

How to Find Self-Worth

Rich Nathan
June 24 & 25, 2017
Silent Killers
1 Corinthians 4:3-5

Do you know anyone who struggles with feelings of low self-worth? People with feelings of low self-worth have an inner voice that constantly berates them. They hear over and over in their mind, “I’m so stupid. No one is as stupid as me. I never do anything right. I’m just a screw up. I’m ugly. I hate my body.”

People with feelings of low self-worth struggle to have close relationships. They think, “You can’t really love me. I’m not worthy of your love or I’m not worthy of true love. If you really knew me you wouldn’t love me. Before you reject me, which you definitely will, I will sabotage the relationship and I’ll blow this relationship up even though you’re the best thing that I’ve ever found. But before you reject me, I will reject you. I will run. I will flee.”

It’s not only a romantic relationship that a person with feelings of low self-worth will struggle. Often these folks will be isolated, they will often be lonely because they think to themselves that no one really wants to be their friend. No one really likes them.

People with feelings of low self-worth struggle to succeed at their jobs. They often have low self-confidence. “I won’t apply for a great new position because I know I will never get it.” They often are risk-averse. “I won’t take on a challenging new project or leave this company that I hate for something better because I’m definitely going to fail so I won’t even try.”

They won’t speak up at meetings even though they have lots of thoughts because after all their opinions are probably dumb. Everyone around the table is smarter than them. “I know that people will reject what I’m going to share.” In meetings, if they do talk, they speak so quietly that no one can hear them or they turn their statements into questions. Lots of times, people with low self-worth never make declarative statements. Instead, they raise their voice at the end of the sentence so it sounds like a question. “I feel we should do this?”

There are lots of ways to identify feelings of low self-worth.

- A person with feelings of low self-worth may feel unworthy of any success they’ve achieved. They often feel like frauds. “One day people will discover how incompetent I am or how little I know and then I’ll be fired. I’ll be humiliated.”

- A person with feelings of low self-worth may stay in an abusive relationship because they think “I don’t deserve better. I deserve to be abused – being hurt, being shamed, being hit is normal for someone like me.”
- A person with feelings of low self-worth may go from relationship to relationship because they need fresh validation from a new man/a new woman. They may be flirtatious because they desperately need a new person’s attention.
- A person with feelings of low self-worth may seek validation from outward trappings of success – a flashy car, expensive jewelry, a huge house, the applause of others, the size of their bank accounts, their GPA, the attractiveness of their partner.

Does anyone here identify with some of these indicators of feelings of low self-worth? Do you know of anyone that when you hear these descriptors, you think “gosh, this sounds exactly like my husband or wife, my boyfriend or girlfriend, my son or daughter, my brother or sister, this sounds just like my friend.”

Can I ask you a personal question? Is there anyone listening to me right now who says, “Gosh, you are describing me – I’m someone who regularly plays the tape in my head that says I’m stupid, if anyone found out about me they wouldn’t like me. I’m someone who has sabotaged relationships. I’ve rejected someone before they reject me. I stayed in abusive relationships because I didn’t think I deserved any better. I’ve struggled with success at my work because of my feelings of low self-worth or because I’m intimidated by people who are really competent or really intelligent.”

Last week I started a series titled “Silent Killers”. Doctors will frequently will call attention to physical problems that can go unnoticed for years – things like high blood pressure, diabetes, coronary artery disease, cervical cancer – these can go unnoticed, but if they are left untreated they can kill us. Over the summer, I want to talk about other kinds of silent killers – things that don’t necessarily kill our bodies but will kill our souls, things that kill us emotionally, kill our relationships and our shot at success in life. Today, I want to talk about the issue of self-worth – how we feel about ourselves. The message is titled, “How to Find Self-Worth”.

Let’s pray.

1 Corinthians 4:3-5

³ I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. ⁴ My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me. ⁵ Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait until the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of the heart. At that time each will receive their praise from God.

Discovering self-worth

The typical way that we find self-worth is:

By what other people say about us: we look outward

Traditionally, people find their self-worth through their assigned roles. To the extent that you fulfilled your given role, you felt good about yourself. As a man, if your father was a shoemaker, you were a shoemaker. If your father was a farmer, you were a farmer. If you were a woman, you were supposed to grow up to be a wife, a mother, maybe tend a garden for your family, mend the clothes. Your identity was handed to you. You see this in the Old Testament story of Abraham's servant when he met Rebekah for the first time. How does Rebekah identify herself? Here's what we read:

Genesis 24:24

²⁴ She answered him, "I am the daughter of Bethuel, the son that Milkah bore to Nahor."

She doesn't say, "I am Rebekah, hear me roar!" She was given a certain role. I am a daughter to my father, a granddaughter to my grandparents.

Jesus rejected having his identity and self-worth determined by what others said about him. You know what people said about Jesus. People around Jesus accused him of being demonized. They called him a Samaritan. That would be like calling someone a "liberal". Pharisees said to Jesus, "You are a liberal. You're not orthodox. You're a Samaritan."

What was it that the religious authorities said about Jesus?

John 10:20

²⁰ Many of them said, "He is demon-possessed and raving mad. Why listen to him?"

Other people said, "You are a drunkard. You are a deceiver of the masses. You are illegitimate. You are a bastard because your mother got pregnant out of wedlock." Can you imagine if Jesus got his sense of self-worth from what others said about him?

The contemporary self-esteem movement is entirely based upon the premise that children are going to a high sense of self-worth only if all the adults in their lives always shower them with praise. All the adults in their lives – parents, teachers, coaches, grandparents – must always be positive. The self-esteem movement is based upon the notion that we draw our sense of self-worth from others so others must reflect back to us positive feedback all the time. Teachers can't use red ink to mark the papers wrong because kids feel bad when they see a lot of red ink. Use blue ink and put a happy face sticker on the top of the paper even if the kid got everything wrong. Children don't fail – we say, "nice try!"

At the end of every sports season, every child has to get a trophy – a kid who was obnoxious, who talks back is given the “Spirit Award” in which we reframe their rudeness into being spirited. The Most Improved player is going to be the least athletic kid. The Coach’s Award goes to the kid who sits in the outfield picking dandelions – the only thing we can say about them is that they showed up on time. We could give them the Prompt Award, but that seems lame so we have the Coach’s Award. The Most Valuable Player Award almost never goes to the kid who everyone knows is the best player on the team, you know the kid who scores 5 of the 5 goals, because they already won it last year and we don’t want the other kids to feel bad – so we give the award to another less deserving kid.

Lots of kids grow up with an inflated view of themselves. They think they are amazing at something when they are only average. They grow up believing that their opinion should always be listened to even though they are ill-informed or based on false data.

One way of discovering self-worth is by what other people say about us. We look outward for affirmation. Outward for validation. That is the traditional approach. The post-modern approach is to discover self-worth

By what we say about us: we look inward

Looking inward to find your self-worth is the Disney approach to identity that runs through nearly all of their movies for the last 25 years. The other night, I watched the movie *Moana* with my granddaughter, Naomi. Have you seen *Moana*? It has absolutely gorgeous animation. It has a spectacular score – it was written by Lin-Manuel Miranda who created the Broadway hit, *Hamilton*.

Moana finds her identity by looking inward. Here are some lyrics from the song, “How Far I’ll Go”:

I know everybody on this island seems so happy, on this island
Everything is by design
I know everybody on this island has a role, on this island
So maybe I can roll with mine

I can lead with pride, I can make us strong
I’ll be satisfied if I play along
But the voice inside sings a different song
What is wrong with me?

Moana is simply unable to fit within the roles given to her by her family and by her community. The tradition handed to her is suffocating. There’s a voice inside calling to her and she needs to be true to that inner voice. She sings:

And the call isn't out there at all
It's inside me
It's like the tide, always falling and rising
I will carry you here in my heart
You'll remind me
That come what may, I know the way
I am Moana!

The heroines in Disney movies have to be set free from the suffocating expectations of their family or their communities.

Elsa in *Frozen* sings:

It's funny how some distance
Makes everything seem small
And the fears that once controlled me
Can't get to me at all
It's time to see what I can do
To test the limits and break through
No right, no wrong, no rules for me,
I'm free!

I find my sense of self-worth by throwing out the rules and looking inside me. The philosophy has a fancy name. It's called expressive individualism. My life task is to discover my true self and to express that. Nothing outside me should restrain the true me – not my parents, not religion, not the commitments I've made in marriage, not God. My identity and worth are not given to me by other people, instead I create my own identity. I give myself self-worth.

Back in the 17th century, the great English poet Milton wrote a poem called *Paradise Lost*. It's the story of the fall of our first parents, Adam and Eve, after the rebellion by Lucifer and his angels. Lucifer became known in the Bible as Satan. Not only does Lucifer refuse to bow the knee to Jesus, Lucifer rejects the Father and he announces that he fathered himself. Lucifer denies his creaturely status.

In book five of *Paradise Lost* Lucifer asks:

“That we were formd then saist thou? & the work
Of secundarie hands, by task transferd
From Father to his Son? Strange point and new!
When this creation was? Rememberst thou
Thy making, while the Maker gave thee being?
We know no time when we were not as now;
Know none before us, self-begot, self-rais'd

By our own quick'ning power

I created myself. I begot myself. In the 17th century, those words could only be spoken by Satan. Today those words are in Disney movies sung by attractive young women. You've come a long way, baby!

The problem with self-created self-worth is that it is too weak of a foundation to sustain us. Self-created self-worth is always under threat – if you are a perfectionist you feel good only if everything is perfect, but since things are never perfect, you never feel really good. If you are a peacemaker, you only feel really good if your relationships are harmonious. But since relationships in this fallen world are filled with tension, you never feel good. If your self-worth is based on achievement, no success is ever permanent. You have to keep achieving, you have to keep performing. Every day you have to conquer a new mountain. Every day you start with a zero balance and your self-worth has to be created all over again.

We've considered two bad options for establishing identity and self-worth. Looking outward – what other people say, that's suffocating, that's stifling. Looking inward – what I say about myself, that's insecure, it's always threatened. The Apostle Paul offers a third option for establishing self-worth:

1 Corinthians 4:3-5

³ I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. ⁴ My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me. ⁵ Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait until the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of the heart. At that time each will receive their praise from God.

We gain our self-worth

By what God says about us: we look upward

What does God say about us in his Word? What God says, what God thinks of us is the only really secure foundation for my self-worth and your self-worth! Here's the first thing:

I am made in the image of God

Genesis 1:26-27

²⁶ Then God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground."

²⁷ So God created mankind in his own image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.

Because we are made in the image of God, we have extraordinary value. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. arguing that segregation between the races was not just detrimental to the overall good of American society, but that segregation was a sin. Because God's image in us gives every person

"... a uniqueness, it gives him worth, it gives him dignity. And we must never forget this as a nation: there are no gradations in the image of God. Every man from a treble white to a bass black is significant on God's keyboard, precisely because every man is made in the image of God."

Now, there are lots of things that being made in the image of God means. We're representatives of God to the rest of creation. We share various attributes of God – our moral natures, our reason, our creativity. But one of the things that gives us as human beings unique worth is that we were created for a relationship with God. God wants a relationship with every single person he ever made, regardless of our age, regardless of our mental abilities, regardless of our station in life. God made every human being for relationship with himself and he gives every human being the capacity to relate to him. You have worth because you have been made in God's image for relationship with God.

What does God say about us as we look upward and listen to God's Word? God says I am made in the image of God. The second thing that God says is:

I am a sinner

Mark 7:21-23

²¹ For it is from within, out of a person's heart, that evil thoughts come—sexual immorality, theft, murder, ²² adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. ²³ All these evils come from inside and defile a person."

We don't have to excuse away our failures and pretend they are not failures. We don't have to put a smiley face on a failed test or say, "nice try" every time we screw up in order to feel good about ourselves. We can frankly acknowledge before God that we are, in the words of Christian philosopher Frances Schaeffer, glorious ruins. There's a glory in me. There's a glory in you. We are like Lamborghinis that somebody ran into a tree. The front end is all out of alignment, the hood is bent, the headlights are smashed, the radiator is leaking coolant, but there's something still so beautiful about the car. God says, "You are worth repairing."

So, what's the basis of our self-worth? What does God say about us? First, I am made in the image of God. Second, I am a sinner. Third, through faith in Jesus Christ

I am a child of God

This was the foundation of Jesus' own self-worth. The foundation of his successful ministry. He knew who he was before God. At Jesus' baptism, we read these words:

Luke 3:21-22

²¹ When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened ²² and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

It was this foundation of being secured as the beloved of God that enabled Jesus to experience all of the negative feedback from his society and still maintain a sense of self-worth.

Charles Cooley who is a very famous sociologist once said that your self-concept is based on what you think the most important person in your life thinks of you. Your self-concept is based on what you think the most important person or people in your life think of you.

Jewish mothers are taken to task a lot for their tendency to use guilt to motivate and their tendency to complain. But I will tell you one thing that Jewish mothers do very well. By and large, they communicate that their kids are radically valuable in their eyes.

I got together several years ago with my Jewish mom. We had dinner together with my stepfather and aunt. Over the course of the dinner, I kid you not, my mother must have said two or three dozen times, looking at me and grabbing my face, "Isn't he something? Don't you just love him? At the end of the evening, it would have been comical if it didn't feel so good. Our self-concept comes from what the most important person in our life thinks of us.

So, here is the question, friend. Who will be, for you, your most important person? Jesus' most important person was God the Father. Jesus knew whatever anyone else said about Him, whatever other religious leaders said about Him, whatever His disciples in their rising and falling faith said about Him, whatever governmental officials said about Him. Jesus knew who He was because His most important person was God the Father.

Who is your most important person, the one who shapes your feelings about your self-worth? Your boyfriend or girlfriend? Your ex-spouse? Your mother-in-law? Every time

you say, “So and so makes me feel awful about myself” you are saying that they are your most important person, not Jesus.

Who is your most important person? To say you believe in Jesus means more than you just believe that Jesus was born of a Virgin or that He died on a cross for your sins, or even that He was raised from the dead. To say that you believe in Jesus and mean it, means that Jesus has become your most important person and what He says about you controls the way you think of yourself. And I believe Jesus in this way is like a Jewish mom who is squeezing your face and saying, “Isn’t she something? Isn’t she beautiful? Look at my daughter, have you ever met someone so smart?”

“Oh, he is so precious.”

“Oh, he is so valuable.”

Fred Craddock, who was a professor at a seminary, was talking about this whole issue of realizing what Christ says about us and its life-changing power. He said he was on vacation with his family in Tennessee when an old man who looked like he needed a shave and a new suit came up and pulled up a chair at the restaurant. He said, “How ya’ doin’? Are you havin’ a good time? Are you on vacation?” This seminary professor responded fairly formally and said, “Yes, we are on vacation.”

The old man said, “What do you do for a living?”

Professor Craddock, wanting to get rid of him, put him off and said, “I am a professor of homiletics.”

The old man said, “Oh, so you are a preacher, huh? Let me tell you a preacher story. [Everyone has a preacher story.]

Professor Craddock groaned inside. He was going to hear the preacher story. This guy was physically sitting at the table. He said, “I was born an illegitimate child. I never knew who my father was and that was hard on me. The boys at school had names for me that I can’t repeat. When I walked down the main street of our little town, I used to feel people staring at me and I constantly felt like they were asking, ‘I wonder who that little boy’s father was?’ I spent a lot of time as a boy by myself. I didn’t have many friends. One day a new preacher came to town and everyone talked about how good he was. I never went to church before, but I decided to go and hear him preach. He was a good preacher, so I kept going back and listening to him. Nearly every time I would try to leave early so that I wouldn’t have to talk to anyone because I was embarrassed by my past and where I was from. One day I was caught up listening to the message and I forgot to leave. When I got up to leave, I was caught in the aisle by the crowd. I felt this hand come down on my shoulder. It was the preacher. He said, ‘What’s your name, boy? Whose son are you?’

The old man said, “I just shook when he asked that question whose son are you? But before I could say anything, he said ‘I know who you are. I know your family. There is a distinct resemblance there. You are a son of God, that’s who you are. You are a son of God.’

He said, “Friend, that changed my life.” The old man got up to leave. Fred Craddock was sitting there cocking his head when a waitress came up and said, “Do you know who that old man was?” The professor said, “No.” She said, “Well, that is Ben Hooper. He is the Governor of our State.”

A sure foundation for self-worth is not what others say about us. We don’t look outward. It’s not what we say about ourselves. We don’t look inward. It’s what God says about us. We look upward! What does God say about us? I am made in the image of God. I am a sinner. I am a child of God. And, finally, here’s the wonderful good news:

I am destined for greatness

You see this illustrated really well in the story of Peter in the New Testament. When Andrew introduced his brother, Simon, which was Peter’s original name, to Jesus we’re told that:

John 1:42b

Jesus looked at him and said, “You are Simon son of John. You will be called Cephas” (which, when translated, is Peter).

The meaning of the word Cephas, which is Aramaic, and Peter, which is Greek, is rock. As you read through the gospel stories and you quickly see that Peter was anything but rock-like. He knew he was a sinner. He regularly blurted out dumb things. And he completely caved in on the night Jesus was betrayed by denying knowing Jesus three times after boasting that he would die for him.

When Jesus looks at us, he doesn’t see us as we are. He sees what we could become if we let him manage our lives. As we surrender control of our lives to Jesus, we become what God always intended our lives to be.

So, we don’t have to look to our past and all the terrible things we came out of in order to try to find a basis of self-worth. The Bible constantly calls us to look to the future to what God is making us into as we begin to live out our appointed destinies. Look ahead to the pull of his kingdom purposes. And as I begin to live out God’s purposes for my life, I discover who I am and I grow in my sense of self-worth.

You have infinite value, friend. You are made in the image of God. When you put your faith in Jesus, you can become a child of God, the beloved of God. If you yield to Jesus,

if you surrender to his kingdom purposes over and over and over again you will become the person God always meant for you to be. And your self-worth will be secure!

Let's pray.