

ELEMENTS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF SELF ESTEEM (SE)

We are bombarded by books about self-love, and positive SE. The Bible speaks of self-love in both a positive and negative way. It assumes that we will love ourselves (Matt. 22:35-40). The main problem from a Biblical perspective is inordinate love of self which is identified by self-indulgence, self-centeredness, and self-adoration which is called "idolatry" (2 Tim. 3:2-5, Phil. 2:3-4, 3:21, Col. 3:5-6). However, it is clear that negative self-image is a problem in our time (paradoxically, poor SE often manifests itself in self-indulgence!).

What is a high SE person like? What are his or her characteristics? Some have featured a positive self-view in terms of "**Self-Actualization**" (Maslow). He studied some of the great historical figures (Lincoln, Einstein, E. Roosevelt, Jane Addams, and others). He found them to be acceptant of self and others, spontaneous, creative, autonomous, and able to achieve mature love relationships. Others have looked at a positive self-view as it relates to production as in "**Achievement Motive**" studies (McClelland, French, Winterbottom). They found high achievers to be goal oriented, possessing an internalized standard of excellence, completing what they initiated, and that they usually had mothers who very early demanded that they be responsible to do things for themselves...to be part of the home team, so to speak.

An overview of research shows that there are a number of factors which serve to contribute to SE including: **(a) the way we see ourselves in reference to personal qualities** such as appearance, achievement, ability, and how we compare to others; **(b) interpersonal aspects** such as feeling loved, being held in positive regard by others, and being seen as useful; **(c) moral and spiritual qualities** such as one's relationship to God, a biblically based belief system, and a life consistent with one's belief system which features love as the basic motivator; **(d) how one deals with guilt** including having the ability to admit guilt, being capable of assessing the causes of guilt in a realistic manner, and possessing a system for responding to guilt through repentance and change; **(e) how one deals with conflict** including a realistic assessment of conflict, being aware of one's personal areas of conflict, possessing a system for the resolution of conflict; **(f) one's relationship to the environment** including whether one sees the environment as a friend or foe, whether one sees self as a victim or a winner in relation to the environment; and **(g) one's life philosophy** whether it be service oriented, hedonistic, self

or other directed, an attitude of community and friendship, or an attitude of isolation, alienation and being a loner.

PERSONAL QUALITIES: So far as personal qualities are concerned, we are not all "created equal". The kind of home into which we are born is very significant. Children with parents who are loving and supportive give their children a head start compared to those who do not. In a world where beauty, youth, wealth, power, success in terms of material possessions, sexual acting out, emphasis on being superior to others, winning over others, being served by others, and blatant self-centeredness are prized; it takes a lot of parental teaching and example to stem such a tide! In a culture that prizes physical attractiveness those of us who do not measure up may have problems! If we are less endowed physically or mentally it is easy to feel inferior. Proper attitudes and education should help everyone feel important and capable when they are doing the best they can with the qualities and abilities they possess. Our way will be harder if we were short-changed due to failure of those who should have cared for us, but that is not fatal! All around us there are persons who show that even if we did not have an equitable start, we can make up for it. Few things are worse than feeling that we are victims. The Bible encourages us not to make our case for success or fame on how we compare to others (2 Cor. 10:12). The Christian view is that when we do what we can do with what we possess, we have done well in the Lord's sight (2 Cor. 8:12, 1 Cor. 4:1-5). With God, availability is more important than ability! If our ability is less, He can make up the difference if we are available (Phil. 4:13, Eph. 3:20-21). In God's view, to be gifted and not available is to be a failure.

INTERPERSONAL ASPECTS: As indicated above, being born into a good family gives one a running start! How wonderful it is to be covered by love from the moment of our arrival in this world! However, if love is not wisely demonstrated, it can become lethal to children. Many parents learn too late what it means to raise "over indulged children!" We may do that by doing everything for them and giving them too much. In the meantime, we may rob them of the pleasure of being a contributing part of the family team. It is good to help children feel capable by not doing everything for them! Parents that as soon as possible make their children part of the family work force, do their children a favor.

Parents should be very interested and involved in everything their children do. Children should be praised for being involved, and made to feel good when they have made a good effort even if they do not win. Parents owe their children a feeling of being loved, of being important, of security, and they owe them proper discipline (which is best done by parents that are disciplined themselves).

Discipline should be reasonable, clearly explained, consistent, united, and loving. Parents should let their children know that failure or fouling up are not fatal, and that they are special. Good parents allow their children to grow and develop in terms of their gifts and interests, rather than trying to relive their lives through their children. If children do not grow up in that kind of environment, their way to interpersonal success is harder, but not impossible. Children are good at finding substitutes for parents who fail, whether it be by latching on to someone else's parents, or a favorite minister or teacher, or a neighbor, or youth leader of some type. Churches that are doing their job should be looking for such children to help, as should neighbors, civic leaders, and persons whose tasks involve working with children and young people.

High self-esteem homes are characterized by more love and esteem, by stricter discipline, by democracy and openness, by mature adolescent relationships, by the achievement of developmental task for future adulthood, by learning independence and responsibility, by intellectual growth (turn the T.V. off and go slow on video-games!!!), and by positive adult/ child relationships characterized by openness, listening, involvement and giving.

MORAL AND SPIRITUAL QUALITIES: Moses wrote that parents should teach their children about the Lord and His will when seated in the house, when walking along the way, when lying down and when rising up. They were also to display messages that reminded their children many times daily of such teachings and their importance. (Deut. 6:4-9).

The Jews of the Old Testament times developed Synagogues which served both as places of worship and as schools. These meeting places were means which helped parents and children remember who they were, to whom they belonged, and whom they were to serve in their lives. In the Proverbs, a book largely dedicated to general truths, we are told that children that are brought up in a proper manner, will tend to hold to this even into their old age (Prov. 22:6). Fathers are especially encouraged to deal with their children in such a manner that they will not cause them to be rebellious, but will instead be led in the way of the Lord (Eph. 6:4). Only such Christian men as had successfully raised their children to be Christians were to be appointed Elders of the church (1 Tim. 3:4-5, Tit. 1:5-6).

Our hearts tell us how much more content, relaxed, and successful we feel when we live up to those standards that we believe to be true and right. Such demeanor tends to be admired by people generally,

especially when it is clear that one's conduct is based on unselfish love for God and for others rather than on a legalistic sense of duty!.

On the other hand, people generally call us hypocrites when we say we believe one thing, and then act in a way that is contradictory to what we say we believe (nor can we feel good about ourselves). The bottom line is to recognize that a Christian can never have high SE without being "born again" (Jn. 3:3-5), thereby receiving a new personality as we are changed into the likeness of Christ (Gal. 3:27, 2 Cor. 3:18). In a recent exchange with my granddaughter Nicole, she wrote, "Without a relationship with Christ it is the image of sin that dominates our self-perception. Until we deal with our sin by giving it over to Christ on the cross and accepting his sacrifice, we are going to feel just plain awful because our soul is marred by our sin."

HOW ONE DEALS WITH GUILT: The church has been called the originator of guilt, but Tournier says guilt is a universal phenomenon. He says this because wherever there are people there are rules and traditions and people who violate them, as a consequence, there is guilt everywhere. The Bible says this as well (Rom. 2:11-16). Ungersma says guilt is an outgrowth of responsibility and they go together like Siamese twins. Freud saw it as related to the development of a value system which included a Super-ego which was brought about by the need to inhibit impulses of the unregulated urges of the Id (sex and aggression), and served to persuade the Ego to accept moralistic goals. He also saw guilt as a by-product of our striving for perfection. To the extent the Ego does not achieve its goals, guilt is produced. Drakeford saw guilt as related to the "thou shalt not" of the conscience, and the "you ought" of the Ego ideal. Pattison wrote of civil guilt (breaking specific laws), of psychological guilt (internal effect of self-condemnation), of existential guilt (growing out of the interaction of people-estrangement), and ontological guilt which he thought related to original sin (Collins, Gary, *Christian Counseling*, 1988, pp. 134-146, Ungersma, Aaron, *Escape From Phoniness*, p. 90-94, Drakeford, John, *Psychology in Search of a Soul*, pp. 166-167).

Guilt may be healthy or unhealthy in terms of being real guilt related to a specific infraction; or neurotic guilt, a free-floating generalized sense of guilt not related to a specific infraction. The later is believed to often be related to early parental mistakes usually having to do with a child not being able to measure up to parental expectations, an early sense of failure, or to faulty personality formation. Impulsivity and subjectivity tend to produce guilt, as do hostility and depression. Sometimes children feel guilty even for harmful actions that parents undertake against their children.

The Bible deals with real guilt. The Greek word for sin is HARMATIA and gives the idea of "falling short" or of "missing the mark." John writes that guilt (sin) comes from a violation of the Law (1 John 3:4). James says it is from the failure to do right (James 4:17). Paul says it comes from the violating of the conscience (Rom. 14:23)...actually, the conscience (heart) is intended to function in relationship to all of the above (1 John 3:19-21).

Remedies for dealing with guilt from a psychological perspective hold that one should accept responsibility, seek forgiveness from God and persons, seek reconciliation, and seek group support. From a Christian perspective, one should acknowledge that grace (unearned favor) is available through the sacrifice of Christ (2 Cor. 5:17-21), and believe that this grace is obtainable to all and is sufficient to one's need (2 Cor. 12:9-10). It should be noted that grace is hard to deal with because it is not fair!! We have a very ingrained conviction that if we have done wrong, we should suffer....we should in some way have to pay...and yet here God is saying "Yes you have done wrong, but there no way you can pay...it can only be made up for by Christ and handed to you as a gift" (Eph. 2:8-9). However, grace is not unconditional. We are to repent and in sorrow turn away from wrong, and be baptized for the remission of our sins (Acts 2:38). If possible, to the extent that our sin involves a wrong we have done against someone, we are to make restitution and do what we can to not continue that wrong (1 Cor. 5:1-5, 2 Cor. 2:4-11). We are to accept reconciliation with God (Rom. 8:1), and be reconciled with others we may have wronged (as indicated above). As we are restored to the spiritual family of which we are a part we receive the support of the group (2 Cor. 2:6-8, Gal. 6:1-2). We should try to avoid guilt, but when we fail, we have a way to get up again (1 John 1:8-10). Guilt is lessened by seeking to have good/open communication, by seeking trans-parency, by growing in our love for others, and by establishing realistic goals.

DEALING WITH CONFLICT: Conflict is "the state of a person when opposed impulses, or simultaneous functioning of opposing or mutually exclusive response tendencies have been activated" (Dictionary of Psychological & Psychoanalytical Terms, English & English).

Types of conflict include approach-approach (two mutually exclusive positive conditions of which only one can be chosen), avoidance-avoidance (two mutually exclusive negative conditions only one of which can be avoided), approach-avoidance (a choice involving both negative and positive conditions), double approach-avoidance (a choice where each option has both positive & negative conditions). Significant conflicts occur about decisions related to God vs. Satan, God-direction

vs. self-direction, self vs. others, idealism vs. pragmatism and values in conflict as in truth vs. kindness, hard-headed business vs. doing what is best for others. Good Biblical analyses of conflict are found in James 2:4-8, 4:8, and Matt. 14:6-10.

Other serious conflicts tend to come from inner conditions regarding such things as political loyalties, friendships, ideals such as individualism vs. common welfare, good business vs. what is good for others, the war between our two natures – spiritual vs. fleshly, and in setting priorities with due concern for the various levels of needs as in study vs. rest, something for self vs. something for others, and conflict caused by the two views of self (positive vs. negative). Decisions between mundane things often bring conflict such as going vs. staying, mountains vs. sea, this person vs. that person, investing in this vs. that, this work vs. that work, or this party or club vs. that party or club.

The characteristics of a conflicted person include nervousness, depression, indecisiveness, subjectivity, a sense of weakness, disorientation, confusion, a tendency to compulsive activity such as impulse buying, jumping into a marriage, or getting into crime or drugs.

How is conflict related to self-esteem? It tends to the development of a negative or positive self-image depending on the success or failure one has in resolving conflict. Success or failure can also influence whether one will be assertive or non-assertive, dominant or submissive, optimistic or pessimistic.

Conflict is best dealt with by (1) honestly assessing the situation (seeking help when necessary), (2) seeking the fullest possible information as knowledge gives power for the resolution of conflict (2 Tim. 2:15, 2 Pet. 3:17-18, Heb. 5:14), (3) seeking the best possible application of knowledge which is wisdom (James 1:5), (4) giving consistent priority to things of the spirit, (5) keeping meaningful priorities set by your values, and maintaining them in the decision making process, and, (6) by developing personal discipline. Keep in mind that God is your partner in RIGHT, that to ERR is human, and there is redemption and lift when we fail.

MASTERY OF THE ENVIRONMENT: It was the Lord's intention that his "man" creation reign over all the rest of His creation (Gen. 1:27-28). We are taught that God will supply the strength by which all that is in His will for us will be done (Phil. 4:13), an interesting word from a man in prison, often ill, and in peril from angry co-nationals, Roman authorities, and false brethren. One psychiatrist has declared that with the right approach, mankind can decide in any circumstance what will become of him mentally, and spiritually. He held that we can do this by: (1) striking out our past (forget it and move on), (2) coming

to terms that we possess only our naked existence (use what we have), (3) adapting to a provisional existence (this will not last forever), (4) being mindful there is space beyond our present narrow space (there is a whole world out there), (5) believing we can be victorious in our present reality (not allowing our reality to change us into something we do not want to be), (6) discovering that salvation comes in, by and through love (love never fails), (7) growing in our appreciation for beauty (it is everywhere), (8) discovering that there is joy possible in every situation (just look for it!), (9) coming to see the importance of humor (laugh at ourselves!), (10) believing in the power of suffering, loving, and dedication to goals beyond self (its not about us), and (11) looking to the future (that is were hope is) (Phil. 3:13-14). For a fuller development see Viktor Frankl's "Mans Search for Meaning".

SELF-ESTEEM AND LIFE PHILOSOPHY: We are living in a hedonistic world (HEDONA = pleasure) - "the doctrine that pleasure or happiness is the sole or chief good in life." We are daily encouraged to live hedonistically. Even Christianity is often equated with hedonistic outcomes ("God wants to make all people rich. powerful, famous, and physically well"... "just send us your seed money"!). Hedonism centers on self. Frankl, Peck, Adler et al say we must live for others. At its deepest levels, contentment with self will be there in terms of what we have given, not what we have consumed (Acts 20:35). Christ challenged us to pursue such a life: humility, tender heartedness, placing a cause above self, seeking for truth, right, justice, showing grace to others, having pure motives, building bridges rather than walls, and being willing to suffer for a right cause (see Matt. 5:1-13). In so doing, we will inherit the kingdom, we are comforted, we inherit the earth, we are satisfied, we obtain mercy, we see God, and we become God's children. Satan can't stand it!

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS: If I, or someone else were to ask you, "How are you doing"?; you would probably say, "alright," "great," or "just fine." But such an answer might have all of the false optimism of Mark Twain's description of a boyhood fight when he is reported to have said (I do not know the source), "I placed my nose between my opponent's teeth, and then threw him solidly to the ground on top of me." We build self-esteem by learning to look for the positive things in self, in others, and in life; by assuming control of self and the environment, by dealing wisely with conflict, by doing what we can do, by adding to and improving our abilities, by living up to what we know is right, by seeking to grow in understanding and in wisdom, and by learning to lean on a higher and greater strength...that of God.

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