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## s e l f - i m a g e

*AS HE THINKS IN HIS HEART,  
SO IS HE.*

—PROV. 23:7, NKJV

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selfless

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When God created Adam and Eve, they were comfortable in their skin, literally and figuratively. Even though they were naked, they felt no shame or embarrassment before God or each other. They were transparent and real without fear of rejection (Gen. 2:25).

But things changed after they ate the forbidden fruit. Their eyes were opened, and they became uncomfortably self-aware and fearful. Instinctively, they knew to hide from God and from each other. In explaining the act of eating the forbidden fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they projected their guilt, blaming their actions on others. Adam blamed Eve and God, telling God that it was the woman He gave him who made him eat it. Eve blamed the serpent. God knew their self-consciousness was the result of their sin (Gen. 3:1-13).

Adam and Eve had healthy, *real* self-images until the Fall. Up until that time they were unashamed, secure, cooperative, and complete. They didn't wonder if they were good enough; they felt accepted by God and each other.

After the Fall, they became ashamed, self-focused, blaming, competitive, and insecure. They were aware of their physical, emotional, and spiritual nakedness and their need to cover themselves. They were suddenly concerned with what the other person was thinking, and their relationship was based on power struggles, competition, and pain. They felt inadequate and guilty before God (Gen. 3:14-24).

Like Adam and Eve, we often feel inadequate and ashamed. We hide our true selves from others because of the fear of being known. Our relationships are imperfect and imbalanced. We don't see ourselves as we really are. Instead, "Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror" (1 Cor. 13:12). In the apostle Paul's day, mir-

rors weren't of the quality we have today. They were made of bronze rather than glass, and even the best ones reflected imperfect and unclear images. Paul reminds us that in our temporal and sinful state our perception is flawed, but that someday we will understand things fully. Part of that complete understanding will be in the way we see ourselves and others, our understanding of the value of each of us as God's creation, the wonder and perfection of our uniqueness, and the part each of us plays in God's big story. Although we won't have a perfectly real image of ourselves in this world, we can strive to gain a more correct image that is more closely aligned with the way God intended us to see ourselves.

Terms associated with self-image include *self-worth*, *self-esteem*, *self-confidence*, *self-examination*, *self-preservation*, and *self-respect*. Each of these describes an aspect of what you think, perceive, or feel about yourself. As we look at each one of these more closely, you'll see that feeling good about yourself isn't the same as being a "lover of self."

## **SELF-IMAGE**

Your self-image began to form when you were born. It evolved to include awareness of your body, abilities, personality, looks, intelligence, feelings, values, and power. Your self-image continues to change throughout your life and is greatly influenced by your interactions and experiences.

An image is the representation of something that is supposed to be a likeness of the original. Image can be a mental perception or an actual object, such as a photograph or drawing. Your image of yourself is who you perceive yourself to be, who you present yourself to be to others, and who you think others perceive you to

be. Self-image includes your assessment of yourself: your talents, personality, achievements, physical attributes, and behavior. It also includes a perception of your essence—or soul.

Your self-image may be accurate or inaccurate. It may be inflated, leading you to believe that you're more than you are; or it may be deflated, leading you to believe that you're less than you are. Your image might be damaged because of hurtful things others have said to you. Your self-image can be a reflection of society's values and standards to which you compare yourself. Your self-image may be stained by memories of past failures and regrets because of missed opportunities. Or it can be *real*—a reflection of the truth about who you really are—transparent and honest.

The image you hold of yourself is a product of your past experiences and current interactions with others, society's standards and values, and your beliefs about yourself. God's ideal is for you to project the image of Jesus Christ as well as the unique image He created you to bear.

## **SELF-WORTH**

Your sense of self-worth is measured by the value you place on yourself. It is calculated by some type of measuring stick—your values, God's values, society's values, other people's values, or a combination of all these.

How do you measure your worth? Do you feel persons are worth more if they're productive, accomplished, beautiful, rich, a certain age, powerful, or popular? Are others worth less if they're uneducated, unattractive, handicapped, poor, or mentally ill? Do you value one race over another? Your first response is probably to answer, "Everyone is equally valuable, because God created all of us and

loves us all the same.” Do you really feel that way? Dig deeper. These subjective values are often subtle—and we all have them.

What is there about you that you’re glad you possess? Looks, money, position, influence, intelligence, or talents? What do you not possess that you wish you had? What do you envy in others? When you compare yourself to others, what causes you to feel either inferior or superior? These are probably the measuring sticks you use to determine your worth and the worth of others.

The American culture has established itself in the work ethic. Americans value productivity and accomplishment. That’s not wrong in and of itself, but it does spill over into the way we value ourselves. As a result of the work ethic, we may value accomplishment, success, and material worth more than we value virtues such as honesty, good character, and spiritual maturity.

The value we place on individuals is often determined by a set of criteria. Look at the following list, and identify which of these distinctives you use to determine worth.

- Physical appearance
- Education
- Ethnicity
- Intelligence
- Personality
- Money
- Possessions
- Occupation
- Goodness
- Popularity
- Fame
- Success

- Talents
- Relationships
- Productivity
- Achievement
- Influence, power, or who you know
- Approval from others
- Age

If you have trouble determining upon which of these you base your value, consider which of these if lost would cause you to feel bad about yourself and which ones you admire in others.

None are wrong to possess or pursue, but if you base your self-worth on anything you do or have, you risk compromising your sense of self-worth when the thing you believe makes you worthwhile is unachievable or lost. If you determine your worth by your looks, you'll face a problem as you age and begin to lose your youthful beauty. If you determine your value by your actions, you'll feel less worthy when you fall short of your ideal. It's the same with achievements: When you fall short of what you consider significant or acceptable, or someone else does better than you, your self-worth may diminish.

Grant was on top of the world at age 32. He had made it: CEO of a big company, a six-figure salary, a beautiful home, and a Jaguar. Grant felt good about himself until he lost his job, his home, and a year later, his wife. His self-worth plummeted.

We also tend to judge our own worth by comparing ourselves to others. But worth is always subjective when based on a comparison and causes you to feel either inferior or superior. To God, our worth is constant and unchangeable, and it's rooted in the fact that we're each His unique and valuable creation, valuable enough that He sent His Son to die for each of us (Rom. 5:8).

## SELF-ESTEEM

The word “esteem” originates from a Latin word meaning “estimate.” Self-esteem is a first cousin to self-worth. It has to do with the value you assign to yourself, but it also includes the feelings you have about yourself. One who has poor self-esteem is one who has a negative opinion of himself or herself. Conversely, a person with good self-esteem is considered to have a positive opinion of himself or herself. Some of the trademarks of positive self-esteem are acceptance, joy, contentment, security, and confidence. Negative self-esteem is associated with feelings of rejection, shame, self-loathing, embarrassment, self-pity, insecurity, and self-consciousness.

Self-esteem matters because the more inferior one feels, the more he or she tends to focus on self and what others are thinking. This interferes with the ability to be real in relationships and to be all God has created you to be. It also makes it difficult for you to truly love others as you love yourself (Matt. 22:39).

Low self-esteem is linked to feelings of self-pity and depression that keep you stuck and unable to see other options. It can even be used as an excuse to avoid making changes or to disobey God. Jonah experienced this. God told him to go to Nineveh to warn the Ninevites to repent. Jonah ran away and then decided to obey God after being swallowed by a large fish. He went to the Ninevites, they repented, and God forgave them. Then Jonah got depressed. He incorrectly mistook God’s mercy to the Ninevites, who were Gentiles, to mean that Israel was no longer God’s chosen people. He decided it wasn’t worth living if the Israelites weren’t special to God.

God reminded Jonah that He was a compassionate God to-

ward everyone—He could care about the Ninevites, Israelites, and Jonah all at the same time. God doesn't want you to feel so badly about your life that you don't want to live. Jonah's misguided thoughts about himself and his situation led to feelings of low self-esteem, depression, and self-pity (Jonah 1—4).

Low self-esteem affects your relationship with God, because you find it difficult to believe that God loves and values you. Perfectionists hold unattainably high standards of behavior for themselves and transfer those feelings to God, believing He is constantly displeased with them. They can't accomplish enough to feel accepted. Shame-ridden people also have difficulty accepting forgiveness.

Nicky saw herself as a failure as a Christian, wife, and mother, and the more she dwelled on her shortcomings, the more depressed and anxious she became. She isolated herself from others, believing that no one wanted to be around her. She began to feel her husband didn't love her and withdrew from him. The more these feelings overtook her, the more she loathed herself. She became convinced that even God couldn't forgive or help her.

If you're convinced that others will reject you, you tend to push them away, reading rejection into benign actions and comments. This behavior may cause others to reject you because you're ultrasensitive and easily hurt or in need of continual reassurance. You may be suspicious of people who compliment or like you, wondering whether they have an ulterior motive, or you may refuse to accept compliments at all. You may also have weak boundaries and tolerate things that are destructive. Or you may be afraid to be yourself and as a result become a people-pleaser.

Persons with low self-esteem often see themselves as "all bad" or "all good," but this is an unbalanced self-concept. Those who per-

ceive themselves as “all bad” have an overly guilty conscience and feel responsible for everything in their relationships—even the other person’s behavior. Persons who present themselves as “all good” often have low self-esteem too. Their arrogance is actually a compensation for their internal feelings of inadequacy. None of us is all good or all bad. We have strengths and weaknesses. We do some good things and some not-so-good things. The ability to integrate the two and see yourself truthfully through God’s grace, accepting yourself as you are and finding satisfaction in who He made you to be, is the key to feeling good about yourself.

## SELF-EXAMINATION

If having good self-esteem means feeling good about ourselves, does that mean we shouldn’t feel badly about sinning? The apostle Paul addressed this issue in Rom. 6. We’re no longer under the law but under grace. Yet we shouldn’t want to keep sinning, because we’ve died with Christ and have been raised to a new life. We no longer offer our bodies to sin, because we would then be allowing ourselves to be slaves to something from which we’ve been freed. Instead of using our bodies to sin, we should use them as instruments of righteousness for God.

Paul asks an important question: “What benefit did you reap at that time from the things you are now ashamed of? Those things result in death! But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves to God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life” (Rom. 6:21-22). Christians won’t want to sin for several reasons: It displeases God, whom we now serve and love; it causes problems in our lives; it hurts our witness; it isn’t our primary nature any more; and we know that it will put us volun-

tarily back into bondage. Since we have another choice, the part of us that wants to choose what's good will feel remorseful when we choose what's wrong.

When you feel remorseful for wrongdoing, that remorse should serve as motivation to repent, not as a weapon with which to beat yourself. The remorse and repentance are meant to purify rather than pulverize and to uplift you rather than convince you that you're a perpetual loser. Constructive guilt spurs you toward doing better rather than keeping you stuck in your mistakes, feeling badly about yourself.

We're to examine ourselves regularly to see whether our actions are right (2 Cor. 13:5) and use the mirror of the Word to evaluate them (James 1:22-25). What we do is important. Self-inspection is a requirement of us not only as Christians but also as human beings who take responsibility for their actions and growth. Persons who cannot self-evaluate have all kinds of problems in life and relationships. If your self-evaluation is accurate, you will feel badly when you do wrong but not when you do right. The Holy Spirit convicts us of sin and leads us into truth (John 16:8). We are being purified and made holy (1 Pet. 1:15-16), and that purification process involves change. The difference between proper self-evaluation and low self-esteem is the conclusion you draw about yourself and what you do with the guilt.

Regina kept a checklist in her mind of all the things she did wrong, concluding that she was a poor example of Christianity. Because she felt like a hypocrite, she wouldn't witness to anyone about her faith.

After 13 months of sobriety, Steve gave in to the urge to have a drink. He felt so badly about himself that he stopped going to church

and Bible study. He couldn't admit to the men or to God that he fell into his old habit once more. He felt completely defeated.

You should feel badly about doing wrong, but not about who you are. Who you are is a forgiven and redeemed precious child of God, made perfect in His righteousness.

## **SELF-PRESERVATION**

Self-preservation isn't wrong; it's necessary and natural. God gave all living creatures instincts that guide them toward life-sustaining actions. You're wired to respond to danger at a primitive level. Your body is fashioned in a way that's self-preserving. You feel pain, which warns you to stop doing something that's potentially destructive. Your body repairs itself, fights diseases, and cleanses itself from toxins to prolong your life.

The apostle Paul assumed that we naturally care for our own bodies. He told husbands to love their wives as they nurtured their own bodies (Eph. 5:28-29). We're told that our bodies are the temples of the Holy Spirit and that we should take care of them accordingly (1 Cor. 6:19). An argument used against sexual sin is that we're sinning against our own bodies (1 Cor. 6:18). Taking care of our bodies includes our emotional, physical, mental, and spiritual selves.

Holly dressed plainly, didn't style her hair, didn't wear make-up, and didn't exercise. She told herself that God didn't want her to waste time and money on those things and that it wasn't "spiritual" to care about her looks. But beyond all her pious explanations, she simply didn't feel she was worth spending money or time on, and she didn't feel she could be pretty anyway.

Bobby pushed himself to the limit trying to make more money. To compensate for the stress, he drank more and more and ignored

the physical signs of deteriorating health. Finally, he had to admit that he was pursuing self-worth and self-esteem through material possessions and achievements. Inside, he felt completely empty.

There are many harmful things we do, such as eating poorly, not exercising, living under high stress, engaging in various addictions, and choosing unhealthy relationships. Frequently those self-destructive actions originate from a poor self-image.

## **SELF-RESPECT**

If you don't value yourself or feel positive toward yourself, you won't respect yourself. Your level of self-respect is revealed by how you take care of yourself and how you allow others to treat you.

My daughter Rachel had a high degree of self-respect. She knew how she wanted to be treated and requested that people do exactly that. She put a sign on her door that said, "I am Rachel. You will treat me with respect." She then wrote a long list of specifics such as "Knock before entering," and "Ask before you take my stuff."

As Rachel understood, self-respect often manifests itself in the boundaries we set with others. Christians sometimes confuse dying to their sin natures with dying to their right to set limits. "Dying to self" means living for Christ and not following our sin natures (Col. 3:3). We die to ourselves when we choose right over wrong and follow what God has asked us to do. That doesn't mean we can't stand up for ourselves in relationships or that others don't have the responsibility to treat us respectfully. If we truly love others, we'll do everything we can to promote righteousness in their lives (Rom. 13:10). Allowing them to mistreat us is hurting them. The second most important commandment is to love others as our-

selves (Matt. 22:39). When we don't esteem and value ourselves, it's likely that we're not loving others as we should.

Another argument used as evidence that Christians don't have the right to ask for respect or have rights is that we're to "turn the other cheek" (see Matt. 5:38-39). The implication is that we should tolerate mistreatment willingly. This interpretation misses Jesus' intended meaning. He was actually explaining the correct application of the Old Testament law (Lev. 24:17-22) and New Testament practice to illustrate that God wants us to have an attitude of mercy and forgiveness rather than one of revenge. Old Testament law required judges to mete out the same punishment to the perpetrator that was done to the victim. But the Jews were taking it upon themselves to pay people back.

God never intended that. Jesus was illustrating that when people mistreat you, you can choose your response to them and that it doesn't have to be revenge. But this teaching doesn't prohibit you from standing up against mistreatment. Jesus responded to His own mistreatment during His trial by questioning the right of the high priest's official to slap Him, saying, "If I said something wrong . . . testify as to what is wrong. But if I spoke the truth, why did you strike me?" (John 18:23).

Another argument against rights is this: Christ didn't demand His rights—He laid down His life. That's true. Christ did lay down His rights and give up His life, but only because it served God's divine purpose. Prior to that appointed time, He protected himself and chose what He allowed others to do to Him. He controlled His sacrifice, not others. The apostle Paul laid down his rights but only when it promoted the gospel. He stood up for his rights as a Roman citizen and his right to be set free from unlawful custody (Acts 16:37; 22:23-

29). Later he was willing to lay down his life, but only when he knew it was God's specific plan (Phil. 1:19-26; Acts 20:22-24).

Allison was married to an angry and controlling husband. He frequently yelled at her, called her names, and refused to let her spend money or be involved in outside activities. Allison quietly submitted, believing that as a Christian she didn't have rights and that God would bless her loving obedience to her husband. She willingly bore the pain, degradation, loneliness, and hurt, believing it was the right thing to do.

Allison misunderstood the teachings about submission and rights. God doesn't want women to be mistreated or to be slaves to their husbands' demands, whims, and selfishness. All of us deserve respect in relationships. Both persons' needs and rights are important: "Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others" (Phil. 2:4). There are selective times you should wisely, carefully, and purposefully lay down your rights, especially when it promotes the gospel. But you don't have to—and definitely shouldn't when it hurts the other person or harms you. You can help others make more healthful choices for themselves by asking that they treat you in a respectful way. But if you have low self-worth and low self-esteem, you probably don't respect yourself and tend to choose unhealthy relationships that devalue you. As a result, you hurt yourself and the other person.

## **SELF-CONFIDENCE**

Self-confidence has to do with knowing you're capable. Self-confidence is related to a sense of competency. It's not sinful and is absolutely necessary to survive. If you have a poor self-image, you'll have low self-confidence, because your assessment of your abilities will be low.

Confidence is necessary for a person to function. Think of a toddler taking his or her first steps. The child is scared and at first holds on to a table. He or she then lets go, takes a step, and falls, then crawls back to the table, tries again, and successfully takes a few steps. The next time he or she takes a few more steps with a little more confidence. Each successful step results in more successful steps until the toddler has enough confidence to make it across the room. Eventually walking becomes natural, and the child doesn't even think about it. But when a new challenge comes—like stairs—the child will stop to reassess his or her ability, feeling less confident with this new hurdle. Eventually the toddler will gain confidence in this area too.

It's the same with any task. If you think you can't do it, you probably won't. A baseball pitcher who thinks, *I can't throw well*, probably won't throw strikes. A public speaker who is nervous and convinced he or she can't speak, probably won't communicate well. The antidote to this nervousness is to envision yourself succeeding at whatever you presently feel unable to accomplish, and as you succeed, build a track record that negates the fear. Not trying because of fear ensures that you'll continue to feel incapable. Most of the Israelites weren't able to enter the Promised Land because they didn't have confidence that they could defeat the people living there. Their lack of confidence in themselves and God resulted in the perception that they were incapable (Num. 13:31-33).

Confidence is related to competence, which is the ability to do a task well. We study and train to become competent in a vocation, profession, sport, hobby, or other talent. Competence is not sinful; neither is being confident that you can perform or succeed. The opposite of competence is incompetence. When you feel unsure of

your ability, you'll either do more poorly or refuse to attempt the task. You won't make it in life if you feel incompetent at everything you do.

Women in her church kept telling Kacie she needed to be a small group Bible study leader, but she was afraid to commit because she didn't see herself as a leader. In spite of the fact that she was admired by many and was an effective encourager, she doubted herself. Kacie needed confidence. Finally she gave in to their requests, and as she began to lead, her confidence increased, and she began to grow by using her gifts and talents.

It is important to note that confidence and self-righteousness are not the same thing. Competence does not make you sinless or presentable to God. The apostle Paul knew his abilities and his credentials: He was circumcised, from the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew, a Pharisee, a zealous persecutor of the Church, and a faultless keeper of the law; but he knew that he must put his confidence in Christ for his salvation (Phil. 3:4-9). We can approach God's throne of grace with confidence, because He gives us grace and mercy through the blood of Jesus, not because of our righteousness (Heb. 4:16; 10:19).

We all have weaknesses as well as strengths. It's in our weakness that we must rely on God. Paul said that he preferred his weaknesses because they caused him to depend on the Lord. He was careful to boast in the things that glorified God rather than in his achievements (2 Cor. 12:9). Paul knew his strengths and what was easy for him. But he chose to focus on what brought him closer to the Lord.

Your abilities and competence ultimately come from God anyway (Deut. 8:17-18). Whether it's your intelligence, talents, gifts, ap-

pearance, or skills, it's God who made you the way you are and put you on the path to any successes you may have. He gets the glory, not you. But it's OK to feel good about what you do well and to admit the truth without feeling as though you're sinning by being proud.

## FEELING GOOD VERSUS BEING A LOVER OF SELF

Is focusing on yourself unchristian? Is it wrong to spend time figuring out what you think, feel, and perceive about yourself? Is it wrong to have a positive self-image and self-esteem? Would it be better not to think about yourself at all and focus completely on God? Some Christians would answer yes to all those questions. But the truth is, you'll think about yourself because you're human, so it's necessary to analyze what you think and how it affects your life. It's the purpose of this book to help you think correctly about yourself, because if you don't, it negatively affects your life and your ability to serve God and others.

Christians sometimes feel it's wrong to have good self-esteem. William Backus and Marie Chapien explain it this way: "It is true that out of our old sinful selves no good thing can flow. It is true that without the Holy Spirit we can do nothing [good]. But it is *also* true that with the Holy Spirit at work within, *we* do the good" (*Telling Yourself the Truth* [Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1980], 99).

We don't leave our bodies when we get saved, and we still live our own lives. We're empowered to overcome sin through Christ, but we still *choose* to do what we do. It's possible to feel good about our choices, because we could also choose the other way.

Can we love ourselves too much? Of course. Having good self-esteem is not an excuse to be arrogant, proud, superior, or

narcissistically self-indulged. Paul wrote to Timothy and described this type of person:

People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God—having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with them (2 *Tim.* 3:2-5).

A positive self-image is not an excuse for these attitudes.

A lover of self has little regard for others. A person with a good self-image is concerned with his or her own interests as well as the interests of others (Phil. 2:4). When we have a *real* self-image, we won't be selfish, self-seeking, egotistical, or self-centered but confident to truly serve. Jesus had a real self-image, and because of that, He was able to love selflessly without losing himself. Agape love requires us to love from a healthy self that's not self-seeking, proud, or boastful and doesn't do any harm to self or others (1 Cor. 13:4-7).

## IT'S NOT REALLY ABOUT YOU

After all is said and done, this life isn't really all about you—it's all about God. When your self-image is healthy, you won't be burdened with inferiority, self-pity, low self-worth, low self-esteem, and low self-confidence, nor will you be self-focused or proud. In a sense, you'll "get over yourself." If your self-image is inaccurate, you'll hinder yourself and will be unproductive in serving the Lord, because that wrong image of self holds you back, holds you down, holds you captive, keeps you blind and confused, and causes you to

be limited and self-focused. The self-image that results from low self-esteem and low self-worth usually causes increased self-consciousness and self-focus that prevents you from freely serving the Lord and others. Your healthy self-image lets you know that it isn't all about you, and, like Adam and Eve before the Fall, you'll be comfortable with who you are with the ability to be God-focused and other-focused.

### QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Describe the image you have of yourself.
2. From the list of things we tend to use to determine self-worth, identify the top five things you use.
3. Describe how your feelings about yourself affect your relationships with others.
4. How do you think your negative feelings about yourself prevent you from experiencing what God wants to do in your life?
5. When you realize you have done something wrong, how do you deal with it? How does recognizing the difference between the action and your worth as a person help you move forward?
6. How do you take care of yourself physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually? What else could you do to value the life God has given you?

7. Do you agree that Christians can ask for respect in relationships? Why or why not?
8. How do you respond to mistreatment in relationships?
9. Name some areas in which you feel confident and some in which you need more confidence.
10. Do you think it's wrong for Christians to have good self-esteem and self-worth? Why or why not?