

# Self-esteem



## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *Ps. 100:3, Acts 17:24–28, Rom. 12:3, Matt. 22:39, 2 Samuel 9, Luke 15, Eph. 4:23–32.*

**Memory Text:** “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Peter 2:9, NIV).

**D**iminished self-esteem is a modern plague. It often is brought to the counseling or pastoral offices either by itself or in association with such full-blown problems as substance-related abuse, depression, or eating disorders.

In everyday existence, low self-esteem never may reach clinical proportions, but it almost invariably hurts relationships and impairs performance in most areas of life.

Perhaps the main reason people suffer more than ever from this problem is the media, which often portrays its celebrities as larger than life, leaving others to feel their own inadequacy in contrast to the icons paraded before them.

The idea of self-esteem as presented in the Bible has a different perspective. Conventional psychology sees self-esteem as the evaluation someone makes of their own attributes and characteristics based on their observation of themselves and on others' input. The Bible offers at least two additional components: What humans are by origin (*Gen. 1:26, 27*) and what God thinks of and grants to each person (*John 3:16*). When we add these components, so much regarding self-esteem can change.

*\*Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, February 26.*

## Origins

Two prevailing views of human origins exist, each mutually exclusive of the other. One portrays humans as products of pure chance, the result of a cosmic accident in which our existence wasn't planned for. We just happened to come into existence. Though this view always has existed among some people, in recent centuries—particularly after the false theories of Charles Darwin became popular—the idea of humanity existing purely by accident has deceived millions. Thus, many have come to believe that life is inherently without purpose, or that any purpose it might have individuals must try to make for themselves. For millennia most people thought that they had originated from God or from gods; today, many think that they came from the apes.

In contrast, there's the view taught in the Bible.

**Read** Genesis 1:26, 27; Psalm 8:5; 100:3; and Acts 17:24–28. **How radically different is what's presented in these texts from the view of our origins as expressed previously? How should each view impact our own sense of self-worth and self-esteem?**

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Not only did God purposely create us, He created us in His image. He also created other wonderful, life-bearing plants and animals, but in their beauty and perfection they do not bear resemblance to their Maker as humans do. Furthermore, humanity is placed above all of them with dominion and authority.

In contrast to the atheist belief in no transcendent purpose for our human biology and psychology, the Bible teaches us that God chose to share “His image” with the human family. Obviously, much of that image has been marred and lost by generations of sin, yet the imprint continues in each person, and that lost image can be restored progressively by the transforming power of the Spirit working in those who are surrendered to Christ.

**Not only did God create us, He redeemed us, as well. In fact, Ellen White said that Christ would have died for even one person. What does that tell us about our inherent worth, regardless of what the world might think of us? Why is it so important to keep before us our worth in the eyes of God?**

## Self-perceptions

What I see in myself is one important component of self-esteem. However, it is an incomplete and often faulty picture. Subjectivity can lead to misinterpretation when assessing people, including ourselves.

One of the gravest biblical warnings is against passing judgment on someone else: “For at whatever point you judge the other, you are condemning yourself” (*Rom. 2:1, NIV; see also Luke 6:41, 42*). Distortion seems universal, and people are subject to commit mistakes when judging others. The same happens with self. There is a great deal of error when one judges oneself in terms of ability, looks, character, power, etc. There always are going to be people smarter, better looking, and more gifted than you; at the same time, there always will be people who will look at you and feel themselves to be inferior.

**Read** prayerfully and carefully **Matthew 22:39**. What is implied in this text regarding how we should view ourselves?

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This text implies that a reasonable amount of love should go to oneself (though this is not the main focus of the text). There should be a healthy pride in things well done, in well-accomplished tasks, and in the good traits and characteristics one may possess. There is an expected attitude of self-protection and caring for oneself. The problem comes when someone does not give credit to God, the Creator of all good things in us.

**How** are we to understand **Romans 12:3** in light of what we’ve looked at so far?

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There is a desirable middle area between extremely low self-esteem and arrogance. And Paul warns against the latter. At the same time, **Romans 12:4–8** explains that the body of Christ needs the input of each member, according to the individual gifts given by grace. There is nothing wrong in acknowledging each gift, using them to strengthen Christ’s church, and thanking God for them.

**Make a mental list of the good personal attributes, characteristics, and abilities that God has given you. How can you use them and at the same time remain humble? How can looking daily at the Cross help keep us in our place?**

## What Others See

In so many societies, a person's worth is determined by their talents, gifts, appearance, and so forth. We do look at outward appearance (*1 Sam. 16:7*); after all, that's all we can see. Thus, our concept of self often is shaped by the reaction others display, based on their outward observation of us. If everyone tells you that you are pretty, you will be more likely to view yourself as pretty.

But there always is much more to each of us than meets the eye. Individuals experiencing poor self-esteem need to think in terms of personal traits or attributes that are of true value and not necessarily what the world values, because so often what the world values is of no value to God.

**What** are the things that your society and culture place so much value on? How important do you think those things are to God?

There may be exceptions, but most societies tend to place excessive value in outward, observable features. However, other traits, such as honesty, kindness, temperance, or firm commitment to principles and ideals tend to have less value.

**How** does gender/class/nationality prejudice affect people's self-esteem? What should be the Christian's aim in terms of prejudice and discrimination? *Gal. 3:28*.

The effects of prejudice are devastating on self-esteem and performance. As Christians, we should be making a concentrated effort to uplift and encourage others, regardless of their background.

In 2 Samuel 9, there is the story of Mephibosheth, who could have been the target of retaliation by David. No wonder he showed fear, fell on his face to the ground, and called himself "a dead dog." He also was crippled. The restoration of the family property, the reassignment of servants, and the honors granted no doubt brought to Mephibosheth an extra measure of self-worth.

The influence that people have on others' self-esteem is extremely powerful. More than we realize, we have the ability to shape others' self-concept through words, actions, and even how we look at them.

**How careful, or careless, are you with the way you impact the self-esteem of others? Think about your closest relationships. How can you help build up these people as opposed to tearing them down?**

## What God Sees

**Read** Luke 15. What should that one chapter alone tell us about our worth to God? How should this impact our own sense of self-esteem? What do these parables tell us about what God thinks of us? Why is this so important to know and to keep before us?

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If someone feels tempted to dwell upon being inferior, lost, or outcast, they should remember that something else goes with that condition—a special and intense care from God and His angels. The shepherd cared more for the lost sheep than for the remaining ninety-nine. The woman forgot her other coins and searched carefully until she found the lost one. The father appears to have given more attention to the unreasonable demands of the prodigal son than to his first-born. Shepherd, woman, and father all show a special consideration for the least successful individual.

Then, when the lost are found, there is great joy on earth and in heaven. Look at how powerfully these stories reveal to us the love of God for each one of us, regardless of our faults.

This principle can play out in helping those in need. So often, in talking with others, if you can give them a nonthreatening, confidential, and accepting environment, that alone can do them so much good. People, especially hurting people, need to know that someone cares for them, especially in their pain.

A Christian has a clear advantage over someone who does not accept or believe in the Lord. God is on call 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, to listen to the depressed, stressed, lonely, and anxious soul. This relationship with God should be sufficient reason to feel special and to gain some relief from low self-esteem.

Of course, the greatest example of our worth in the eyes of God is the Cross. That more than anything should show us just how valuable we are to God, regardless of whatever weaknesses and faults we have. The Cross tells us that no matter what others think of us, or what our society thinks of us, we are of infinite value to the Creator of the universe. And considering how fleeting and transitory and contingent society and its values are, in the end how much should the view of others and of society as a whole really matter to us anyway?

**How can we help others take the message in Luke 15 and apply it to themselves? How can we help others realize that Jesus here is talking about them personally?**

## A New Self

**Read** Ephesians 4:23, 24. What does Paul mean by “putting on” the new self? What is the nature of this new self?

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People like to try new looks: changing hairstyle, buying new types of clothes, even getting a face-lift or hair transplant. But these changes will bring only minor variations inside. The basic self will remain unchanged.

Paul talks about a new self, related not to appearance but to attitude and mental nature. He says that we are “created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness” (*vs. 24, NIV*).

**Outline** the attitudes and behaviors coming out of the new self. *Eph. 4:25–32.*

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The new self referred to by Paul exhibits successful fruits (truthfulness, unity, honesty, diligence, wholesome talk, kindness, forgiveness). Notice, too, that all of the new self’s attributes have to do with good character and interpersonal relationships, and these can be tied directly to questions of self-esteem. The adverse behaviors mentioned in Ephesians 4, such as lying, anger, and bitterness, leave the person with a diminished sense of value. In contrast, sharing with those in need and being kind and compassionate are actions that can enhance self-esteem, as they change a person’s focus from self and thus leave the person with a sense of accomplishment.

The Christian community needs people who are interested in building others up rather than destroying them. The concept of self easily can be ruined in no time with rude words of criticism. “Upon every family, upon every individual Christian, is laid the duty of barring the way against corrupt speech. When in the company of those who indulge in foolish talk, it is our duty to change the subject of conversation if possible. By the help of the grace of God we should quietly drop words or introduce a subject that will turn the conversation into a profitable channel.”—Ellen G. White, *Christ’s Object Lessons*, p. 337.

**Why is it that helping somebody enhances your own self-esteem? Make a list of small things that you can do for your neighbor, partner, or family member. Do them; you may be surprised at how well you feel about yourself.**

**Further Study:** “If God cares for a sparrow . . . how will he care for the purchase of the blood of Christ? One soul is worth more than all the world. For one soul Jesus would have passed through the agony of Calvary that that one might be saved in his kingdom. ‘Fear ye not therefore, ye are of more value than many sparrows.’ ”—Ellen G. White, *The Review and Herald*, May 3, 1892.

“We lose many and rich blessings because we neglect to seek the Lord with humble hearts. When we come to Him in sincerity of heart, asking Him to reveal our defects, He will show us a true picture of ourselves, reflected in the mirror of His Word. Then, having seen ourselves as God sees us, let us not go away forgetting what manner of men we are. Let us study critically the features of our character that are defective, and seek for grace to make them like the pattern presented in the Word of God.”—Ellen G. White, *The Lake Union Herald*, November 3, 1909.

The two paragraphs above give us additional insight to maintain the balance between inferiority and vanity. Read Romans 12:2, 3 in the light of these texts to gain understanding into attaining a balanced self-concept.

## Discussion Questions:

- 1 The twentieth century was one of the most violent ever, with mass murder seen on a scale as never before. How could the Darwinian view of human existence, which postulates that all life is a product of random mutation and natural selection, be partially responsible for this total disregard for the sanctity of human life? In other words, if human beings are just advanced apes, products of chance alone, what is the inherent value of an individual life?
- 2 Tuesday’s lesson looked at how the perceptions of others can impact a person’s self-worth. Though we want to affirm people and help them have a healthy sense of self-worth, we also need to be careful about feeding someone’s ego and pumping them up in ways that could be detrimental to them. How can we strike the right balance here—affirming people without, in the process, damaging them in a different way?
- 3 Dwell more on the question of what the cross of Christ teaches us about our individual worth. Think about what happened at the cross, who was on it, and what His death meant. How should the Cross help us have a better sense of what our individual worth really is?

# The Stubborn Businessman

by BRITTO AMAL RAJ

I am a stubborn man. I thought I could solve all my problems without God's help. But God showed me otherwise.

When I opened my own business, I met unforeseen financial challenges that brought stress on my family and me. My wife urged me to ask her parents for a loan to help us pay our bills, but I was proud and refused.

As the stress increased, so did my smoking and drinking. The family begged me to quit, so I hid my habits from them. I went to church with my family on Sundays, but I returned home unchanged.

The Seventh-day Adventist pastor is one of my neighbors, and we became friends. During one especially difficult time, I asked him for advice and prayer regarding my financial problems. I needed to order a shipment of rags with which to make floor mats, but I had no money to pay for them. Without the rags, I couldn't make mats to earn money. The pastor prayed with me and encouraged me to trust God.

The next day, I received an unexpected shipment of rags. I called the company and learned that they had sent the rags without an order, and I could pay over time. This was an answer to prayer! I made the mats, paid for the rags, and had money for my other bills. Now the company sends shipments on credit, and my business is growing.

I began to think more about my relationship with God. When the pastor invited me to visit the Adventist church, I went. I began seeing my sinful life through God's eyes, and I asked God for forgiveness and strength to give up my bad habits. I threw away my cigarettes and alcohol. I struggled with these temptations, but God delivered me, and I haven't smoked or drank since then.

My pastor friend helped me commit my life completely to God. He studied the Bible with me, and I was baptized.

I'm sharing what I learn with my wife, and she listens. She sees the miracles that God has performed in our lives, and while she doesn't yet attend church with me, she does join me for prayer every morning to commit our lives and family to God.

Your mission offerings help support the ongoing work in India, where nearly a million Adventist believers live and share their faith. Thank you!

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BRITTO AMAL RAJ *shares his faith in a town near Madurai, India.*