

Why You Don't Need More Self-Esteem
Pastor Steven J. Cole, Flagstaff Christian Fellowship, WORLD, "Soul Food" column (7/12/97)

One of the most popular ideas to emerge in Christian circles in recent years is that we all need to build and maintain proper self-esteem. Dozens of best-selling Christian books are laced with this theme. It is frequently mentioned in sermons and on Christian radio shows. It is a fundamental assumption underlying most Christian counseling. For example, one well-known Christian treatment program, endorsed by top Christian leaders, states in a promotional brochure, "Part of [this program's] success is found in the unique ability to target and resolve problems of low self-esteem. At the core of all emotional problems and addictive disorders is low self-worth. It is never the only problem; but it is so major an issue that, if not dealt with adequately, one is kept from experiencing lasting, positive results."

An article by a Christian psychologist on the problem of pastors who commit adultery stated that one reason pastors fall into sexual sin is low self-esteem. If they would just love themselves properly, they wouldn't have a need to find "love" from another woman. Another article asserts that low self-esteem is a major factor behind homosexual behavior. A popular Christian author even used the story of Lee Harvey Oswald to illustrate how low self-esteem led this man to shoot President Kennedy!

The question Christians need to ask is, *does the Bible teach this?* Does it teach that we need to build our self-esteem? Those who say yes usually support it with the verse, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 22:39). They say that you must properly love yourself in order to love your neighbor. But that is not the meaning of the verse. It assumes that we all love ourselves just fine, thank you. If we would show the same regard for others that we do in fact show for ourselves, we would be loving them as God commands. Even those who go around dumping on themselves don't need to focus on loving themselves. Their problem is precisely that they are too self-focused. They need to consider the needs of others ahead of themselves. The mark of biblical love is self-sacrifice, not self-esteem (see Eph. 5:25).

Even in the case of a suicidal person, the problem is not that he does not love himself. Rather, he loves himself more than he loves anyone else. He is not considering what his death will do to family or friends. He is only considering himself: he is in pain and he wants out of his pain.

Consider the adulterous pastor. He was esteeming himself above everyone else. He certainly was not esteeming God or he would not have dragged His name through the mud by committing adultery. Nor was he loving and esteeming his wife, his children, or the woman he defiled. He was esteeming his "needs" above all else.

The Bible teaches that love of self is at the root of all our sins. It warns that "in the last days difficult times will come. For men will be lovers of self" (2 Tim. 3:1, 2). This is followed by a list of terrible sins. You can't find a single command in the Bible that even hints that we need to esteem and love ourselves more than we do. To the contrary, Jesus explicitly said, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me" (Mark 8:34). Many Bible verses tell us to humble ourselves and not to think too highly of ourselves (see James 4:6-10; 1 Pet. 5:5-6; Rom. 12:3), but none tell us to focus on how wonderful or worthy we are. In fact, God operates on the principle of grace, and grace is for the unworthy, not for the worthy.

In his devotional classic, *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*, William Law writes of the "monstrous and shameful nature of sin" and then asks rhetorically, "Shall we presume to take delight in our worth, we who are not worthy so much as to ask pardon for our sins without the mediation and intercession of the Son of God?" (Westminster Press, pp. 106-107).

My analysis is that most American church-goers need to grow in a sense of their unworthiness, not their supposed worthiness. They need to see what the old Puritan writers called "the exceeding sinfulness of sin." Then perhaps we would see how much we need the Savior. Being forgiven much, we would love much.