

Self-Image

RESOURCES FOR BIBLICAL LIVING

Self-Image

How to Overcome Inferiority Judgments

LOU PRIOLO


P U B L I S H I N G
P.O. BOX 817 • PHILLIPSBURG • NEW JERSEY 08865-0817

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“My self-esteem has been at an all-time low ever since the divorce. I’ll never be the same again because of all the hurt Fred has caused me. My feelings of inferiority have turned me into an emotional basket case. I’ve got to learn how to improve my poor self-image and feel good about myself again so I can get over this mess and get on with my life. I know I’ll never be able to grow as a Christian until I overcome my self-esteem issues.”

Thoughts such as this are common today—even among Christians. It’s little wonder. Christian books, magazines, radio, television, and video programs (not to mention pulpits) are promoting certain ideas about self-image that are not taught in Scripture. The idea that “self-esteem” is essential for one’s happiness ought to raise a red flag in the mind of any discerning believer who understands the implications of Philippians 2:3: “Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves.”

Our happiness is not related as much to how we esteem ourselves as it is to how we esteem others. Christians have been inundated with humanistic presuppositions that they believe to be theologically sound.

Did you catch the fallacies implicit in the opening paragraph? Here are a few of them:

1. There is a part of man’s nonmaterial being (such as his mind, conscience, or will) called a “self-image” (cf. 1 Cor. 2:13).
2. *Inferiority* is a *feeling* rather than a *judgment* or self-evaluation (cf. Rom. 2:14–15).

3. People are victims of something beyond their control (cf. Gen. 3:12–13).
4. A good self-image is a prerequisite to success and happiness (cf. Josh. 1:8).
5. God’s ability to help people change depends on one’s having a good self-image (cf. Rom. 8:29).

The construct of self-image doesn’t exist in the Bible.¹ The Scriptures speak of man’s heart, his mind, his conscience, his emotions, his thoughts, and his motives, but say nothing about self-image. We are mistaken when we view self-image as an entity in and of itself. It is not an organ of the soul that can be squashed, flattened, punctured, inflated, deflated, damaged, or devastated. It can’t be isolated, fixed, or modified—at least not directly.

“What do you mean by ‘not directly’?”

To answer that question, we must first look at and interpret the idea of self-image “not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual thoughts with spiritual words” (1 Cor. 2:13).

Self-image can best be classified as a judgment one makes as he evaluates himself. You and I continually make judgments about ourselves in a variety of areas (cf. 1 Cor. 2:15–16; 11:31; Titus 3:11). These judgments form our self-evaluation. This internal evaluation is what is commonly referred to as our self-image. Self-image, therefore, is not an emotion or a feeling, but rather a part of our cognitive process. It is fundamentally thought—not feeling.

We may feel good about our self-evaluation, or we may feel bad about it. But the feelings are the result of our thoughts.

1. We are indebted to John Bettler and Jay Adams for the fine work they have done in unpacking the construct of self-image and repackaging it into biblical concepts.