

**Core Seminar**

**Fear of Man**

**Class 5: The Bible’s Answer to Self Esteem**

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**I. Introduction**

Good morning and welcome to the fifth of our classes on the Fear of Man!

We began this course by defining the fear of man. Fear of man is when we orient our lives around the power that people have over us instead of around God. That power could be their perceptions, their words, their actions, or any number of things we feel we need from them. Then we looked at the opposite—fear of God. When we orient our lives around him instead. We studied three common forms of fear of man: fear of being exposed, of being rejected, of being harmed. Last week we asked the question, “what do we really need?” Or more specifically, how do we need other *people*? We saw that the answer lies not so much in some kind of psychological need to be loved. Instead, we need others to fulfill God’s purposes for us. That is, his purpose to show off how amazing he by being, his image-bearers. Which means our need for others is not so much to *be* loved as it is to *love*. That’s very different from a self-oriented need to be loved that ultimately leads to orientation around people rather than around God.

Today, I want to look at another common question we ask ourselves when we’re struggling with the fear of man: what’s the role of self esteem in the life of a Christian?

**II. The Self Esteem “Solution”**

If you’re under the age of 50 and grew up in this country—or in many others—you’ve likely had the need for self esteem beaten into your head from a young age. It comes from the base-level assumptions of the talking heads on TV, from novels, from classes in school, from the assumptions of your friends. If you want to be happy, to be well-adjusted, to be successful, you must begin by loving yourself. How often do you hear that refrain in our city: “I respect myself.” Which, despite the confidence with which it’s delivered, often seems more aspirational than objective.

For those who struggle with fear of man, this is a basic solution that many of us go to—whether consciously or not. “If I felt better about myself, I wouldn’t care what he thinks.” “If I really loved myself, I’d be OK whether or not she rejects me.” Of course, the problem is that many of us *don’t* feel OK about ourselves. Deep down inside, we fear that we don’t measure up.

And you can even make the self-esteem solution sound quite Christian. After all, how did Jesus state the golden rule? “Love thy neighbor as thyself.” First learn to love yourself, and then you’ll be ready to love your neighbor. Jesus loved you so much he died for you! He saw how valuable you are!

But as good as that might sound, I don’t think that’s very Christian at all. I don’t want to throw out the baby with the bathwater—so in a little bit I’ll try to salvage some truth from this basic concept. Before we do that, though, I think it might be good to put this question to you. **What are the basic problems with combatting fear of man through self-esteem?**

**III. A Losing Battle**

Well, let me take all that and summarize a few fatal flaws with self-esteem as a solution to the fear of man.

1. It’s not biblical

When Jesus said to love your neighbor as yourself, he *assumed* that we already love ourselves too much. The aspiration there is not love of self, but love of neighbor. Similarly, he died for us not because we were valuable but exactly the opposite. We were weak (Romans 5:6). We were sinners (Romans 5:8). We were his enemies (Romans 5:10). It’s not even that we were sinners with great potential. As the verse at the top of your handout says, one of the great lessons of the Christian life is to *glory* in our weakness, even as redeemed children of God.

The message of the gospel is not “cheer up, you’re better than you thought.” The message of the gospel is that you’re actually a lot worse than you thought, that it matters much more than you feared…but…that you’re loved way more than you could possibly imagine. That’s pretty much 180 degrees away from the self-esteem mantra.

1. It doesn’t work

I suppose that my second argument really doesn’t matter given the first. But it’s refreshing to see Biblical truth play out in real life. Since *The Psychology of Self Esteem* was published in 1969, the Western world has been awash in the self-esteem mantra. By one count, from 1970 to 2000, scholars published 15,000 articles on the relationship between self-esteem and pretty much everything: happiness, grades, self-control, you name it.

But in recent years there’s been a growing scientific backlash against those assumptions. As it turns out, self-esteem doesn’t improve grades or career performance. In fact, students whose self-esteem is praised become more risk-averse and perform more poorly. When college students on the verge of failing receive esteem-building praise, their grades sink even lower. Demographic groups who think most highly of themselves are least happy. “Highly aggressive, violent people happen to think very highly of themselves, debunking the theory that people are aggressive to make up for low self-esteem[[1]](#footnote-1).” And so on.

1. You know it’s not true

At least, some of the time, deep down inside. As Abraham Lincoln said, “You can fool some of the people all of the time, and all of the people some of the time, but you can not fool all of the people all of the time.” Not even yourself. If a happy and successful life depends on you knowing for sure that you’re an awesome person, you’re in trouble.

Which leads to a very important question. *How should a Christian respond to a sense of inferiority?* “I get it: just telling myself that I’m really OK, or just telling my kids that they’re really OK…that’s not the answer. But what is?”

**IV. Something Better than Self-Esteem**

Let me give you the punchline to the class right here. The Bible’s answer to self-esteem is *not* to give you some Jesus-fied method of feeling better about yourself. It’s *not* to tell you that now you’re in Christ, you’re finally the beautiful, noble person you always wanted to be. Instead, the Bible is honest. It says that outside of Christ, you are a wicked rebel against God. And even now that you’re a Christian, your worth is not in your abilities. Instead, you’re valuable as a canvas on which God can display *his* abilities. Your worth is not intrinsic but derived. From God. So the self-esteem crowd have one thing right: that you are valuable. Amazingly value. But they’re mistaken on where that value comes from or why it matters. Again, your value is not intrinsic but derived. It’s all about God. The Bible’s answer to the self-esteem movement is that your life’s purpose is to make much of Christ, to show off his great worth and not your own.

And…and here’s the good news…in doing that, even being honest about your weakness, you will find all that the self-esteem movement has promised. Peace. Joy. Happiness. Fulfillment. Love. Freedom. Instead of seeking these things by making much of yourself, these things are found in making much of God. “But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you” – Matthew 6:33. Or Proverbs 29:25, “Fear of man will prove to be a snare, but *whoever trusts in the Lord* is kept safe.” *Trust in the Lord*. Focus on him, not on yourself. Submit yourself gladly to his purposes for you. Learn to be content with however he has chosen to show off his power in your life, even when he does that through weakness. Because you were made to image him, to make much of him.

One of the best places to see that is in the verses from 2 Corinthians at the top of your handout. In 2 Corinthians 12, the apostle Paul is struggling with what he calls a “thorn in the flesh.” Was that Loneliness? Sickness? Disability? Temptation? The Holy Spirit apparently felt it best that we not know.

Three times, Paul pleads with Jesus to take this away. Presumably not for selfish reasons but for good reasons. I’m sure he felt if he was freed from this, he could serve Christ better. “But,” chapter 12, verse 9, “he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’” Was Jesus concerned that Paul might be less productive in his ministry because of this weakness? No: in fact, Paul’s weakness is part of Jesus’ perfect plan to display his strength. And here Paul is a marvelous model for us. Was he then weighed down by inferiority? Tried to hide it in case people found out he wasn’t quite as “apostolic” as they’d thought? Afraid that with this thorn in his flesh, people wouldn’t want him anymore? Well, there’s no guarantee that none of those things would happen. But, like we saw in Proverbs 29, Paul chose the path of trust instead of fear. “Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.” How is Paul strong when he is weak? Because his life purpose is to show off the glory of Christ. And if weakness can do that, it only strengthens his cause.

“Perfect love casts out fear,” 1 John 4:18 tells us. Paul knew he was loved by Jesus. He trusted Jesus absolutely. If Jesus felt it best not to deliver him from this thorn in his flesh, he would not just be OK with that—he would be, as he says in verse 10, “content.” He would even, verse 9, “boast” in his weakness.

The Bible’s answer to the self-esteem trap is *trust*. Trust in Jesus Christ. Know his purposes for you—to use your life to show off his glory and goodness. Trust however he chooses to do that. That’s your escape from the fear of man, not some flimsy denial of your weakness. Like Paul, *glory* in your weakness!

For the rest of our time together, I’m going to step through three different ways we can struggle with feeling inferior and apply this truth to them. But before we do that…**Any Questions?**

**V. Three Types of Self-Image Struggles**

In Lou Priolo’s book *Self-Image*, he describes three different ways that we can struggle with having a low self-image. First is inaccurate perceptions about ourselves. “No one loves me.” “I can never do anything right.” That’s where we need a change of perception—conforming our view of reality to Scripture. Second is where are perceptions are accurate but we judge something to be wrong that’s not actually wrong. “I’m too short.” “I’m not very smart.” In those cases, what we need is to better conform our *values* to Scripture. The third category is where our perception is accurate *and* where our values are accurate. “I’m lazy.” “I have a quick temper.” In that category, what needs to be conformed to Scripture is not our perceptions or our values but our behavior and our hearts.

You’ll see on your handout a chart with these three categories and space for you to give examples. I’ve given you a few examples to start with—but what I want you to do for the next few minutes is to list what this looks like in your own life. Start by writing down a list of 5-10 ways in which you feel inferior. Then categorize each of them in one of these three categories.

**Give the class 2-3 minutes for this exercise.**

OK. So what do we do about these things? Let’s step through the three categories one by one and try to apply the main idea from the first half of this class, that we escape the snare of fear of man by trusting in God’s purposes for us.

1. Inaccurate perceptions

First category is where we feel inferior simply because what we feel isn’t true. In fact, quite often we *know* it isn’t true. Take someone who says, “no one loves me.” My guess is that at the propositional level, they know that’s not true. But they still feel that way, don’t they? And simply knowing that doesn’t really change the extreme discomfort of feeling like no one loves you.

So what do we do?

First, remember the Bible’s doctrine of sin. The doctrine of sin tells us that even as redeemed sinners, we’re stained by sin and that sin distorts our perception of reality. So we shouldn’t be surprised when our feelings, and even our senses, tell us things that aren’t true. Think of Proverbs 28:26, “He who trusts in his own heart is a fool, but he who walks wisely will be delivered.” To be wise means to trust God’s word as the only reliable measure of reality.

Second, discipline yourself to dwell on what you know to be truth. Philippians 4:8, “Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.” Or 2 Corinthians 10:5, “take every thought captive to obey Christ.” Sometimes when you know something isn’t true—even though it feels very true—you need to take your thought life captive and tell youself what *is* true.

How do you do that? Remind yourself of God’s Word. To take a popular question from the London preacher D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, “Have you realized that most of your unhappiness in life is due to the fact that you are listening to yourself instead of talking to yourself?” He’s referring to Psalm 42 where we listen in on a conversation between the Psalmist and himself. “Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God.” Back to Lloyd-Jones:

You must say to your soul: ‘Why art thou cast down’–what business have you to be disquieted? You must turn on yourself, upbraid yourself, condemn yourself, exhort yourself, and say to yourself: ‘Hope thou in God’–instead of muttering in this depressed, unhappy way. And then you must go on to remind yourself of God, Who God is, and what God is and what God has done, and what God has pledged Himself to do. Then having done that, end on this great note: defy yourself, and defy other people, and defy the devil and the whole world, and say with this man: ‘I shall yet priase Him[[2]](#footnote-2).

In this first category, we trust God by trusting his Word. His Word is more reliable than our own reasoning, our own experience, our own feelings, our own perception. If you have any wrong perceptions in this first category, you might write down next to them what the Bible says in opposition to them, and then commit those passages to memory. As it says in Psalm 15, “He who walks blamelessly and does what is right and *speaks truth in his heart*…He who does these things shall never be moved.”

1. Accurate Perceptions That Aren’t Sinful

Let me tackle a second category and then we’ll stop for questions. Many places where the world would say we struggle with self-esteem—and where the Bible would say we struggle with fear of man—have to do with perceptions about ourselves that are accurate but not sinful. There’s nothing wrong with us but we feel inferior just the same. Perhaps you covet the skills God’s given to another brother or sister, or you despise some aspect of how he’s made you. The danger here is that though your perception may be of something that’s not sinful, your reaction to it may become sinful—like coveting or discontent that I just mentioned. Body image often falls into this category. What do you do with those perceptions? Well, ultimately what you need is a change in values.

For the first category, I said our key doctrine was the doctrine of sin—that as sinners we shouldn’t be surprised when our perceptions are warped. For this second category, our key doctrine is justification. The doctrine that God has declared Christians righteous not because of anything we’ve done but purely by his grace, through faith. As a Christian, you’re OK before God in every way that matters. Romans 3:23, “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, *and are justified by his grace as a gift*.”

Why is that so important? Because many things in this category leave us feeling like we’re not good enough. But God has *made* us good enough, through faith in Jesus. *That* is the declaration that matters. So what do we do when we feel this way?

First, trust the wisdom of God in the weaknesses he’s given you. Just as Paul learned to be content with his weakness. God make you for a purpose, and all of your weaknesses—moral as well as physical—are not outside of his loving control. Can you trust him in this? Can you trust him with your disability, with your less-than-enviable skills, with your body? Can you trust him? You know he’ll make good on that trust.

Remember, his purpose for your life is greater than what you can accomplish, greater than who loves you, greater even than your happiness. He is remaking his image in you. And so you can say with Paul, “I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.” Or, also in 2 Corinthians, chapter 3, “We all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another” (v. 18). This is what he’s doing, and nothing’s going to stop him! Not your weakness, not your inferiority complex, not the superiority complex of someone else…nothing!

Second. In large part as a result of that, we need to resist the temptation to think we’re OK by comparing with others. “I’m not OK because my *whatever* isn’t as good as *so-and-so’s*. 2 Corinthians 10:12, “When they measure themselves by one another and compare themselves with one another, they are without understanding.” Why didn’t God give you the gifts and skills of the person next to you? I don’t know. But he did that for a reason, and you can trust him in that. Comparison is a form of pride—it essentially says that we know better than God. The path out of the comparison trap is to identify where in your sinful heart that desire to compare comes from. “Lord, please forgive me for thinking that I’m not good enough for you unless I’m like Monique*.* Because I know you’ve declared me good enough for you in Jesus.” Or “Lord, please forgive me for not being content with the role you’ve created for me. I’m struggling to trust you in your wisdom and love and so I’m coveting what you’ve given to Ben.”

Third, sometimes we need to strengthen our consciences. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 8 about how sometimes we feel things are wrong that the Bible doesn’t say are wrong. It’s interesting—he makes provision for that kind of conscience. But doesn’t call that conscience a *strong* conscience; he calls it *weak*. Sometimes we have perceptions of inferiority because our consciences need to be educated. In Paul’s day, eating food sacrificed to idols isn’t wrong. Or for us, not having a quiet time every day isn’t necessarily wrong. Not being a missionary isn’t wrong. Strengthen your conscience.

So, three ways we can escape the fear of man trap when we have perceptions of inferiority because what we value needs to conform to Scripture. **Any questions?**

1. Accurate Perceptions that *Are* Sinful

Last, as we round out these three, what about accurate perceptions of inferiority that *are* sinful? My addiction to comparison, like I just mentioned. A persistent struggle with lust. My greed or laziness or bitterness or anger. What do I do with the inferiority I feel because of those things?

I’ll be more brief here, not because this isn’t an important topic but because it’s so much bigger than we can deal with in this class. I’ll give you some highlights, though.

First, the key doctrine to remember is the doctrine of sanctification. When God saved you, he decided in his mysterious providence to not make you perfect right away. Instead, he gave you the promise that you will one day be perfect, glorified. And he justified you—he declared you righteous today. But that process of getting more and more like Jesus every day of your Christian life…that’s called sanctification. And it’s slow and painful.

Why didn’t God just—poof—make you perfect? Donno. But I can speculate, and my speculation centers on his main purpose for you, to show off who he is. Let’s say that before you became a Christian, you struggled with addiction. And the day you became a Christian, he took that away. Amazing! He does that sometimes. Does that show off his glory? Yes, the glory of his power. But, on the other hand, let’s say he didn’t do that. And now every day of your Christian life you have to choose by faith that his promises are *better* for you than the promises of alcohol. And over time, your desires gradually change and you struggle with addiction less and less. Now, he has shown off his power in your life, yes—but also his goodness. Because your life is living testimony that he is better than the promises of sin.

So when we struggle with feeling inferior because we’re not sanctifying faster, we need to trust God. Trust the pace of his work in your heart. Trust that he’s going to get you there! Trust that he is more pained by your sin than you are, and yet for some reason he’s not yet finished remaking your heart.

Are you somehow a lesser Christian because of your sin? Well, God certainly delights in your holiness. And God promises that he will use us as we fight the good fight of faith to become holy (2 Tim. 2:21). But the Bible doesn’t have some sense of a “good Christian, not-so-good Christian” hierarchy. You *are* responsible for our sin. You *are* responsible to put off your old self and to put on the new self, “created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness” (Eph. 4:24). Yet all of us are right where God has always planned for us to be. And we can trust him in that.

**Conclusion**

The doctrine of self-esteem makes some pretty big promises. If you can just understand your innate worth and value, you’ll be happier, more loving, a better worker, more self-controlled, less angry, more content, and the list goes on. But Scripture would suggest something quite different. How can you be happier, more loving, a better worker, more self-controlled, less angry, more content, and so forth? Romans 12:3, “I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment.” Not self-esteem but Christ esteem. Discover the glory of how amazing God is. Learn to delight in the plan he created for you from before time to be part of showing off how amazing he is. Trust him that that plan really is best. And as you seek first his kingdom, all these things will be given to you as well. Let’s close in prayer.

1. https://albertmohler.com/2007/02/16/the-self-esteem-movement-backfires-when-praise-is-dangerous/ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Spiritual Depression, pages 20-21. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)