

# God's Omniscience

## Lesson 2

### *Psychology: Self-esteem and God's Image*

*Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought.*

Romans 12:3(NIV)

#### **Introduction**

Mention psychology in Christian circles and you are likely to get very mixed responses. At one extreme some view modern psychology as the tool of Satan; at the other extreme there are those who believe it is a new reformation. In fact, psychology is the process and results of learning about mankind's mental processes and behavior. Since God created mankind and his mental processes and gave mankind a free will, psychology is simply mankind's attempt to understand God's creation. Though, like so many of our other attempts we do not always get it right.

Many Christians oppose modern psychology for very good reasons. Many of the results and recommendations of modern psychology have opposed the traditions and teachings of the church and the Bible. Of the sciences, psychology stands second only to evolutionary biology in producing results that Christians reject. Consider for example the conclusion from constructivism that "we have no access to an objective truth" (Proulx, 2006, section 2). Many of these results have been proposed and championed by radical humanists whose views have been recognized even within psychological circles as being terribly lopsided. Remember that science continually adds to and broadens mankind's knowledge through a process of debate and correction. Ideas are proposed, tested, championed, debated, and corrected. Then the corrected idea is tested, championed, debated, and corrected. And so on. Our corrected ideas are never perfect, but they can be correct, enlightening, and helpful to our understanding of God's creation.

Self-esteem is one area within psychology where Christians have found reason to oppose the results. The following statement in a pop-culture web site succinctly summarizes that reason: "Self-esteem is your key to happiness and success" (More-Selfesteem, n.d.). Self-esteem has deep roots in psychology with the first definition of self-esteem being published in 1890 (Ward, 1996). Since that time self-esteem has gone through a metamorphosis that has resulted in claims that high levels of self-esteem lead to such things as good academic performance, well-adjusted children, and happy marriages; and that low self-esteem is linked to teenage pregnancy, suicide, arson, and homicide (Ward). If modern self-esteem proponents are right, then self-esteem *is* the key to happiness and success.

#### **Self-Esteem in Psychology**

In 1890 William James defined self-esteem as being "determined by the ratio of our actualities to our supposed potentialities" (Quoted in Ward, 1996, para. 18). In other words, James claimed that your self-esteem was based on what you did compared to what you thought you were capable of doing. James concluded that if a person were well adjusted they would balance their actions with their capabilities. As you will see later in

this essay this beginning of self-esteem in psychology was not such a bad start. The problems started with subsequent researchers and self-esteem in pop-culture.

Subsequent research beginning with Maslow (1942) and Raimy (1949) and continuing through to the late 1990s found significant connections; high self-esteem was found to lead to good behaviors and outcomes, while low self-esteem was found to lead to bad behaviors and outcomes (Ward, 1996). Self-esteem is so popular in psychology that it has been “related to virtually every other psychological concept or domain” (Adler & Stewart, 2004). In 1965 Morris Rosenberg published a book in which he redefined self-esteem as “a favorable or unfavorable attitude toward the self” (Adler & Stewart). The difference between the definitions provided by James and Rosenberg is huge. James connected self-esteem to our own actions, thus grounding self-esteem in reality. Rosenberg connected self-esteem to only our own attitude, which may or may not be formed by anything external to ourselves, thus removing reality as the grounding element of self-esteem. Yet Rosenberg’s definition of self-esteem is “the most broad and frequently cited definition of self-esteem in psychology” (Adler & Stewart).

In Rosenberg’s 1965 book he claimed, “parenting and educational tactics were two of the most important factors influencing the development of self-esteem in children and adolescents” (Ward, 1996, para. 23). In 1967 Stanley Coopersmith published a book linking parenting style and self-esteem in children (Ward). Thus started the trend toward modifying both parenting and teaching to enhance children’s self-esteem. Many books focusing on raising self-esteem in your children have been published (CFERT, n.d.) and the public school systems throughout our nation have devoted numerous resources to raising self-esteem in children. The efforts by the public schools have included many questionable programs (Beardsley, 2005; SETRC, n.d.) and bizarre tactics.

The tactics employed by the self-esteem movement have ranged from the simple to the truly dangerous. Dr. Mandel (n.d.) suggests never grading using red ink, never using Xs to mark problems wrong and putting the number correct on a paper instead of the number wrong all in an effort to make things look better to the student. Some schools do not publish school honor rolls so as not to damage the self-esteem of those students not on the honor roll (Twenge, 2006). At the other extreme some self-esteem programs are steeped in new age philosophy and practices, and many programs employ psychotherapy techniques on children in both groups and individually (Beardsley, 2005). According to Dr. Bennet Pologe (n.d.), a licensed psychologist in New York state, the purpose of psychotherapy is to help people deal with the unconscious causes of “irrational patterns of feeling, perception and behavior”(Pologe, n.d., *Why Psychotherapy*). Pologe goes on to state, “Just as the problems are established somewhere outside your awareness, so too must the cure reach into this area.” These techniques do not belong in the classroom.

No wonder many Christians are skeptical of psychology in general and the results of the self-esteem movement in particular. At this point it is good to be reminded of several things: 1) God created mankind including the inner workings of his mind and emotions. The study of what God has created is a legitimate endeavor and glorifies God; 2) Just because modern psychology, pop-psychology, and the self-esteem movement have over-indulged themselves in raising self-esteem, thus creating numerous problems, does not mean self-esteem is bad or should be ignored; 3) Science includes debate and

correction – and there is plenty of debate and correction occurring in the field of self-esteem within modern psychology.

### **Self-Esteem or Self-Control?**

*But the fruit of the Spirit is...self-control...*

Galatians 5:22-23(NASB)

Ask any Christian what the Bible speaks to more—self-esteem or self-control—and you are likely to get a 100% response for self-control. In fact, you would be hard pressed to find someone in the local church who could provide scriptural support for self-esteem. That does not mean teaching on self-esteem is absent from scripture, it just goes to demonstrate how overwhelmingly the Bible addresses self-control. Well, modern psychology is beginning to see the light.

In *Generation Me* Dr. Twenge (2006) summarizes twelve studies on generational differences encompassing 1.3 million young Americans. The results of the studies and the message of the book can be summarized by the words of researcher Roy Baumeister, “After all these years, I’m sorry to say, my recommendation is this: forget about self-esteem and concentrate more on self-control and self-discipline” (Quoted in Twenge, p.66). The reason for this significant change in modern psychology is that we are now seeing the results of the self-esteem movement. And the results are ugly. The self-esteem movement has produced generations of people who are increasingly more focused on themselves to the detriment of everyone around them and society in general. When people are overly focused on themselves they lack the ability to see life from someone else’s perspective, they feel entitled to special privileges, and they believe they are superior and more important than other people. Does this describe anyone you know or have met recently? We call this ugly attitude and behavior narcissism, which can be defined as excessive preoccupation with oneself, which also describes the central purpose of the self-esteem movement. Even psychologists agree that narcissism is a negative personality trait.

The twelve studies on generational differences (Twenge, 2006) revealed that self-esteem is an outcome and not a cause. Here is an example to illustrate this point. Suppose we were to conduct a number of studies of obese people and conclude that sitting at a table produces obesity. It makes sense, right? Obese people tend to sit at the table more often and longer than non-obese people. As a result of our studies we develop wonderful programs to teach obese people how to sit somewhere else when they eat. Maybe one program teaches them to stand in the kitchen while they eat. Another program teaches them to sit in the living room watching television while they eat. Do you see the absurdity of this mock research and solution? Ultimately, someone is going to figure out that it is eating that causes obese people to sit at tables and it is eating (and lack of exercise and heredity) that causes obesity. Thus sitting at a table is an outcome of eating and not a cause of obesity. This is what happened with self-esteem research in modern psychology. Many, many researchers focused on self-esteem, which is the “sitting at the table” aspect, rather than on self-control, which is the “eating” aspect and the actual cause of so many good things and preventer of so many bad things.

Dr. Twenge (2006) notes, “self-control...is a better predictor of life outcomes than self-esteem. Children high in self-control make better grades and finish more years

of education, and they're less likely to use drugs or have a teenage pregnancy. Self-control predicts all of those things researchers had hoped self-esteem would, but hasn't" (p.67). Thus, there is an emerging trend to focus on self-control instead of self-esteem within psychology. This is just an emerging trend though, which means that there is still much debate among psychologists; just remember the cycle of scientific discovery—debate and correction. We are immersed in a debate phase involving self-control and self-esteem and it will be years before the secular world crowns self-control king over self-esteem, if it ever does. The really good news though is that the secular world is finally beginning to recognize what God has taught us all along.

## What Does God Say?

### *Self-Esteem*

The Bible teaches us that we should not overvalue ourselves (Romans 12:3); that God opposes the proud (James 4:6); that we should think of others as better than ourselves (Philippians 2:3); and that self-indulgence is bad (Matthew 23:25). The focus in these verses is on limiting our self-esteem. Maybe the reason for this is that mankind is naturally prone to excessive self-esteem because of sin.

We are commanded to love our neighbors as ourselves (Leviticus 19:18). Jesus included this instruction as a command on par with the Ten Commandments (Matthew 19:19) and said it was the second greatest commandment behind loving God (Mark 12:28-31). We are also told that this command fulfills the whole law (Gal 5:14). The key to these verses is to understand they are about loving your neighbor and not about loving yourself. The loving yourself portion is a reference point. We know how to care for ourselves through such things as food, personal hygiene, safety precautions, and when we provide comforts for ourselves. God instructs us to use that same knowledge and approach when dealing with others. These verses are *not* instructing us to love ourselves in the modern pop-psychology sense before we love others, which is a classic approach of the self-esteem movement. Instead these verses focus our attention on others and away from ourselves, thus serving as a limit on our self-esteem.

The true source of mankind's value and worth, and thus his self-esteem, is God.

- God formed us (Isaiah 44:24)
- God has loved us with an everlasting love (Jeremiah 31:3)
- God died for us in order to reconcile us to himself (1 Peter 3:18)

### *Self-Control*

Self-Control is a consistent message throughout the Bible.

- Isaiah pronounced judgment on the nation of Israel for its lack of self-control (Isaiah)
- Self-control is better than being mighty (Proverbs 16:32)
- A man without self-control is like a city with its walls torn down (Proverbs 25:28)
- Paul preached on self-control (Acts 24:25)
- The absence of self-control leads to temptation (1 Corinthians 7:5)
- The physical self-control of an athlete is an example for our lives (1 Corinthians 9:23-27)

- Self-control is a fruit of the spirit (Galatians 5:22-23)
- An unspiritual mind can make us narcissistic (Colossians 2:18)
- Lack of self-control is an indicator of being wicked and should be avoided (2 Timothy 3:1-5)
- Self-control should be a trait of an overseer in the church (Titus 1:7-9)
- Self-control is our duty to God (2 Peter 1:5-9)

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