

A Self-Image to Reflect God's Image

Often a new counselee at Biblical Counseling Center will tell me that she has a low self-esteem, which she believes is the root of all her emotional distress or the reason behind certain behaviors. Pop psychology has so infiltrated our thinking that many committed Christians have erroneously bought into the belief that if we can only improve how we feel about ourselves then we will be happier and behave better. Scripture does not confirm this approach, nor do statistics indicate that the millions of dollars spent on self-esteem training in public schools has produced a happier and better behaved generation. So what will? I believe that the key to lasting help comes not from inflated self-esteem, but rather from changed thinking that allows one to see himself as GOD sees him, made in God's image to reflect God's character and glory. This paradigm shift has transformed many counselees, freeing them to respond to God in love and service.

Because of our human limitations, we view life through binoculars, seeing only what is in our direct line of time and space. We naturally focus on the temporal issues of this life. God views our lives through an eternal perspective. Time and space do not bind God as they do us, and His view is not limited to the present. Therefore, when He looks at each of us, He sees us as we were before individual time and space began, when we existed only in the "mind of God."¹ He sees us as we live in the present² and He sees what we will be for all eternity.³

So how does understanding this concept help a person who has an unbiblical self-image? That person first must learn to view himself as God already sees him and then begin to act in accordance with his new identity in Christ. As He takes on the mind and character that Christ has assigned to him, he can evaluate accurately who he is and what changes in his behavior need to result from his new thinking.⁴ The more he responds in Christlike behavior, the more he fulfills his purpose, to reflect the image of Christ to the world around him for God's glory!⁵

How is this process accomplished in God's children? When we come to the Cross, Jesus Christ saves and justifies us. With this spiritual birth we begin a process of growth called sanctification that will take the rest of our life on earth. Philippians 1:6 confirms God's commitment to us, to complete the work which He has begun in us. Jesus died in our place and exchanged our sins for His righteousness, so we now stand righteous before Him.⁶ Someday, when He completes His work in us we will be glorified in an instant and will be with Him forever.⁷ However, between salvation and glorification, the process of sanctification is a lifetime of disciplined growth. The lifestyle of sanctification is pictured in Scripture as an athletic event, with the athlete running a race to receive the prize.⁸ It is also represented as a soldier who strives to win a war, and as a farmer who prepares, sows, waters, and finally reaps.⁹ These word pictures reveal that sanctification is a process requiring a lot of difficult work.¹⁰

Most counseling of believers involves struggles with the process of sanctification. For them to receive help, their faulty view of this process must change to a biblical view of sanctification. Many counselees become angry and bitter at God for allowing a specific trial to enter their life. However, James 1:2-4 states that the believer's attitude toward trials should be one of joy. If we **know** that trials are allowed by God to produce endurance, and to perfect what is lacking in us, then we can go through trials with joy and anticipation of the good work God is surely doing in us. This is the hope in the midst of trials¹¹ that we must communicate to our counselees if we are to help them. They can experience joy in trials as they recognize that the sanctification process is maturing them.

Perhaps a counselee has a physical handicap that he has never accepted. As long as he directs anger toward God, he will not grow to become more Christlike through his circumstance. He may view himself as downtrodden and unworthy, unloved by a god who would let him suffer. The world's diagnosis would be "low self-esteem." God's diagnosis would include words such as anger, pride, ingratitude, discontentment, comparisons, and lack of trust. Biblical counseling would aim to help the counselee reevaluate himself and his circumstances according to God's perspective. An excellent resource to help a counselee work through this process is Wayne Mack's Bible study "Inferiority Judgments" found in *Homework Manual*, Vol. 1, p.93.

Perhaps someone has committed a sin against the counselee. Scripture does not teach that God caused someone to sin against him just to teach him a lesson, but rather that God in His sovereignty uses everything that comes into our lives to accomplish His purpose in us, even the sin of others. An example of this can be found in Genesis 50:20 where Joseph saw the bigger picture. The brothers sinned against Joseph, but Joseph recognized that God was using what his brothers meant for evil as good in the lives of Joseph, his family and the future of Israel. As the counselee begins to view his life from God's perspective instead of through his own limited temporal view, he can come to a genuine trust in a loving God who allows circumstances to accomplish God's purposes for the good of His children. The counselee must learn to see himself as one small piece in a much larger jigsaw puzzle of God's design and purpose, as Joseph did.

At times, however, we all fail to respond to trials in such a positive manner. It is at this point that the Father must bring correction into our lives. According to Hebrew 12:5-11, no correction feels pleasant for that moment, but He corrects us out of His love to produce the peaceable fruit of righteousness in us. He lovingly but firmly, with patient determination, brings us to the point of yielding to His training so that we may become more like Christ in true righteousness and holiness. God's loving correction, then, is to be desired rather than resented, since it is our sign of true sonship. This concept should encourage counselees who are dealing with the consequences of their sin and with God's loving correction. This picture of God as our loving heavenly father who patiently teaches and trains His children is one of the most effective ways to present the sanctification process to our counselees.

Romans 8:28 declares that God uses *all* things (all the stuff of life!) to work His good in us. Some of our counselees will define the God of Romans 8:28 as their personal "genie god," expecting God to turn everything around to their own definition of "good." If He doesn't, they become angry, even though James 4:1-10 indicates that God does not answer our selfish prayers. We must help our counselees define "good" as God defines it. Romans 8:29 defines "good" as being conformed to the image of His Son! We can confidently tell counselees that God wants to use *everything* that comes into their lives to teach them more about Him and how to be just like Jesus! What a hope and joy this produces in the midst of even the hardest trials.

Romans 8:29 goes on to say that Jesus is the firstborn among many brothers. Where does He get His brothers? Through adoption, at the Cross. Another word picture in Scripture is that God in His grace and mercy finds dirty, ragged orphans and brings them to the Cross and adopts them into His royal family. As we come to the Cross, He washes us with His precious blood¹² (orphans are sinfully dirty!). He clothes us with His robes of righteousness¹³ (orphans are pitifully ragged!). As He presents us to His family and we begin to interact with our new brothers and sisters in Christ, it becomes painfully evident that orphans were never taught good manners – we don't know how to get along with our new family. So the process of teaching us how to love and relate to our new family begins; it takes a long time to teach a child good manners and communication skills. It becomes equally evident that we have not been educated in the royal family's way of wisdom. Just as it takes a long time to go from kindergarten to a Ph.D., it also takes a long time to learn how to live a godly life

in our new family. In fact, it takes the rest of our earthly lives to mature and become like our brother, Jesus Christ. He is the only child of God ever born perfect and sinless. Jesus is the only begotten child of the father¹⁴ and therefore He is the only one qualified to purchase our salvation and bring us into the family of God.¹⁵ The rest of us were born to human fathers and therefore must be adopted, or born again, into the family of God.

Does God relate differently to His adopted child who sins? Does God's love suddenly become anger and wrath when we sin? To answer this question, it is first necessary to go back to the Garden of Eden and understand God's plan for the creation of man. God created mankind in His own image, declared His crowning creation to be "very good,"¹⁶ and regularly fellowshiped with Adam and Eve. God, Who knows all things, knew when He created Adam and Eve that they would choose to sin and would need a savior.¹⁷ The day that sin entered the heart of mankind was no surprise to God, and God's response (Genesis 3) was to begin unfolding His plan of redemption right there in the Garden. God came to find Adam and Eve even though they were hiding! God had warned them that in the day they disobeyed they would die,¹⁸ and they were tremendously afraid. They had never seen death, and now they deserved to die. Yet God did not kill them. The process of death began, but so much more occurred that day in the Garden, because an actual death did occur. God killed an innocent animal in Adam's place, the first substitutionary atonement, pictured throughout the entire Old Testament and fulfilled in the substitutionary atonement of Jesus Christ.¹⁹ God killed a substitute rather than His beloved creation made in His image for His glory. God redeemed Adam and Eve that day when He shed the blood of an animal that pictured the blood of Christ and eternal redemption. The reason fig leaves were unacceptable to God is that they represented Adam and Eve's own pitiful attempt to hide their guilt and shame, to make themselves look acceptable to God. God could not accept their efforts, just as He does not accept our good works to purchase our salvation.²⁰ After God killed the substitute for Adam and Eve, He clothed them with the skins of the animal. This pictures the way He clothed us with the robes of Christ's righteousness when He saved us.²¹ He alone can remedy sin, guilt and shame.

He redeemed His children and restored the possibility for fellowship that day in the Garden of Eden, even though the consequences for their disobedience remained.²² Likewise there are consequences for our disobedience even though He has taken the punishment for our sin.²³ God's desire for fellowship with His children did not change because of sin. He simply provided redemption and continual cleansing to restore what sin had destroyed. The cloud of sin and shame over the sinner does not change who we are in Christ but rather affects the quality of our fellowship. Until sin entered the world, Adam and Eve had known God only as their Creator and Friend. After the fall of mankind into sin, Adam and Eve were afraid and saw God as their judge. God had not changed, but how they perceived Him changed after they sinned. When we sin, God does not change His mind about us. His plan and desire for us remain constant; we are the ones who change. We hide in fear of judgment from the God Who loves us, when instead we should run to Him to restore our fellowship by confessing our sin.²⁴

God's purpose in both the creation and redemption of mankind is summarized in Matthew 22:36-40, to love God and each other with all our heart, soul, and mind. That love and relationship gives meaning to life for the believer, with a focus on God and others rather than on self. When a counselee's focus turns to self and the "problem," he focuses more and more on his own flaws. A focus on self manifests itself in a variety of ways. Some counselees become so self-focused that fear and panic overwhelm them. Some worry about what other people think about them or might do to them. Others become so self-righteous or critical that no one else can please them. Some retreat into anger and bitterness because of the sins committed against them. Others become weighed down with guilt and shame. None of these individuals feel very good about who they are or how life is going for

them until they understand who they are in Christ and what the purpose for their life is. Only then can they grow to become more and more like the person Who is to be their focus - Jesus Christ.

The more our counselees fail to understand biblical theology and biblical anthropology the more they will believe the lies of psychology and secular humanism that say we must love ourselves more and find our own happiness in life. Yet these lies do not provide fulfillment in life. We will continue to have counselees struggling with the questions of life (who they are, what their life is all about, and why they have no sense of meaning and purpose) until they learn God's answers to these questions. As counselors, we want to help guide our counselees to God's answers and help them learn how to reflect the image of their Heavenly Father in every sphere of their lives.

How can we help a person to reflect God's image spiritually? Guide the counselee through Psalm 139 which will help in understanding God's skillful craftsmanship (:13-16) to accomplish His purposes (:17-18, 23-24).²⁵ A counselor might ask a teen girl if she could change anything about herself, what would that be. The answer often reveals a focal point that negatively affects her view of God and of herself. She must come to understand that she is made in the image of God²⁶ to reflect His glory. All creation is to reflect His glory, but because of sin, man falls short of His glory.²⁷ Redeemed man, however, once again reflects His glory²⁸ and bears His image.²⁹ If we are to help her, she must see herself as a part of His family³⁰ reflecting His immortal nature.³¹ She must get her focus off of this temporal life of self and onto God's eternal purposes. Working through Ephesians 1-3 and listing every way she is identified with Christ will help her to understand and strengthen the vertical relationship with God and to exchange destructive labels she may have accepted from others in her life for the biblical identity. The goal is to help her shift from a temporal focus to an eternal focus. Ephesians 2:4-10 and I Timothy 1:12-17 are excellent passages to help her understand God's abundant grace. Pray Ephesians 3:14-21 for her and with her.

Reflecting God's image socially also flows out of the spiritual aspect of our relationship with God. II Timothy 3:1-7 tells us that in the last days perilous times will come when men will be lovers of themselves more than lovers of God. His description goes on to read like the evening news. Having a focus on self opens the door to all kinds of sinful attitudes and behaviors. The cure is to put the primary focus back on God and others. In Matthew 22:36-40, Jesus taught that the greatest commandment is to love God with every part of our being, and then He said that right up there next to loving God is loving our neighbor as we already love ourselves.³² This model is demonstrated throughout Scripture. In the creation of man, God clearly established the vertical relationship with Adam first. Then he created Eve to establish a horizontal relationship for Adam. In I John 4:20-21 the relationship between the vertical and the horizontal is so closely intertwined that we are told we cannot love God without loving His other children. The horizontal becomes evidence of the vertical. Ephesians 1-3 deals with the vertical relationship, our identity in Christ. Ephesians 4-6 deals with how to dwell in unity in our horizontal relationships. Right horizontal relationships with others are impossible without a right vertical relationship with God. We should frequently evaluate our ability to love others, striving to love with pure motives. This is one true mark of discipleship.³³

To help a counselee reflect God's image socially, the counselor must lead first in how to love God and then in how to love one's neighbor. Jay Adam's book *4 Weeks with God and Your Neighbor* may be a helpful resource. The counselee must come to a genuine love for other believers³⁴ and also learn to love enemies, putting love into action.³⁵ The counselor should help him to evaluate areas where he is deficient in relating to others, such as in communication skills, conflict resolution, or anger control. Use Bible studies from Wayne Mack's *Homework Manuals*, Vol. 1 and 2. A homework example for a woman who feels like she has no meaningful purpose in life would be to have her do the Bible study "Usefulness," Vol. 1, p.183, or p.196 "How a Christian Woman Can Become Useful." These two studies will help her learn to serve God and others more effectively.

If a counselor is to help a person to understand who he is intellectually, then he must help him to develop the mind of Christ, to think and respond as Christ would.³⁶ We are told in Scripture to study to develop ourselves in a way that God approves³⁷ and to avoid the foolishness of this world.³⁸ The counselor may need to help the counselee evaluate how he is spending his time so that non-productive activities such as excess TV or sports can be eliminated and other areas such as work or leisure can be balanced. Priorities must be established first, and then a schedule adopted that reflects responsibility in those areas of biblical priority. A person who is wasting his time and mind will not feel good about his day's accomplishments. We are to be wise and faithful stewards.³⁹ A helpful resource is "Structuring Your Life for Biblical Change," p.168 in Mack's Homework Manual, Vol. 1.

We cannot help a counselee understand how to reflect God's image physically without helping him first to reflect God's image spiritually. Remember the teenage girl who focused on a physical feature she did not like, such as her height. If God made her with a particular unchangeable feature, He had a reason. If she hates the feature, why? Is she evaluating herself by God's standard, or by her own or by that of her culture? She may need to accept it as God's gift to her and be content, knowing He wants to use that to help her better serve God and others. Other features, such as distracting teeth, can be corrected that will enhance who she is in Christ and her ability to serve Him. The physical focus in our culture today can either be good or bad. Certainly God has told us to take care of our bodies which are the temple of God,⁴⁰ but this can lead to an inordinate focus on the body, such as in anorexic or bulimic addictions. Bodybuilding may serve a godly purpose, like promoting better health to serve God more effectively, or it may serve an ungodly purpose such as promoting vanity. What we eat may reflect a desire to glorify God⁴¹ or it may reflect a lust of the flesh.⁴² Help the counselee to evaluate a healthy balance in diet and exercise⁴³ and to develop a lifestyle of care for the body to better serve and glorify God.⁴⁴

We hear a lot about emotional needs from pop psychology and how these needs must be met if we are to feel good about ourselves. Supposedly if our "love cup" is empty, then someone else has deprived us and we dry up and die emotionally. How does Scripture address the emotions? Luke 2:52 addresses the issue by excluding the emotional sphere. This is the only verse we have on the development of Jesus Christ as an adolescent. He grew intellectually (wisdom), physically (stature), spiritually (favor with God), and socially (favor with man). Why does it not mention that He developed emotionally? I believe this is because Scripture implies the emotions are a by-product of balance in the other spheres of life. When we help counselees to develop balance in their lives, we will see them flourish emotionally. John 13:17 says happiness is the result of knowing what the Lord teaches and doing it. A positive emotion is the result of obedience to God. To reflect His image in emotions, then, is to reflect emotional health and stability that flow from balance in the spiritual, social, physical, and intellectual spheres of life.

The counselee needs encouragement to move beyond feelings and to live by faith. Faith can be defined as "believing the Word of God and acting upon it, no matter how I feel, knowing that God promises a good result." An assignment to reinforce this definition is found in Hebrews 11. List the faithful servants mentioned there and notice that they lived by faith. God asked each to *do* something and by faith they obeyed. God produced the good result as each obeyed. Faith, then, is a belief system producing action, not just feeling.⁴⁵ Guide the counselee into evaluating and changing what needs to be changed, to put his faith into action, and to trust God for the results. As he develops a biblical view of man and of God and believes by faith God's personalized design is best he will grow in desire and ability to reflect God's image in his own self.

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- ¹ Psalm 139:16
 - ² Psalm 139:1-4
 - ³ Ephesians 1:13,14; 2:4-10
 - ⁴ Romans 12:1,2; Eph. 4:17-24
 - ⁵ Rom. 8:28,29
 - ⁶ Romans 8:1; Isaiah 61:10
 - ⁷ I Peter 5:10; I Cor. 15:35-58; II Cor 5:1-8
 - ⁸ I Corinthians 9:24-27
 - ⁹ II Timothy 2:3-6
 - ¹⁰ I Timothy 4:7,8
 - ¹¹ Romans 5:3-5
 - ¹² I Peter 1:18-19; Hebrews 9:12-22
 - ¹³ Isaiah 61:10
 - ¹⁴ John 3:16; Luke 1:26-38
 - ¹⁵ Hebrews 2:9-17
 - ¹⁶ Genesis 1:26-31
 - ¹⁷ Revelation 13:8
 - ¹⁸ Genesis 2:17
 - ¹⁹ Hebrews 9:11-22--28
 - ²⁰ Ephesians 2:8-10
 - ²¹ Isaiah 61:10
 - ²² Genesis 3:14-19
 - ²³ Isaiah 53:4-6, Hebrews 12:1-11, Romans 8:1
 - ²⁴ I John 1:5-10
 - ²⁵ Jeremiah 29:11
 - ²⁶ Genesis 1:27
 - ²⁷ Romans 3:23
 - ²⁸ Rom. 15:6; I Cor. 1:27-31; 6:19,20; I Pet. 4:16
 - ²⁹ Romans 8:29; II Corinthians 3:18
 - ³⁰ I John 3:2; Ephesians 1:5
 - ³¹ I Corinthians 15:35-58
 - ³² Ephesians 5:29; I John 4:7-21
 - ³³ John 13:34-35
 - ³⁴ I John 4:7-21
 - ³⁵ Romans 12:9-21
 - ³⁶ Colossians 3:1-4; Philippians 2:5; 3:10
 - ³⁷ II Timothy 2:15
 - ³⁸ I Timothy 6:20-21
 - ³⁹ Luke 12:41-48
 - ⁴⁰ Romans 12:1,2
 - ⁴¹ I Corinthian 10:31
 - ⁴² I Samuel 2:29; 4:18
 - ⁴³ I Timothy 4:8; Ecclesiastes 10:17
 - ⁴⁴ I Corinthians 6:19-20
 - ⁴⁵ James 2:14-26