

THE LYING MIRROR

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INTRODUCTION

Guiding principle: “*I say . . . to every person among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think*” (Romans 12:3). Paul balances two important points: “not more highly” and “ought to think.”

Terminology: a number of words and expressions get at this concern: self-esteem, self-identity, inner security, self-respect, self-image, self-worth, psychological strength, self-concept, self-acceptance, self-awareness, knowing ourselves, how we feel about ourselves. Self-esteem is not ego.

Audience: the “self-esteem problem” applies to everybody. Some of us wrestle with it more than others do, particularly while we are young, when we have failed in our own eyes, if we do not have positive support from family, spouse, or friends.

Relevance: low self-esteem generates *dysfunctional*, *unfulfilling*, and *sinful* behaviors. Christ came to remove sin (Colossians 1:14) and give abundant life (John 10:10). Besides, we have a responsibility to exceed the righteousness of the Pharisees (Matthew 5:20) by helping each other live well. Our goal in Christ is edifying others rather than degrading ourselves. Denying self (Matthew 16:24) does not mean making ourselves zeros or making ourselves out to be as evil. Instead, it means bringing ourselves under responsibility to God and servanthood to other people so that self-improvement comes in the context of prioritizing other persons (“self-edification”).

I. HOW WE CAN TELL WHAT WE THINK OF OURSELVES

Two main types of weakness behavior are attention-getting and defensive behavior. Both stem from low self-esteem at least in part. We feel the urge to gain attention because other people’s approval helps us feel good about ourselves. We “defend” ourselves because we suspect other people do not value us as they ought. If we feel compelled to cover up our weaknesses, we can profit instead from thinking about legitimate self-esteem in the context of the Good News.

A. How compelled we feel to draw attention to ourselves

1. If we have to be the boss or we will not participate, we are weak persons. We are afraid to associate ourselves with anything less than ideal for fear that other people will evaluate us as less than ideal.

2. If we are the “show off,” the “limelighter,” “braggard,” the specialist in “one-upmanship,” the guy with the ‘messiah complex,’ “the compulsive talker,” the “smart aleck,” the “mouthy” fellow, we are trying to raise our self-esteem by proving our ability to capture other people’s attention and admiration.

3. If we are “lingers,” we create the opposite effect of what we intend. The harder we hold on the more other people pull away and the less satisfying our experiences with them are. They pull away because we do not put closure on encounters. We “corner” people and “trap” them; we pay no attention to the cues that they need to move on. We need to set goals and get something to do so we have a healthy mix of personal relationships and worthwhile responsibility.

4. If we are “tellers,” we feel that it would show weakness to listen; it would imply that there was something for them to teach us.

B. How hard we try to defend ourselves

How much we defend ourselves includes how much it bothers us to be wrong, and how much we are inclined to “argue a point to the death.” It is okay to be wrong; other people respect us more if we are strong enough to admit error. In fact, when we admit weakness, we are strong (2 Corinthians 12:10). Besides, by backing off a little, we increase other people’s willingness to listen.

C. How easily we get offended

Here belongs “touchy” people that “have to be handled with kid gloves,” the people that “can’t take a joke,” those who are suspicious of friendly banter, claiming that it is really intended to be a “cut.” When we “take things personally,” it shows that we suppose other people do things to demonstrate their disregard for us. Supposing their dislike for us comes from our impulse to believe that they see us as second level in quality; when there is no overt activity on their part that communicates that notion, the notion originates from within us as an indication of our self-evaluation.

D. How easily we get discouraged

1. “Quitters,” not just lazy people, but people that throw up their hands in despair. Characteristically doing that indicates that we do not have confidence in ourselves to succeed or to win the respect of other people necessarily involved in the enterprise.

2. People who do no finish things are a little different from “quitters” because they have the gut feeling that what they do will not matter even if they do get it done.

E. How strongly we prefer to be by ourselves (the “loner,” the inward-directed *vs.* outward-directed person)

F. How easily we compliment others

If we criticize a lot, find fault, tend to put everything down, we do it because the smaller we can make other people and their activities look, the less difference exists between us and the quality of what we can do.

H. How much time we spend thinking about ourselves

I. How other people sense by our behavior what we feel about ourselves

One big problem with self-image is that we have a hard time knowing whether we are exceptional. We cannot tell very easily how other people feel inside. One value of fellowship with other people and listening to them is that it gives us a chance to learn how they feel. Another helpful point is that it does not matter particularly whether we have lower self-esteem than other people do; if we are doing the Christian things that edify them and us, we will experience the benefit as contrast with our former condition.

II. HOW SELF-IMAGE IS FORMED

primarily

A. By feedback from other people

Good self-image comes primarily from acceptance by other people, especially by our “significant others”: parents, spouse, siblings, peers, God. “I” tend to think of myself the way I think you think I am.

1. how they respond to us: what they are willing to do for us, how much time they are willing to take with us
2. whether they initiate activity with us: whether they seek us out or ask our opinion, whether they initiate conversation with us, whether they invite us into their lives (with special information; note pattern of information flow)
3. whether they focus on us: whether they look us in the eye rather than with sideways glances, face us when they talk to us, and a number of other “body language” cues.

secondarily

- B. by our perceived ability level
- C. by our perceived physical appearance
- D. by the perceived possessions we have
- E. by our perceived accomplishments

Who I really am is the sum total of my capacities, associations, and responsibilities. My self-esteem is the sum total of my perception of my capacities, associations, and responsibilities. The idea is to bring those two matters into conformity. Interestingly, Christian people often have no better self-image than people in the world. Their faith is not working for them in this area.

III. HOW TO DEVELOP A HEALTHY SELF-IMAGE

We have some elements at our disposal: being (what we are capable of), action (what we do), and relationship (how we relate to other persons and things). We are (a) created in the image of God; (b) we exist in our circumstance; and (c) we have purpose and responsibility. The image of God in us is the interpersonal capacity (natural).

Interpersonal capacity enables us to have personal relationship with God and other people (existential). Persons can be responsible to fulfill purposes (eschatological). As a result, we can improve self-image by recognizing our God-given nature, by participating in fellowship, and by being responsible in accomplishing purposes. The framework for objective meaning becomes our framework for developing a subjective sense of worth.

A. Remembering that we are created in the image of God (being)

We are not mere animals or complex electro-chemical processes. Since we were created as persons by another Person, we have a basis for dignity without pride.

B. Doing something (action)

1. Being active rather than passive. We cannot have a good self-image without taking initiative. We do not feel good about ourselves as long as we have the habit of depending on other people to prod us along. Unless we take charge of ourselves we will not feel like we are in charge of anything. Consequently, our capacity for purpose/responsibility is not fulfilled. Having to be “told” all the time makes us feel forced or manipulated into action. If we rebel, avoid, or “drag our feet,” we only increase the pressure other people put on us and their disgust with us. That translates into even lower self-esteem, and the vicious cycle continues.

Avoiding responsibility attempts to gain worth by standing outside the “system” as much as possible; we are trying to gain self-respect by gaining freedom. But there is no way to have the benefits of the “system” without being involved in it. In order to feel free of the system, we have to internalize its purposes—we make them our own—so we operate from within—by our own purposes (“internal locus of control”; “warm-blooded” rather than “cold-blooded”).

2. Doing rather than feeling, living by goals and values, not just by feelings and impressions. We need to base self-esteem on factors we can affect rather than on genetic and environmental factors that are beyond our control. We are not created equal in heredity and circumstance. Such items then cannot form a legitimate basis for self-esteem. But action is something that we can be in charge of.

C. Replacing law with grace (action)

1. Living by faith rather than by works. The fact is, there are no self-made men. We depend on other persons whom we trust to supply what we cannot provide. We have to trust that they are not “out to get us.”

2. Substituting progress for perfection. We cannot expect to have a strong self-image as long as we expect perfection from ourselves. No one can live up to a perfect standard even though we all keep the ideal as a goal. Here is one of the most important implications of the gospel for the psychological dimension of human experience.

D. Converting competition to caring (action/relationship)

As long as we tie self-worth to being better than others, we are doomed to feeling bad about ourselves. By its very nature, success in competition (a) can provide a positive self-image for only a small minority of people and then for only a limited time. Even for that minority (b) their declining years bring deterioration to flesh-based skills and abilities and erode any sense of worth based on them. Another problem is that (c) meantime self-worth based on success in competition often creates personal pride and belittles others. Self-respect degenerates into personal pride and belittling others when it is set in contrast to other persons and when it fails to acknowledge God as the source and end of life (1 Corinthians 3:7; Ephesians 1:12, 14). To avoid pride, we do not have to make ourselves worms, but at the same time we do not have to make other people worms either. Lastly, (d) competition puts us by ourselves.

Instead of feeling good about ourselves on the basis of successful competition against others, when we give of ourselves for the joy of others (love), we get our sense of worth from the grateful response of those to whom we have given ourselves in love (cp. Ephesians 1:6). Self-worth based on self-giving (a) has no limitations as to who can use it to enhance self-worth and (b) ties us to other people in a positive way.

E. Changing from a material to a spiritual orientation (relationship)

We need to measure ourselves the way God measures us. That means giving up evaluations based on physical things and other things that “do not count.”

F. Diversifying our investments

Not “*putting all our eggs in one basket*” increases the likelihood of something coming through for us. Besides, variety is the spice of life. Diversifying helps avoid that locked-in, held-down feeling. Doing something new once in a while breaks routine and has a liberating effect on the way we feel.

G. Living interpersonally (relationship)

1. Living interpersonally contrasts with living materially; that would involve impersonal living.

2. Living interpersonally is different from trying to live individually; for all practical purposes that would mean no one else is involved.

3. Living interpersonally means not living passively because then only the other person is acting.

4. Living interpersonally means not living competitively, which is often self-centered and manipulative and treats other people as if they were not persons.

5. Living interpersonally means living by grace rather than works, because works is earning the result myself. When I try to earn the result by myself, there is no other person; I am the only one involved. Living that way, I am not buying into the resources of others to help bring success and thus good self-image. It also fails to understand that since life is basically interpersonal, the results most fulfilling to us are interpersonal ones. In turn that means the persons on both sides of a relationship have to

contribute to it and to its effects; otherwise, there is no relationship and no effects based on it.

One of the best ways to develop a good self-image is to help other people develop good self-images. We need to be outward directed into the lives of other persons. We are not only responsible for ourselves but for other people as well (Galatians 6:5 + 2). The interpersonal orientation in life has many advantages including our increased ability to be patient with the ignorant, erring, and sinful by seeing their weaknesses and faults as reflections of self-image problems; it makes us more understanding of them because we also face the same kind of problem to some degree.

In short, living interpersonally means taking seriously the idea that the image of God equals the interpersonal capacity. So we need to keep ourselves around good people in fellowship and around God by prayer, Bible reading, meditation, and other spiritual exercises.

SUMMARY

Self-esteem is based primarily on feedback from persons. Good self-image comes from accentuating things distinctive to personhood, interpersonal capacity, and interpersonal relationship. Out of good self-image springs psychological strength, emotional control, and a host of stronger behavior patterns.

The most important point is choosing the right significant others. (1) We need to choose whose opinion is important to us. (2) We need to choose whose fellowship we will share to provide occasions for building self-esteem. (3) We need to help other people with their self-image because it will result in similar responses toward us—on top of expressed appreciation and personal fulfillment. That is evidently what Jesus meant by saying, “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35).

In short, living right provides the best source of a sense of worth. Self-esteem is a by-product or righteousness. Living right takes care of everything at once including a healthy self-image.