-love may not be a thoroughly biblical concept is perhaps the hardest step. Once that is accomplished ... the really difficult part may already be behind us. (The Danger of Self-Love, 16-17)

Thirteen problems with the self-love/self-esteem doctrines

1) Doubtful source.

Colossians 2:8. See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ.

Comment:

Self-love's source makes it suspect from the start: it is not from, about, or according to Jesus Christ. Any teaching that is not from, about, or according to Christ has no business being promoted in the church, and especially not as an irreplaceable essential to the Christian life.

2) Inexplicable silence.

In spite of the claims that self-esteem or self-love is the greatest need of man, the Bible is strikingly silent on this issue. No biblical text encourages Christians to foster feelings of affection toward self. This is strange indeed if self-love is man's greatest need as self-love doctrine claims.

Brownback:

How could it be that a matter so vital to Christian living finds no development in the teaching of Scripture? (The Danger of Self-Love, 22)

Adams:

If the apostles were aware of this all-important matter of bolstering self-esteem ... surely they would have said something about it. Yet nowhere do we find them telling converted pagans in Corinth, in Thessalonica, in Crete, or anywhere else that God does not expect them to love Him or one another until they develop better self-images. (The Biblical View of Self-Esteem, Self-Love, Self-Image, 52-53)

Of course, it would be possible for Christians who hold self-esteem doctrines to say that the insights of this movement were not uncovered until the twentieth century. But that would impale them on one or the other horns of a dilemma: 1) For centuries God withheld from His church truth that is essential to fruitful Christian living, or 2) God doesn't think that self-image teaching is all that essential after all. (53)

Comment:

Paul was clearly not concerned about damaging the Corinthians' fragile self-esteem when he wrote 1 Corinthians 1:26-29.

Summary:

In spite of claims that self-esteem is man's greatest need, the Bible is strikingly silent on the subject.

3) Misdirected worship.

Romans 1:22-23, 25.

Brownback:

... *there is one common error—the attempt, to one degree or another, to assign to man the esteem that is rightfully God’s. (The Danger of Self-Love, 125)*

The greatest peril of self-love is that it is worship of self. (130)

Example:

Robert Schuller's definition of self-love:

It is a divine awareness of personal dignity. It is what the Greeks called reverence for self. It is an abiding faith in yourself. It is a sincere belief in yourself. (Self-Love: Dynamic Force of Success, 32, quoted in Brownback 129-130)

Point:

With terms like *divine*, *reverence*, *faith*, and *belief*, Schuller has clearly moved into the realm of worship. In so doing, he openly acknowledges what most self-love proponents in the church try to obscure: with self-love, reverence, faith, and belief are gradually but inevitably transferred from God to self.

The biblical attitude:

Psalm 115:1. *Not to us, O LORD, not to us, but to Your name give glory because of Your lovingkindness, because of Your truth.*

4) Sinful comparing.

Ecclesiastes 4:4. *I have seen that every labor and every skill which is done is the result of rivalry between a man and his neighbor. This too is vanity and striving after wind.*

High self-esteem is maintained by participating in what the Bible calls the foolish and frustrating sin of *rivalry* or *comparing*.

C.S. Lewis:

What we call 'ambition' usually means the wish to be more conspicuous or more successful than someone else. It is this competitive element in it that is bad. It is perfectly reasonable to want to dance well or to look nice. But when the dominant wish is to dance better or look nicer than the others—when you begin to feel that if the others danced as well as you or looked as nice as you, that would take all the fun out of it—then you are going wrong. (God in the Dock, 56)

James Dobson's doctrine of *compensating*:

Comparing is a major strategy in James Dobson's self-esteem theory. If your child is bad at sports, you encourage him to take up piano so he can compare himself to the athletes and feel superior. Dobson calls it *compensating*.

Succinctly stated, compensation is your child's best weapon against inferiority. (Dobson, Hide or Seek, 84, quoted in Bobgan Prophets of Psychoheresy II, 106)

A biblical example of compensating:

Luke 18:9-14

Which man—the Pharisee or the tax gatherer—exhibited high self-esteem? Note: This is the first of many cases in which it is extremely difficult to distinguish that which self-love doctrine promotes from what the Bible plainly calls sin.

The compensation treadmill:

- rivalry
- fear
- pride
- feelings of inferiority

Brownback:

King Saul ... stood head and shoulders above the people. Then he came face-to-face with Goliath, who was head and shoulders taller than he, and day after day he hid in his tent. That is the way self-esteem works. There is always the need to keep climbing, always the fear that Goliath will come along It is always embarrassing to be second especially when you were once first. (Brownback, The Danger of Self-Love, 143)

- depression

Ed Welch:

Some students of depression suggest that the increase in depression is due in part to the backlash of the self-esteem teaching.

The reasoning is straightforward. What happens when people are raised on a steady diet of "You are great, you can do anything, you deserve it, you are the best, you can get what you want"? Sooner or

later they find that they are not great, they can't do everything, they are not the best, and they can't control it all. Depression and denial are the only two options left. (Welch, Depression: A Stubborn Darkness, 119)

5) Sanctified boasting.

Psychology Today:

I LOVE ME. I am not conceited. I'm just a good friend to myself. And I like to do whatever makes me feel good. (quoted in Brownback, The Danger of Self-Love, 129)

Example from a Christian book:

God wants us to see ourselves as his gift to the world. (Rouner, You Can Learn to Like Yourself, quoted in Adams, The Biblical View of Self-Esteem, Self-Love, Self-Image, 83)

Comment:

We all know people who believe they are God's gift to the world. Do they exemplify Christ-like humility?

Brownback's illustration:

Imagine George strolling into the country club after winning the town golf tournament and saying, "It feels so great to know that you are good. Actually, I've always known that I am a rather fine golfer. I certainly do play a superb game. I really feel good about myself."

It might be argued that it is acceptable to esteem yourself, as long as you do not talk about it. But if it is acceptable to think such thoughts, why cannot they be verbalized? Perhaps the answer is that the overt expression of the matter really exposes its true nature. (The Danger of Self-Love, 121)

Biblical commands regarding boasting:

Proverbs 27:2. *Let another praise you, and not your own mouth; a stranger, and not your own lips.*

Proverbs 25:27. *It is not good to eat much honey, nor is it glory to search out one's own glory.*

Comment:

It is not easy to reconcile these commands of Scripture with the positive self-talk required to maintain high self-esteem.

A biblical example of positive self-talk—Nebuchadnezzar:

Daniel 4:30. *The king reflected and said, 'Is this not Babylon the great, which I myself have built as a royal residence by the might of my power and for the glory of my majesty?'*

Note:

Contrast Daniel 4:37: *Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise, exalt and honor the King of heaven, for all His works are true and His ways just, and He is able to humble those who walk in pride.*

Objection:

Christian proponents of self-esteem would say that, while Nebuchadnezzar's boasting was sinful pride, what he did was *different* than the high self-esteem and positive self-talk they are promoting.

Response:

Although self-esteem advocates claim that what they are teaching is different than Nebuchadnezzar's boasting, it's not easy to determine exactly what that difference is. In fact, in practice the two are indistinguishable.

Comment:

Perhaps what self-esteem proponents do not want to admit is that, starting from a worldly source, they have been guilty of sanctifying worldly virtues: pride and the God-condemned sin called *boasting*.

More biblical commands:

Jeremiah 9:23-24. 1 Corinthians 1:27, 29, 31.

Brownback:

The problem is that the man has chosen the wrong object for his boasting Even if you have worth, a basis for a good self-esteem, your boast should not be in yourself but in Him. (The Danger of Self-Love, 97)

It is a serious theological error to see confidence in our abilities as a hallmark of mature faith ... (103)

Note Paul's warning to the tragically immature Corinthians:

1 Corinthians 4:6-7. Now these things, brethren, I have figuratively applied to myself and Apollos for your sakes, so that in us you may learn not to exceed what is written, so that no one of you will become arrogant in behalf of one against the other. For who regards you as superior? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?

John Calvin:

*For there is no other remedy than to pluck up by the roots those most noxious pests, self-love This the doctrine of Scripture does. For it teaches us to remember, that the endowments which God has bestowed upon us are not our own, but His free gifts, and that those who plume themselves upon them betray their ingratitude. (quoted in Brownback, *The Danger of Self-Love*, 18)*

Summary:

A fifth problem with the self-love doctrine is it encourages (indeed requires) the biblically condemned sin of boasting. Attempts to distinguish the positive self-thoughts and proclamations of the self-esteem movement from boasting are nothing more than word games, an exercise in calling evil good (something God sternly condemns in Isaiah 5:20).

6) Increased men-fearing.

Proverbs 29:25. The fear of man brings a snare, but he who trusts in the LORD will be exalted.

Dobson:

*Feelings of self-worth and acceptance, which provide the cornerstone of a healthy personality, can be obtained from only one source Self-esteem is only generated by what we see reflected about ourselves in the eyes of other people. It is only when others respect us that we respect ourselves. (quoted in Bobgan, *Prophets of Psychoheresy II*, 107)*

Narramore:

*We can never have a positive self-image apart from other people. (quoted in Adams, *The Biblical View of Self-Esteem, Self-Love, Self-Image*, 37, emphasis added)*

Comment:

If this were true, it would leave people in a constant state of men-fearing. You are nothing more than a puppet, since your view of yourself (which is supposedly the key to emotional and spiritual stability) hinges exclusively on what other people think about you.

This leaves people languishing under Jesus' condemnation in John 12:43, *They loved the approval of men rather than the approval of God*.

Observation:

Again it is difficult to distinguish between what self-love doctrine teaches as essential to Christian living and what the Bible calls sin.

Dr. Robert Smith:

*Self-esteem philosophy teaches us that we must have the praise of men before we can function properly. It is regrettable that believers accept this unbiblical, even anti-biblical philosophy and teach it as a necessity for other believers. (in Bobgan, *Prophets of Psychoheresy II*, 107)*

7) Conviction of sin.

Self-love doctrine's promotion of unconditional positive self-regard is contradictory to biblical examples of the conviction of sin.

*If the right to feel good about one's self comes as part and parcel of mere existence, then there is no place for guilt or loathing; indeed, there is no need for repentance. (Adams, *The Biblical View of Self-Esteem, Self-Love, Self-Image*, 99)*

Biblical examples of conviction of sin:

Ezekiel 36:31. *Then you will remember your evil ways and your deeds that were not good, and you will loathe yourselves in your own sight for your iniquities and your abominations.*

Isaiah 6:5. *Then I said, "Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips ..."*

Luke 18:13. *But the tax collector, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, the sinner!'*

Point:

It is not easy to see how the conviction of sin and high self-esteem can co-exist.

CS Lewis:

Unless Christianity is wholly false, the perception of ourselves which we have in moments of shame must be the only true one. (The Problem of Pain, 45)

Summed up:

*The Holy Spirit's work in convincing you of sin is to make you dissatisfied with yourself. (Wesner, quoted in Adams, *The Biblical View of Self-Esteem, Self-Love, Self-Image*, 25, emphasis added)*

8) Confusion over unconditional love.

Summarised by Brownback:

One of the most prominent arguments of evangelical self-love literature is that we must be unconditionally lovable because God's love for us is unconditional. (The Danger of Self-Love, 88)

Unconditional love defined:

Unconditional acceptance ... is accepting the person as he is, not necessarily requiring change. (80-81)

The source of unconditional acceptance—Carl Rogers:

*Rogers identified unconditional self-regard as occurring when an individual "perceives himself in such a way that no self-experience can be discriminated as more or less worthy of positive regard than any other." By this he meant unconditional positive self-regard, which is self-love under all circumstances and behavior. (Bobgan, *Prophets of Psychoheresy II*, 72-73)*

Applied to child-raising:

*... We can make our child feel his immense worth by showing him our unconditional love. This means we accept our children fully, no matter how they act. (Narramore, quoted in Brownback, *The Danger of Self-Love*, 110.)*

The notion of unconditional love summed up:

*Nothing we do in any way affects our relationship to God, including either His attitudes or actions toward us. (Brownback, *The Danger of Self-Love*, 89)*

Unconditional *self*-love:

Self-love theory says that the love that God has for people must be imitated by an individual as he loves himself: "Nothing I do in anyway negatively affects my positive standing with myself. Nothing I do could make me think less of myself."

Evaluation:

Unworkable on the human level:

*Any arrangement by which one person constantly gives unconditional acceptance to another is unworkable in any absolute sense. The theory can never be fully put into practice; it must give way to the realities of life in its application. The only way any person-to-person relationship can survive is with at least some responsibilities on both sides. There must be some conditions of acceptance. (Brownback, *The Danger of Self-Love*, 110)*

The psychologist's office (assuming the psychologist is Rogerian) is the only place in adult life where a person will find unconditional acceptance.

*The problem is that sooner or later the client must walk out the front door, where he finds that there are conditions to acceptance. (Brownback, *The Danger of Self-Love*, 144)*

Point:

A child who expects perpetual positive affirmation from God, others, and self, will feel betrayed by God, will be let down by others, and will never rightly perceive himself.

For example, the child who has been "unconditionally accepted" and told how wonderful he is (even when he isn't) all through his school years might find that his employer will *not* unconditionally accept him when he is lazy and unproductive at work.

Does God unconditionally accept us?

Yes and no, depending on whether you are talking about *justification* or *sanctification*. Theological imprecision here is dangerous.

- Justification: God's acceptance of us in Christ is conditioned exclusively and eternally on the cross work of Christ.
- Sanctification: God's on-going discipline of believers makes it clear that, in the area of sanctification, God's acceptance of us is not unconditional. He requires and actively works for change, and He does not regard us and all our behaviour positively.

Brownback:

We need to recognize that in our relationship with God justification is not the end of the matter Though God will never sit as Judge in regard to the eternal destiny of His children, that does not mean that He is blind or indifferent to their sins. (The Danger of Self-Love, 112)

Hebrews 12:6, 10. *Those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and He scourges every son whom He receives" He disciplines us for our good, so that we may share His holiness.*

1 Peter 1:16-17. *It is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy." If you address as Father the One who impartially judges according to each one's work, conduct yourselves in fear during the time of your stay on earth.*

Adams on passages that speak of our identity in Christ:

They are designed not to make us satisfied with ourselves so that we may accept ourselves as we are, but to destroy any self-satisfaction that may exist and to motivate us to make greater progress in Christian living. (Adams, The Biblical View of Self-Esteem, Self-Love, Self-Image, 78-79)

Point:

Those who speak of God's love as being unconditional have not considered all the aspects of a believer's relationship with God.

In fact, I don't use the term "unconditional love." First, it isn't a biblical term, and therefore, we aren't required to use it. Second, it confuses the issue as people tend to want to apply

the idea indiscriminately to both justification and sanctification.

Brownback:

*Apparently it makes a great deal of difference to God and to us how we live. It affects our fellowship with Him, our suitability for service, His blessing on our lives, and much more. Our relationship with God is conditional in many vital respects. (Brownback, *The Danger of Self-Love*, 114)*

Examples:

- 1 Corinthians 11:18-19, 22, 30
- How do church discipline and unconditional acceptance go together?

9) Biblical warning.

2 Timothy 3:1-5. *But realize this, that in the last days difficult times will come. For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, revilers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, unloving, irreconcilable, malicious gossips, without self-control, brutal, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power; Avoid such men as these.*

Contrast Paul's statement with James Dobson's:

Whenever the keys to self-esteem are seemingly out of reach for a large percentage of the people, as in twentieth-century America, then widespread "mental illness," neuroticism, hatred, alcoholism, drug abuse, violence, and social disorder will certainly occur. (Hide and Seek, 1974, 12-13)

Observation:

Paul attributes to *self-love* what Dobson attributes to a *lack of self-love*. Both cannot be right.

Brownback:

Recall the list of social problems that are said to result from low self-esteem. It included such items as hatred, alcoholism, drug abuse, and violence. Rather than viewing those things as sins that have as their solution the cleansing power of the blood of Christ, they are seen as the consequences of low self-

esteem and have as their solution the boosting of feelings of self-worth. (The Danger of Self-Love, 21)

Point:

How you define the problem determines the solution you pursue. That's why it is so important that we use biblical terminology when describing people's problems.

The doubtful logic of blaming social vices on a lack of self-love:

Indeed, today's conventional wisdom that drug abuse and alcoholism and sexual irresponsibility come from an absence of self-worth seems to me to be precisely wrong. Drugs and sex and alcohol have but one thing in common: They yield intense and immediate pleasure. That is why people do them. Indulgence in what used to be called vices is an act of excessive self-love. (Krauthammer quoted in Bobgan, Prophets of Psychoheresy II, 136)

Question:

Are the apostle Paul and self-love proponents talking about the same thing?

Exegesis:

The phrase *lovers of self* in 2 Timothy 3:2 is *philautoi*. It is a compound word consisting of *phileo* (love) and *autoi* (selves). We should note that Jesus' command to love your neighbour as yourself in the Gospels uses the word *agapao*. What is the difference?

W. E. Vines:

Phileo is to be distinguished from agapao in this, that phileo more nearly represents tender affection. (Vines Expository Dictionary, "Love", 3:21)

Suggested translation of 2 Timothy 3:1-2

But realise this, in the last days difficult times will come, for men *will have feelings of warm affection toward themselves ...*

Summary:

- The word *philautoi* in 2 Timothy 3:2 sums up with startling accuracy the feelings of self-regard taught by the self-esteem movement.
- In contrast to today's self-love doctrine, the apostle Paul states categorically that *a warm affection toward self* is the heart of our sinful society's problems.

George Knight on 2 Timothy 3:1-5:

The list begins and ends with words expressing a misdirection of "love" [i.e., lovers of self ... lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God]. This suggests that what is fundamentally wrong with these people is that their life is misdirected and that the other vices flow from this misdirection when self rather than God (and others) is made the central focus of one's life all else goes astray. (The Pastoral Epistles, NIGNT, 430)

Brownback:

For the most part 2 Timothy 3 has been ignored by the proponents of self-love. There has been little serious attempt to explain its apparent condemnation of the kind of self-feelings they advocate. That failure is quite outstanding and should cause us to proceed with extreme caution ... (The Danger of Self-Love, 62)

10) Self before Christ.

The biblical order of priority:

Matthew 6:33. *But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.*

Self-love doctrine, based on Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs, says that you cannot fulfil basic life responsibilities until your "need" for self-esteem is met. Therefore, seeking to love oneself is the Christian's highest duty, of greater precedence and sequentially prior to seeking Christ and His kingdom.

Self-love advocates on the priority of self-love:

James Dobson:

If I could write a prescription for the women of the world, I would provide each one of them with a healthy dose of self-esteem and personal worth I have no doubt that this is their greatest need. (What Wives Wish Their Husbands Knew about Women, 35, quoted in Adams, The Biblical View of Self-Esteem, Self-Love, Self-Image, 9)

Walter Trobisch:

*Self love is thus the prerequisite and the criterion for our conduct towards our neighbor You cannot love your neighbor, you cannot love God unless you first love yourself Without self-love there can be no love for others. (quoted in Adams, *The Biblical View of Self-Esteem, Self-Love, Self-Image*, 34, 68)*

Note Paul Brownback's comment:

Protecting the ego is a full-time job. (The Danger of Self-Love, 152)

Bruce Narramore:

[Narramore] was (quite rightly) asked by a client, "Aren't we to seek first the kingdom of God?" He replied: "Putting a priority on self-acceptance is the first step many of us need to take if we are going to build a more positive attitude toward ourselves."

Observation:

Building a positive attitude toward self has moved into first place, trumping seeking Christ and His kingdom.

Evaluation:

Dr. Robert Smith:

*Dobson also talks about a child having a need for self-esteem and acceptance. These philosophies have been taught by Abraham Maslow and others who claim that they are essential prerequisites for a person to function in a responsible way. In other words, until one has these needs fulfilled, we can't expect him to obey God's commands. Again, this is unbiblical. (quoted in Bobgan, *Prophets of Psychoheresy*, 86)*

Adams:

"You can renounce all your ties and follow me after ... you have learned to love yourself." The very idea sounds ludicrous when you put it in Jesus' mouth! (The Biblical View of Self-Esteem, Self-Love, Self-Image, 109)

Plainly, Jesus' priorities differ from those in modern self-worth need theory. (47)

11) Biblical instructions.

- ❖ Matthew 5:3. *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

Jesus did not say: "Blessed are those who have high self-esteem," or "Blessed are they who have replaced inferiority feelings with high self-esteem," or "Blessed are they who have a healthy sense of self-worth and self-acceptance." (Bobgan, Prophets of Psychoheresy II, 152-153)

- ❖ John 15:5. *I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing.*

High self-esteem is focuses attention on the wrong person—self rather than on God who gives and sustains all human gifts and abilities.

1 Corinthians 4:7. *For who regards you as superior? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?*

Psalms 139:14. *I will give thanks to You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; wonderful are Your works, and my soul knows it very well.*

- ❖ Ephesians 5:29. *... for no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it ...*

Objection:

What about people who are clearly dissatisfied with themselves and who express hatred for self, up to and including committing suicide, because of their self-loathing?

Response:

Counsellor: *Why do you hate yourself?*

Teenage girl: *Because I am fat, ugly, and nobody likes me.*

Counsellor: *If you hated yourself, wouldn't you be glad that you were fat and ugly, and that nobody liked you? When you hate another person, do you wish good on them? Of course not. You aren't glad that the girls at school whom you are jealous of are slender, attractive, and popular, are you? Hatred wants bad things, hurtful things for the people it hates.*

Your problem isn't that you hate yourself; you love yourself and are dealing with the disappointment that you aren't as attractive and popular as you wish you were. If you truly hated yourself, you would be glad to be ugly and disliked, but you love yourself, and therefore, ardently desire for yourself the attention the pretty and popular girls are receiving.

Point:

The self-loathing of the person who supposedly suffers from low self-esteem is actually the result of a deeply committed self-love that strongly desires better for self than he or she is getting.

12) Misused passages.

1. Misused passage: Matthew 22:37-40

Matthew 22:39. *You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*

Christian proponents of self-esteem claim that Jesus said we must love ourselves before we can love others. In other words, love for self is the *de facto* first command of the Christian life.

Walter Trobisch in *Love Yourself*:

*Without self-love there can be no love for others You cannot love neighbor, you cannot love God unless you first love yourself. (quoted in Adams, *The Biblical View of Self-Esteem, Self-Love, Self-Image*, 34)*

Evaluated by Jay Adams:

When Christ said that the whole law could be summed up in two commandments (love for God and love for one's neighbor), He intended to say exactly that and nothing else. Yet some Christians (with a psychologizing bent) and some psychiatrists who are Christians are not satisfied with that; they (dangerously) add a third commandment: love yourself.

*... The fact that Christ distinguishes but "two commandments" (vs. 40) is decisive. Had He intended to stress a third (particularly when one of the other two was dependent upon it) He could not have done so by using the language that He employs in this passage. Such psychologizing of the passage erases its plain intent and seriously diverts its stress. (*The Christian Counselor's Manual*, 142, 143)*

Evaluated by Paul Brownback:

The kind of self-love encouraged by self-theory (philia) leads to an excessive self-concern in which the person does not love (agape) his neighbor ... as he loves himself but less than he loves himself.
(Brownback, *The Danger of Self-Love*, 128)

Understanding Matthew 22:37-40:

The parallel structure:

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart ...

You shall love your neighbour as your self ...

Point:

The complementing prepositional phrases (*with all your heart* and *as yourself*) define the intensity with which loving God and neighbour are to be pursued.

When Jesus instructs them to love their neighbour, He assumes that people's hearts are naturally preoccupied with caring for themselves and their basic needs. Christians are to use that natural bent as an illustration of how to meet the needs and desires of others.

Question:

Are the *feelings of self-affection* promoted by the self-love movement even under consideration in Matthew 22:39?

Answered lexically:

The word for *love* in Matthew 22:39 is *agapao*, not *phileo*. Therefore, it seems most likely that Jesus' was speaking of *self-sacrificial actions*, not feelings of affection for self.

Answered from the OT context:

Jesus' command to love your neighbour as yourself is quoted directly from Leviticus 19:18. That verse concludes a section (19:9-17) in which the following subjects are dealt with:

- leaving the corners of your field unharvested for the poor and needy (v. 9-10)
- not stealing from or lying to one another (v. 11)

- not making false oaths (v. 12)
- not oppressing, robbing, or withholding wages from your neighbour or employees (v. 13)
- not taking advantage of those with physical handicaps such as deafness or blindness (v. 14)
- refusing to treat a poor neighbour unjustly in court (v. 15)
- not slandering neighbours or attempting to harm them physically (v. 16)
- not hating, taking revenge on, or bearing a grudge against your neighbour (v. 17-18)

God summarised His instruction on how to treat your neighbour with the command, "Love your neighbour as yourself."

Point:

Leviticus 19 has nothing to do with feelings of affection, and everything to do with righteous, self-sacrificial action toward your neighbour. It is a reflection of the Golden Rule: do unto others as you would have them do unto you (Matt 7:12).

Summary:

Jesus assumes that people naturally give attention to eating, being treated justly, and so on. On that basis, reflecting the context of Leviticus 19:18, Jesus commands His followers to care for their neighbour's needs and desires *as they already* care for their own.

If a chronic lack of self-love is the human race's greatest problem, then for Jesus to command people to love their neighbours *as themselves* was a dangerous and foolish thing to do. But Jesus knew that sinners naturally act in their own best interests, and that this natural inclination would be an excellent object lesson on how to love their neighbour.

Note:

This was exactly how the apostle Paul approached teaching husbands to love their wives.

Ephesians 5:28-29. *So husbands ought also to love their own wives as their own bodies for no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it ...*

Four conclusions regarding Matthew 22:39:

- There is no command—real or implied—in Matthew 22:39 to love yourself.
- Both Jesus and Paul *assumed* that sinners have an in-built instinct to seek their own best, and used that instinct to teach Christians how to love others.
- The self-love promoted by psychology—an emotional affection for self—is not under consideration in Matthew 22:39.
- The self-love movement contradicts Matthew 22:39, teaching people to be *more* preoccupied with themselves than with others.

2. Misused passages: Matthew 6:26 and 10:31

Matthew 6:26. *Look at the birds of the air, that they do not sow, nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not worth much more than they?*

Matthew 10:31. *So do not fear; you are more valuable than many sparrows.*

Adams:

*The point is not man's great worth but God's far-reaching providential care. If it extends to sparrows which are worth so little, then it surely extends to man, who is worth more. (Adams, *The Biblical View of Self-Esteem, Self-Love, Self-Image*, 84)*

But:

If self-image enthusiasts wish to say that God counts man's worth to Him ... and that this worth amounts to something that compares to sparrows, the fact is hardly calculated to bolster one's self-worth! The comparison can only serve to cool enthusiasm, not foster it. (85)

13) Dangerous theology.

1. People should love themselves because they are created in God's image.

The logic:

Narramore:

When God said, "Let us make man in Our image," (Genesis 1:26), He once and for all provided a basis for human dignity, worth, and value. He sealed

*forever the fact that every person who walked on earth would have the right to see himself as a creature of worth, value, and importance. (quoted in Brownback, *The Danger of Self-Love*, 87)*

Summarised:

- Man has unconditional worth because he is made in the image of God.
- Because of this, people should love themselves.

Brownback's comment:

*In supporting that concept practically all evangelical writers have dealt with the first premise, but the second aspect of the argument has been too often ignored or assumed. (Brownback, *The Danger of Self-Love*, 96*

Evaluation:

While the Bible teaches that being made in God's image dictates how we treat *others*, it never teaches that we should love ourselves and nurture feelings of self-worth because we are made in God's image.

*Man's nature, which bears God's image, is never held out as a reason for having high self-esteem. (Adams, *The Biblical View of Self-Esteem, Self-Love, Self-Image*, 81)*

❖ Being made in God's image affects how we treat *others*:

Since people are made in God's image, we don't murder them or murder them with our tongues.

Genesis 9:6. *Whoever sheds man's blood, by man his blood shall be shed, for in the image of God He made man.*

James 3:8-10. *But no one can tame the tongue; it is a restless evil and full of deadly poison. With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God; from the same mouth come both blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be this way.*

❖ Being made in God's image affects how we see ourselves:

However, biblically speaking, the appropriate response to being made in God's image is a sense of humble smallness and an outburst of worship of God.

Psalm 8:3-6, 9. *When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars, which You have ordained; what is man that You take thought of him, and the son of man that You care for him? Yet You have made him a little lower than God, and You crown him with glory and majesty! You make him to rule over the works of Your hands; You have put all things under his feet O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is Your name in all the earth!*

In contrast to the feelings of self-worth and high self-regard encouraged by the self-love movement, the glory and dignity of being made a little lower than God caused David to burst forth in praise for God's majesty, not his own; it causes him to consider his own inadequacy and smallness.

Psalm 139:14. *I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made ... (ESV).*

Comment:

We cannot allow worldly self-esteem doctrine to rewrite David's words to "I praise *me*, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made."

Brownback:

What God intended to be a source of praise to Himself has become malformed so as to become a ... basis for self-adoration. (The Danger of Self-Love, 98)

Further comment:

The supposition that we should think high thoughts of ourselves in response to being made in God's image involves a serious oversight of logic.

Brownback:

In order for that worth to be inherently his, man's gifts must function autonomously; they must be operative apart from the work of God. (101)

The biblical view—we are not autonomous:

Psalm 100:3. *Shout joyfully to the LORD, all the earth. Serve the LORD with gladness; Come before Him with joyful singing. Know that the LORD Himself is God; it is He who has made us, and not we ourselves.*

Point:

Everything of worth finds its ultimate source in God and depends on Him for life and meaning and fruitfulness, the appropriate response is not self-esteem but adoration of the God who is the source of all. (Brownback, The Danger of Self-Love, 104-105)

Conclusion:

While the Bible clearly teaches that being made in God's image affects how we treat *others*, God's word never even hints that we are to love ourselves because we are made in the image of God. The Scripture does not embrace the psychologists' logic that image-bearing leads to feelings of self-worth.

Furthermore, Psalms 8, 139, and 100 teach a completely different response—a humble exaltation of God, not self.

2. Undercutting grace.

Self-love advocates emphasise that Christians should foster a strong sense of self-worth because Jesus died for them on the cross.

A sampling of quotations:

Man's intrinsic worth and significance as the image-bearer of God is magnified by the lengths to which God went to redeem him. (Robert Morey, quoted in Adams, The Biblical View of Self-Esteem, Self-Love, Self-Image, 93)

Sinful men are valuable to God. If God loves sinful men for the redeemable value He sees in them, then we ought to love these men too, including ourselves. (Norman Wright, quoted in Adams, The Biblical View of Self-Esteem, Self-Love, Self-Image, 88)

It is as if Christ had said, 'You are of such worth to me that I am going to die; even experience hell so that you might be adopted as my brothers and sisters.' (William Kirwin, quoted in Adams, The Biblical View of Self-Esteem, Self-Love, Self-Image, 90)

Of course, the greatest demonstration of a person's worth to God was shown in giving us His Son. (Donna Foster, quoted in Adams, The Biblical View of Self-Esteem, Self-Love, Self-Image, 91)

The fact that God gave His son to die for you proves how eternally valuable you are. (J.W. Jepson, quoted in Adams, The Biblical View of Self-Esteem, Self-Love, Self-Image, 92)

*There must be something truly wonderful about us if he (God) can love and accept us so readily. (Cecil Osborne, quoted in Brownback, *The Danger of Self-Love*, 106)*

Summed up by Anthony Hoekema in *The Christian Looks at Himself*:

*The continuing worth of man after the fall is particularly evident in the Bible's teaching on redemption Surely God would not give His Son for creatures He considered to be of little worth. (quoted in Brownback, *The Danger of Self-Love*, 105)*

Question: Were you worth the price God paid for you?

Evaluation—An attack on grace:

The notion that God redeemed man because of his great worth is ...

... a false belief that borders on heresy In an attempt to exalt man, by supposing him to be of infinite worth, God's grace is unwittingly denied.

*The cross magnifies Christ and His marvelous grace—not us and our supposed worth. (Adams, *The Biblical View of Self-Esteem, Self-Love, Self-Image*, 87, 93)*

Question:

Did God get value for money when He purchased you with the blood of Christ?

The whole point of grace is that there is no relationship between the price Christ paid and the value of what He purchased (see Deut 7:7-8).

*If we are of intrinsic value and worth, Jesus' death was not a sacrifice but a shrewd bargain. (Bobgan, *Prophets of Psychoheresy II*, 151)*

CS Lewis:

Christ did not die for men because they were intrinsically worth dying for, but because He is intrinsically love ... (Miracles, 52)

Dr. Trevor Craigen:

In Scripture no context presenting the wonder and grandeur of salvation even remotely suggests or attempts to apply the doctrine in such a way so that anyone may now validly conclude himself to be worth dying for, or himself to

be worthwhile and significant Salvation is, in all of its aspects, a testimony of the grace of God toward those who were unworthy of eternal life and of His love. Salvation signifies, not the worth of man, but the sinfulness of man. (quoted in Bobgan, Prophets of Psychoheresy II, 150-151)

Observation:

The man-centred source of the self-love doctrine (humanistic psychology) reveals itself again in its result: a man-centred view of grace.

Further observation:

A God-centred Bible and man-centred psychology can't be integrated, and when attempts are made to do so, inevitably doctrines central to the Christian faith end up being sacrificed or perverted.

Adams:

Notice how the self-image proponents, like the humanistic psychologists with whom these ideas originated, keep focusing on man's great ("infinite") worth rather than God's great (and truly infinite!) love.

.... This sad response to God's marvelous grace seems all too symptomatic of this movement that is bent on glorifying man rather than God. (The Biblical View of Self-Esteem, Self-Love, Self-Image, 91, 92)

Conclusion:

Christians generally and biblical counsellors specifically should reject self-love and self-esteem as unhelpful and unbiblical concepts for the following thirteen reasons.

- 1) Doubtful source
- 2) Inexplicable silence
- 3) Misdirected worship
- 4) Sinful comparing
- 5) Sanctified boasting
- 6) Increased men-fearing
- 7) Conviction of sin
- 8) Confusion over unconditional love
- 9) Biblical warning
- 10) Self before Christ
- 11) Biblical instructions
- 12) Misused passages

13) Dangerous theology

➤ **What does God say *to do* about your problem?**

Seven steps to helping a person who believes he is suffering from low self-esteem.

- 1) If necessary, debunk self-esteem doctrine.

See the previous section.

- 2) Ask: What have you *done* that causes you to think so lowly of yourself?

When counselees say bad things about themselves, take them at their word, rather than contradicting them.

Counselee: *I'm nothing.*

Counsellor: *You probably have some good reasons for having reached that conclusion. Tell me about them.*

Asking this question might uncover a significant sin that the counselee has been trying—to his detriment—to keep hidden (Prov 28:13, *He who conceals his transgressions will not prosper*).

An immediate (possibly untrue) affirmation from the counsellor, "You're not a bad person. I think you're a fine Christian," might actually obscure the person's sordid, secret lifestyle, rather than coax the truth out into the light: "Well, actually I've been a terrible wife and mother—disrespectful to my husband and angry at my children—and I feel terrible about it."

If her evaluation of her behaviour is accurate, her feelings are an appropriate conviction of sin, and the counsellor's well-intended affirmation would hinder rather than help her confess and repent of her sin.

Question:

What if the counselee doesn't have a deep, dark sin to confess?

If a counselee continually talks himself down, but has no specific sin that is driving his negative view of self, you have two options.

- Sound out his understanding of the doctrine of justification.

He may feel that he is not good enough to win God's favour: he's right. But instead of languishing in his feelings of unworthiness, he needs to be taught to rejoice in the complete worthiness of Christ and in the joys of credited righteousness.

- Point out to him that his habit of speaking badly about himself is probably a tactic employed to gain attention and sympathy.

*Frequently in counseling a person will loudly proclaim what a terrible person he or she is. But when asked what they have done wrong they become strangely quiet or avoid the question by returning to their former lament To call yourself an "awful person" does not seem too bad because you are both to be pitied for your condition and praised for your nobility in admitting it. (Brownback, *The Danger of Self-Love*, 139)*

This selfish, attention-seeking tactic must be pointed out so that the counselee can repent from it and become a thankful, other-focused person.

3) Reinterpret biblically what the person is describing as "low self-esteem."

Six examples of reinterpretation:

1. Ed Welch:

For example, "I am worthless" could be reinterpreted as, "God has not given me the success I desired; therefore, I don't believe that he is good." (Depression: A Stubborn Darkness, 67)

2. Dobson/Bobgans:

[Dobson:] "The self-esteem of an early adolescent is also assaulted in the Western culture by his youthful status. All of the highly advertised adult privileges and vices are forbidden to him because he is "too young." He can't drive or marry or enlist or drink or smoke or work or leave home. And his sexual desires are denied gratification at the time when they scream for release. The only thing he is permitted to do, it seems, is stay in school and read his dreary textbooks."

*[Bobgans:] Is this low-self-esteem or is it a covetous attitude of not being content and grateful for what one already has? The problem seems to be that the culture does not regard the teenager as highly as he seems to regard himself. (Bobgan, *Prophets of Psychoheresy II*, 109-110)*

3. Walter Trobisch:

*I wonder whether one of the deepest roots of the abortion problem does not lie here Can an expectant mother who wishes to abort her child really love herself? (quoted in Adams, *The Biblical View of Self-Esteem, Self-Love, Self-Image*, 10)*

Evaluation:

Trobisch has turned the matter on its head. The woman who aborts her child for the sake of her convenience or reputation clearly loves herself far more than her unborn child—to the point that she will take the child's life to service her pleasures.

4. Midge:

"I'm a nothing I feel inferior My self-concept is just absolutely zero. That may surprise you, but it is. My whole life has been a big, fat zero. Nobody notices me, nobody likes me and nobody cares about me. I may as well be dead. I feel so inadequate. Even when I pray I can't find any relief. Probably the Lord doesn't even like me. But He is the one who made me this way, so maybe He does."

*Note well the self-esteem language in which Midge expresses herself Other people have not done as they should to her, so she has little or no sense of self-worth and is stuck in a meaningless and pitiful life. Obviously, in this condition, dependent upon other people for ego strength, she has no thought of reaching out to others. Even God has let her down. Her problems stem from the failures of others to meet her needs. (Adams, *The Biblical View of Self-Esteem, Self-Love, Self-Image*, 38)*

Midge believes that she cannot reach out to others until they unconditionally affirm her and, as a result of their affirmations, she learns to love herself.

Biblical replacements (Romans 12:21):

- Love God
- Love neighbour (Matt 22:37-40)

Midge needs to overcome the evil of her relentlessly self-focused thinking, not by thinking self-pleasing thoughts about herself, but by obeying Jesus' two great commands, preoccupying herself with God and others.

Adams:

Instead of passively sitting around, waiting for others to satisfy her "needs" ...she must be made aware of the fact that she can reach out

to others now, developing friendships out of serving others and showing love to them.

When she truly puts Christ and His kingdom first, she will develop into a more attractive and happier person as a by-product. (The Biblical View of Self-Esteem, Self-Love, Self-Image, 122)

An important insight:

The man who loves God and his neighbors will not have a problem with his "self-concept" He will be a humbly grateful man who will praise God for the work of the Holy Spirit within him. He will be thankful that he has been chosen and enabled to exhibit the Spirit's fruit of love in his life. (Adams, The Christian Counselor's Manual, 144-145)

Negatively self-focused people are not helped by making them positively self-focused people. Christian maturity is always God-focused and other-focused.

5. Adams—inferiority feelings vs. inferiority judgements:

When a counselee complains, "I feel inferior" it is important to point out to him that he is not speaking altogether accurately. No one feels inferior, stupid, or inadequate. What he is expressing is not a feeling but a judgment or attitude or conviction or belief about himself. He is saying, "I am inferior, stupid, or inadequate." On the basis of that judgment, he may feel sad or guilty or angry or embarrassed or depressed. If "I am inferior" is (rightly) considered a judgment, then the counselor can explore the counselee's reasons for this conclusion. (Christian Counselor's Manual, 113)

Why this reinterpretation is helpful:

First, the Bible rebukes comparing as a destructive, frustrating sin to be forsaken (Ecc 4:4). Second, the counselee's judgements of himself are either *accurate* or *inaccurate*. He either is or isn't a better preacher than other preachers. And if he isn't, why can't he accept that fact without becoming discouraged? Pride.

Reinterpreting his inferiority feelings as inferiority judgements helps uncover the pride of comparing, and allows you to help the counselee formulate and accept an objective evaluation of himself.

6. Low self-esteem as *Pride in reverse*.

What is the difference between the following statements?

*I'm wonderful. I'm great. I'm the best.
I'm terrible. I'm nobody. Nobody loves me.*

Actually, there is very little difference between these two statements.

Both these people are relentlessly self-focused. Both are at the pinnacle of their worlds—there is no one who compares to them. They are first; they stand in the bull's-eye of their own thinking; they rise head-and-shoulders above (or below) everyone else.

In other words, low self-esteem is really just another form of self-exaltation; it is *pride in reverse*. The thinking might be *I'm the worst* rather than *I'm the best*, but the self-centredness is exactly the same.

- 4) Teach the priority of God-focus and other-focus.

Matthew 22:37-39

Both the boaster and the person caught in self-pity need to be taught to love God and to love their neighbour in order to put a stop to their ungodly and destructive self-preoccupation.

- 5) Point out the sin of discontentment and its thankful replacement.

Midge:

*My whole life has been a big, fat zero. Nobody notices me, nobody likes me and nobody cares about me. (in Adams, *The Biblical View of Self-Esteem, Self-Love, Self-Image*, 38)*

Midge's love for herself (and her corresponding self-preoccupation) has led to an ungodly discontentment with herself and her God-given lot in life. Praise to God, thankfulness for His grace in Christ, and thankfulness for God's good gifts would go a long way to helping Midge escape her sinful self-pity.

1 Thessalonians 5:18. *In everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.*

- 6) Replace inaccurate self-evaluations with accurate ones.

Romans 12:3. *For through the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith.*

The person who has "low self-esteem" perpetuates his self-pity by consistently (and often inaccurately) *underestimating* his gifts, work, and so on. Conversely, those who have embraced the unconditional positive self-feelings of the self-love movement often inaccurately *overestimate* their abilities, maturity, and so on, in an attempt to maintain their self-esteem.

Point:

Both extremes—either an unduly low or unduly high estimate of self—are unfounded and need to be replaced by the accurate self-evaluation encouraged by Romans 12:3.

Brownback:

Paul calls us to evaluate our capacities for service (not to feel good about ourselves). We need to evaluate our performance for the purpose of managing our lives effectively for the Lord. (The Danger of Self-Love, 134)

Comment:

There is no point in a man saying, "I'm a terrible preacher," when he is actually a capable expositor of God's word. That is an ungodly, *false* humility. But neither should he meditate on or boast about his gifts as a preacher (most often done by means of sinfully comparing himself with others).

He should evaluate himself honestly and then get on with serving Christ in ways suitable to his level of giftedness, unhindered by self-preoccupation.

Question:

Do you serve Christ better and love others more effectively when you are preoccupied with thoughts of either high or low self-regard?

Brownback continues:

There is an important distinction between that type of evaluation and self-feelings or self-esteem. Self-evaluation is ... an objective process whereas self-esteem is almost exclusively subjective. (The Danger of Self-Love, 134)

Two illustrations of inaccurate self-evaluations:

- Jay Adams cites a survey of 829,000 high school students in which 6% ranked themselves below average in athletic ability, 2% below average in

leadership ability, and 0% below average in their ability to get along with others (in *The Biblical View of Self-Esteem, Self-Love, Self-Image*, 115)

Comment:

How can 0% of a survey group be below average?!!

Bobgans:

*Man will be creatively deceptive to sustain his self-esteem.
(Prophets of Psychoheresy II, 133.)*

- *Time* magazine:

A standardized math test was given to 13-year-olds in six countries last year. Koreans did the best. Americans did the worst, coming in behind Spain, Britain, Ireland and Canada. Now the bad news. Besides being shown triangles and equations, the kids were shown the statement, "I am good at mathematics." Koreans came last in this category. Only 23% answered yes. Americans were No. 1, with an impressive 68% in agreement.

*American students may not know their math, but they have evidently absorbed the lessons of the newly fashionable self-esteem curriculum wherein kids are taught to feel good about themselves. (quoted in Bobgan, *Prophets of Psychoheresy II*, 130)*

Adams:

*God does indicate that He wants us to evaluate ourselves—so far as it is possible to do so—accurately. (*The Biblical View of Self-Esteem, Self-Love, Self-Image*, 113)*

Use biblical standards:

A person who believes he is suffering from low self-esteem will need to be taught to evaluate himself accurately *based on biblical standards*.

*A sober evaluation is made not on the basis of how well one is doing in comparison with others ... (Adams, *The Biblical View of Self-Esteem, Self-Love, Self-Image*, 118, emphasis added)*

Point:

The counselee must evaluate himself based on God's word.

Applied to children:

What about a child who has been ground down by constant negative harangues from his parents—"Failure, failure, failure. You've always been a failure and you'll always be a failure!"—how do you handle that?

Such children also need to be taught to evaluate themselves accurately and objectively based on God's word.

Jay Adams:

*"But what of the child who has been berated time and again by his parents; who has been told in a hundred ways that he is worthless; who is constantly criticized and condemned?" The principle does not change If he believes what he is told, then that is what he is—a weak person dependent upon others for self-evaluation. And, that is one way in which the counselor must help him to change Somewhere in the course of his life he must be confronted about his wrong responses, counseled about God's way of handling abuse, and helped to do so. (Adams, *The Christian Counselor's Manual*, 149)*

Point:

The greatest help you can offer a browbeaten child is not bolstering his self-esteem as if he and his inner strength were the answer to his problem.

True help is turning him to God, teaching him to evaluate himself objectively by God's word, refusing to view himself through the lens of his parents' exaggerated invectives.

7) Point out that self-preoccupation is replaced by self-forgetfulness.

Self-feelings—the two standard alternatives:

- *low* self-esteem
- *high* self-esteem

Since wallowing in the mire of perpetually negative thoughts about yourself seems undesirable, the self-esteem movement has swung the pendulum to the other extreme, offering high self-regard as the replacement for negative thoughts and feelings about self.

❖ Is *high* self-esteem the biblical view of self?

Bobgans:

Self-esteem teachings only enable a person to move from a miserable form of self-centeredness (called low self-esteem, poor self-image, so-called self-hatred) to a more self-pleasing form of self-centeredness with high self-esteem, self-love, self-worth, and self-acceptance. (Prophets of Psychoheresy II, 118)

Brownback:

[The self-esteem movement has committed] ... *the logical fallacy of seeking to prove that one extreme is right by showing that the other is wrong. It also assumes that the only two options available are a very good self-image or a very bad self-image.*

Observation:

Negatively self-centred people do not become *less self-centred* by being taught to foster feelings of self-worth and self-esteem. To exchange low thoughts of self for high thoughts of self is merely to exchange one kind of God-condemned self-centredness for another.

Further point:

The process of developing and sustaining a high self-esteem does not produce *a concern for others*. High self-esteem requires constant reinforcement with doses of self-praising and sinful comparing, and it's a zero-sum process: the time and attention given to building your self-esteem can't be given to God and others.

Even though one primary goal of self-esteem is to feel good enough about oneself in order to become other-centered, there is no guarantee that people will naturally move from self-esteem to other-centeredness. (Bobgans, Prophets of Psychoheresy II, 138)

A scathing summary:

Of course, we are told, the healthy inner-directed person will really take care for others. To which I can only respond: If you can believe that, you can believe anything. (Allen Bloom, quoted in Bobgan, Prophets of Psychoheresy II, 136)

- ❖ Is a spiritual form of *low* self-esteem the biblical view of self?

Is a spiritual martyr complex in which one continually dwells on and talks about how sinful, wretched, and useless he is the biblical view of self?

Brownback:

Humility should not be equated with a pious inferiority complex. (The Danger of Self-Love, 124)

If it is pride to love self, should we seek to deprecate ourselves? Are those the only two alternatives? That seems to be the assumption of virtually all self-theory. But we believe the Scripture teaches a remarkably simple and refreshing third alternative. (130)

The biblical third alternative:

- low self-esteem
- high self-esteem
- no self-esteem

Matthew 16:24. *Then Jesus said to His disciples, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me."*

Adams:

Jesus sets forth self-denial rather than self-affirmation as the way to enter into a proper relationship with God. (The Biblical View of Self-Esteem, Self-Love, Self-Image, 104)

If anything could stand in sharper contrast to Christ's command to deny self than the self-affirming, self-gratifying emphasis that we have been reading about in the self-esteem literature, I don't know what it is. (105)

The idea overstated by Brownback:

The biblical alternative to the wave of concern over self-image is to have no self-image at all. Underlying that approach is the fact that both self-love and self-hate are self-centered attitudes. (The Danger of Self-Love, 133)

Qualified:

We are not talking about the elimination of self-image altogether but the elimination of self-image from our awareness. (Brownback, The Danger of Self-Love, 135)

Point:

Because of sin, self-awareness is often your enemy, not your friend.

Illustrated from Genesis 3:

The first mention of self-consciousness in the Bible is found in Genesis 3:7-11 "Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked."

.... It was not a matter of becoming naked but of perceiving that they were.

What was the immediate result in this change in their self-perception? ... a disturbing new self-consciousness between them Adam answers when God calls him, "I heard the sound of Thee in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid myself." Adam responded with the same self-consciousness before God that he had no doubt had with Eve.

*Of special interest is his emotional reaction to that new self-awareness: "I was afraid." The first fear man ever knew was tied directly to an enlarged self-awareness. (Brownback, *The Danger of Self-Love*, 140-141)*

Note:

Self-consciousness and the fear of man are like fire and smoke—they always go together.

Illustrated from preaching:

*It has always amazed me in my years of teaching homiletics that the ... rigid student putting everyone to sleep in the classroom is the same young man who the night before in the dormitory, with a ring of friends around him, was expounding in great homiletic form. What made the difference? In the classroom he was "self-conscious," but in the dorm he "forgot himself." (*The Danger of Self-Love*, 133)*

Summary—self-forgetfulness:

The biblical replacement of low self-esteem is not nurturing grand feelings about yourself, nor is it pious inferiority. The biblical approach to self-feelings is forgetfulness—*not thinking about self at all.*

Of course, daily life requires thinking about yourself. That's why Jesus could say, "Love your neighbour as yourself." However, in this case we are talking about *self-feelings*.

Self-feelings, whether high self-regard or low self-regard, need to be replaced by a complete absence of self-immersed, self-preoccupied thinking.

John Piper:

Periodic self-examination is needed and wise and biblical. But for the most part mental health is the use of the mind to focus on worthy reality outside ourselves

*Mental health is, in great measure, the gift of self-forgetfulness.
(Piper, *The Hidden Smile of God*, 112, emphasis added)*

A warning about the *Who I am in Christ* approach:

Some counsellors try to help a person who has a "poor self-image" by focusing the counselee on *who he is in Christ*. This approach mistakenly believes that *self-focus is replaced by self-focus*. In fact, self-focus is replaced by *self-forgetfulness*.

Point:

It is far more important to know who **Christ** is in me, than who *I am in Christ*.

Illustration:

The following is taken from a counselling handout that makes the mistake of trying to replace the counselee's negative self-focus with another, theological kind of self-focus:

"Who am I?" The Christian life begins with a recognition of who we are in Christ.

Really? The Christian life begins with acknowledging Christ, His sacrifice, and repenting from sin. This opening statement puts the wrong person at the centre of the target, perpetuating the counselee's tendency to think about himself. That's his problem; perpetuating that habit is *not* the solution.

Speak the following confession out loud so that you can hear yourself declaring what God has said is true. You are not declaring these things to

make them happen. God says that they have already happened! This is who you are in Christ. Speak it with confidence.

This openly adopts the positive self-talk methodology of the self-esteem movement.

I believe that in Christ Jesus my sins have been fully and freely forgiven, and I am a new creation. I have died with Christ to my old identity in Adam. I have been raised with Christ to a new life. I am seated in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus I am joined with angels, archangels, and all the saints in heaven Because of who I am in Christ, I am more than a conqueror. In fact, I can do all things through Christ Jesus who strengthens me

And I want to add: *I am wonderful. I am great. I'm the best ... in Christ.*

Evaluation:

This counsellor seems to be encouraging his counselee to find more comfort in who *he—the counselee—is* than in who *Christ is*.

Although the statements in this handout are theologically accurate, there is a disturbing self-focus in it. People who tend to think negative thoughts about themselves are *not* made more godly by being encouraged to think they are wonderful in Christ. They are made more godly by a God- and Christ-preoccupied *self-forgetfulness*.

Point:

Focusing on his identity in Christ might just be another way for this self-focused counselee to continue his bad habit of being self-preoccupied. He needs to pursue self-forgetfulness, not yet another form of self-saturated meditation.

Conclusion:

Christians are at our best neither when we are fostering negative self-feelings nor when we are revelling in positive self-feeling. We are at our best when we are *not preoccupied with self at all*.

Seven steps to helping a person overcome "low self-esteem":

- 1) If necessary debunk self-esteem doctrine.
- 2) Ask: What have you *done* that causes you to think so lowly of yourself?
- 3) Reinterpret biblically what the person is describing as "low self-esteem."
- 4) Teach the priority of God-focus and other-focus.

- 5) Point out the sin of discontentment and its thankful replacement.
- 6) Replace inaccurate negative (or positive) self-evaluations with accurate ones.
- 7) Point out that self-preoccupation is replaced by self-forgetfulness.