



Scriptural Response to Self-Esteem Teaching

Self-esteem teaching contradicts God's Word. Yet, for decades, Christian organizations and schools, pastors, teachers, publishers, and denominational leaders have embraced self-esteem teaching in spite of its false claims and disregard of scriptural truth. On the other hand, discerning believers have publicly and consistently exposed the false teaching that undergirds the self-esteem movement.

The choice in this battle for truth is between exalting one's self or exalting the Lord Jesus Christ. These two diametrically opposed choices should be obvious to believers in Christ, but self-esteem adherents have overlooked or ignored the diabolical deception that surrounds the glorification of self.

*The Biblical Counseling Foundation (BCF) is one of the faithful opponents of popular "self-teaching." Since the mid-1970's, BCF has scripturally refuted many aspects of the self-esteem movement. The following is adapted from Self-Confrontation: A Manual for In-Depth Biblical Discipleship, published in 1991 by BCF.*¹

SELF OR THE SAVIOR

God has graciously provided for you so that you may give glory and exaltation to Him and not to yourself (Psalm 115:1; also Romans 1:19-21; 5:1-2, 6-11; Ephesians 2:8-9).

Psalm 115:1, Not to us, O LORD, not to us, but to Your name give glory because of Your lovingkindness, because of Your truth.

Your example in giving glory to God and disregarding yourself is Jesus, who did not seek His own glory (John 8:50; also John 7:17-18; 8:54; Hebrews 5:5).

John 8:50, But I do not seek My glory; there is One who seeks and judges.

Instead Jesus lived to do the will of the Father (John 6:38, also John 4:34, 5:30) as a servant who learned obedience from the things which He suffered (Hebrews 5:8) and remained obedient even to death (Matthew 20:26-28; also Philippians 2:5-8).

John 6:38, For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me.

Hebrews 5:8, Although He was a Son, He learned obedience from the things which He suffered.

Matthew 20:26-28, It is not this way among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant,²⁷ and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave;²⁸ just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.

THE ERROR OF MAN'S WAY CONCERNING SELF-WORTH

While you are more valuable than the lower forms of God's creation (Matthew 6:26, also Matthew 10:29-31, 12:12; Luke 12:7, 24) and are intimately known by God (Psalm 139:13-16, also 1 Samuel 16:7, Matthew 10:30; Luke 16:15), you still deserve death because of your inherent sinfulness (Romans 5:12, also Romans 1:18-32, 6:23).

Matthew 6:26, Look at the birds of the air, that they do not sow, nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not worth much more than they?

Psalm 139:13-16, For You formed my inward parts; You wove me in my mother's womb.¹⁴ I will give thanks to You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; Wonderful are Your works, and my soul knows it very well.¹⁵ My frame was not hidden from You, when I was made in secret, and skillfully wrought in the depths of the earth;¹⁶ Your eyes have seen my unformed substance; and in Your book were all written the days that were ordained for me, when as yet there was not one of them.

Romans 5:12, Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned.

Being adopted into God's family should cause you to praise and thank Him for the glory of His grace (Ephesians 1:5-6). It is wrong for you to think that you are worthy in any way to receive His unmerited favor (Romans 5:8, also 1 Corinthians 1:26-31).

Ephesians 1:5-6, He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, ⁶ to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.

Romans 5:8, But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

THE ERROR OF MAN'S WAY REGARDING SELF-ASSURANCE

Even God's people can mistakenly think that they are the source of material blessings which are, in reality, provided solely by God (Deuteronomy 8:11-18). Pride (a dependence on yourself or your "possessions" instead of a dependence on God) will lead to a fall (Proverbs 16:18, *also Proverbs 11:28, 1 Corinthians 10:12*). Since you can do nothing fruitful apart from Jesus (John 15:5), you are to live in total dependence upon Him, who is the power and wisdom of God (1 Corinthians 1:24, Philippians 4:13, *also Proverbs 3:5-6, Galatians 2:20*).

Deuteronomy 8:11-18, Beware that you do not forget the LORD your God by not keeping His commandments and His ordinances and His statutes which I am commanding you today; ¹² otherwise, when you have eaten and are satisfied, and have built good houses and lived *in them*, ¹³ and when your herds and your flocks multiply, and your silver and gold multiply, and all that you have multiplies, ¹⁴ then your heart will become proud and you will forget the LORD your God who brought you out from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. ¹⁵ He led you through the great and terrible wilderness, *with its* fiery serpents and scorpions and thirsty ground where there was no water; He brought water for you out of the rock of flint. ¹⁶ In the wilderness He fed you manna which your fathers did not know, that He might humble you and that He might test you, to do good for you in the end. ¹⁷ Otherwise, you may say in your heart, 'My power and the strength of my hand made me this wealth.' ¹⁸ But you shall remember the LORD your God, for it is He who is giving you power to make wealth, that He may confirm His covenant which He swore to your fathers, as *it is* this day.

Proverbs 16:18, Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before stumbling.

John 15:5, I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing.

1 Corinthians 1:24, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

Philippians 4:13, I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.

THE ERROR OF MAN'S WAY IN SELF-LOVE

You are to love God (Matthew 22:37-38, *also Deuteronomy 6:5*), but nowhere in Scripture are you told to love yourself. A command to love yourself is unnecessary since you already do that; in fact, you are commanded to love others in the same way in which you already love yourself (Matthew 22:39, *also Galatians 5:14; Ephesians 5:28-29*). Note that one of the self-centered characteristics of those who reject the faith in the last days is "loving self" (2 Timothy 3:1-2).

Matthew 22:37-39, And He said to him, "YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND." ³⁸ This is the great and foremost commandment. ³⁹ The second is like it, "YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF."

2 Timothy 3:1-2, But realize this, that in the last days difficult times will come. ² For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, revilers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy,

THE ERROR OF MAN'S WAY RELATED TO SELF-ASSERTIVENESS

Through Jesus Christ, you are more than a conqueror in any situation of life (Romans 8:35-39), and the Lord has not given you a spirit of timidity (fear) but of power and love and discipline (2 Timothy 1:7). However, Scripture never tells you to assert yourself; you are commanded, instead, to trust wholly in God's plan for your life (Matthew 6:33-34, Romans 8:28-29, Philippians 4:19), while you minister to others as a servant (Matthew 20:26-28), esteeming them as more important than yourself (Philippians 2:3-4).

Romans 8:35-39, Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ³⁶ Just as it is written, "FOR YOUR SAKE WE ARE BEING PUT TO DEATH ALL DAY LONG; WE WERE CONSIDERED AS SHEEP TO BE SLAUGHTERED." ³⁷ But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

2 Timothy 1:7, For God has not given us a spirit of timidity, but of power and love and discipline.

Matthew 6:33-34, But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.³⁴ So do not worry about tomorrow; for tomorrow will care for itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

Romans 8:28-29, And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.²⁹ For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren.

Philippians 4:19, And my God will supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus.

Matthew 20:26-28, It is not this way among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant,²⁷ and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave;²⁸ just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.

Philippians 2:3-4, Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves;⁴ do not *merely* look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.

THE ERROR OF MAN'S WAY PERTAINING TO SELF-CONFIDENCE

You are not to trust in yourself but instead are to trust only in the Lord (Proverbs 3:5-7, *also Psalm 60:11-12, 73:26; Jeremiah 9:23-24, 17:5-8; 1 Corinthians 1:26-31*). The Lord is your confidence (Proverbs 3:26), and you are to place no confidence in your flesh (Philippians 3:3). You are not adequate in yourself to consider anything as from yourself, but your adequacy is from God (2 Corinthians 3:5). As a servant of the new covenant (2 Corinthians 3:6), you can be an overcomer only through your faith in Christ Jesus (1 John 5:4-5, *also Philippians 4:13*) and not because of your own strength (John 15:5, *also Romans 7:14 - 8:8*).

Proverbs 3:5-7, Trust in the LORD with all your heart and do not lean on your own understanding.⁶ In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight.⁷ Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD and turn away from evil.

Proverbs 3:26, For the LORD will be your confidence and will keep your foot from being caught.

Philippians 3:3, for we are the *true* circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh.

2 Corinthians 3:5-6, Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as *coming* from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God,⁶ who also made us adequate *as* servants of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

1 John 5:4-5, For whatever is born of God overcomes the world; and this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith.⁵ Who is the one who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?

John 15:5, I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing.

THE ERROR OF MAN'S WAY REGARDING SELF-ESTEEM

Apart from Jesus Christ, you have no inherent value in yourself. Scripture speaks of the natural man's self-importance in the following manner:

- A. Since nothing and no one in the world can compare with God (*Exodus 15:11; 2 Chronicles 6:14; Psalm 40:5, 89:6-8; Jeremiah 10:6-7*), He only is to be exalted (*Psalm 57:11, 97:9*). You are not in any manner to exalt yourself (*Proverbs 30:32*). In comparison to the Creator God, the natural man is:
1. Like dust (*Psalm 90:3, 103:14*);
 2. Like a mere breath and a passing shadow, with a lifetime that is nothing in the Lord's sight (*Psalm 39:4-5, 62:9, 144:4*);
 3. Like grass (*Isaiah 40:6-8, 51:12; 1 Peter 1:24*);
 4. Like a flower of the field that flourishes and then is no more (*Psalm 103:15-16; Isaiah 40:6-8; 1 Peter 1:24*);
 5. Like a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away (*James 4:14*);
 6. Stupid and devoid of knowledge (*Jeremiah 51:17a*);
 7. Accounted as nothing and meaningless (*Isaiah 40:17; Daniel 4:35*); and
 8. Like a worm and not a man (*Job 25:6; Psalm 22:6*).
- B. If you refuse to respond biblically to God's plan of salvation revealed only through the Lord Jesus Christ, in God's sight you are:

1. Worthless (depraved, unapproved), detestable (*Jeremiah 13:10; Titus 1:16*), rejected in regards to faith (*2 Timothy 3:1-8*), and worthy of death (*Romans 1:28-32, 6:23*);
 2. Corrupt, unrighteous, and useless (*Psalms 14:1-3; 53:1-3; 143:2; Ecclesiastes 7:20; Romans 3:10-18*); and
 3. Dead in your sins (*Ephesians 2:1, 5; Colossians 2:13*).
- C. Trusting in yourself is futile since:
1. Nothing inherently good dwells within your heart or flesh (*Jeremiah 17:9; Romans 7:18*);
 2. You can do nothing fruitful apart from Jesus (*John 15:5*);
 3. Apart from Jesus Christ, you are a slave to sin (*Romans 6:16-18; Hebrews 2:14-15*); and
 4. Your natural wisdom is inadequate to direct your steps (*Psalms 94:11; Proverbs 14:12; Jeremiah 10:23*)

God in His merciful love, however, cares for you (*Psalms 8:4*). After receiving Jesus Christ into your life, your value is found in being in Him (*Ephesians 2:4-7, 19-22*) and knowing Him (*Philippians 3:7-11*).

Psalm 8:4, What is man that You take thought of him, and the son of man that You care for him?

Ephesians 2:4-7, But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us,⁵ even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved),⁶ and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus,⁷ so that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

Ephesians 2:19-22, So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household,²⁰ having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone,²¹ in whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord,²² in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit.

Philippians 3:7-11, But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ.⁸ More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ,⁹ and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from *the* Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which *comes* from God on the basis of faith,¹⁰ that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death;¹¹ in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.

THE ERROR OF MAN'S WAY REGARDING SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS

You are not righteous in yourself (*Romans 3:10-12, also Psalm 14:2-3; Ecclesiastes 7:20; Romans 7:18*), and it is impossible for you to earn a righteous standing before God (*Titus 3:5, also Luke 18:9-14*). The best you could do in your own strength or merit is considered as a filthy garment in God's sight (*Isaiah 64:6*) and is worthless when compared to the value of faith in Christ Jesus (*Philippians 3:7-11, esp. verse 9*). Your true righteousness is based *solely* on the Lord Jesus Christ (*2 Corinthians 5:21, also Romans 10:8-10*) and is a free gift of God's grace (*Romans 5:17*).

Romans 3:10-12, as it is written, "There is none righteous, not even one."¹¹ There is none who understands. There is none who seeks for God;¹² All have turned aside, together they have become useless; There is none who does good, there is not even one."

Titus 3:5, He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit.

Isaiah 64:6, For all of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment; and all of us wither like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.

Philippians 3:7-11 – *printed in previous section*

2 Corinthians 5:21, He made Him who knew no sin *to be* sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

Romans 5:17, For if by the transgression of the one, death reigned through the one, much more those who receive the abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ.

THE ERROR OF MAN'S WAY CONCERNING SELF-EXALTATION

Commending yourself has no value (*2 Corinthians 10:18*) and shows your lack of biblical understanding (*2 Corinthians 10:12*). Exalting one's self is characteristic of a person who is rebellious (*Psalms 66:7*) or of one who doesn't truly know the Lord (*Psalms 83:2, also Psalm 10:4, Psalm 94:4*). Those who exalt themselves will be humbled (*Matthew 23:12, also Luke 18:9-*

14, esp. verse 14). Self-exaltation is descriptive of a self-centered person who is rejected in regard to faith in the difficult times of these last days (2 Timothy 3:1-5).

2 Corinthians 10:18, For it is not he who commends himself that is approved, but he whom the Lord commends.

2 Corinthians 10:12, For we are not bold to class or compare ourselves with some of those who commend themselves; but when they measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves, they are without understanding.

Psalms 66:7, He rules by His might forever; His eyes keep watch on the nations; Let not the rebellious exalt themselves.

Psalms 83:2, For behold, Your enemies make an uproar, and those who hate You have exalted themselves.

2 Timothy 3:1-5, But realize this, that in the last days difficult times will come. ²For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, revilers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, ³unloving, irreconcilable, malicious gossips, without self-control, brutal, haters of good, ⁴treacherous, reckless, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, ⁵holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power; avoid such men as these.

Exalting self in any dimension is to forget or deny that your praise should be to the glory of God's grace (Ephesians 1:5-6). The Lord alone is to be exalted (Psalm 148:13).

Ephesians 1:5-6, He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, ⁶to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.

Psalms 148:13, Let them praise the name of the LORD, for His name alone is exalted; His glory is above earth and heaven. You are to boast . . .

in the Lord (2 Corinthians 10:17, also Psalm 20:7, 34:1-3, 44:8; Jeremiah 9:24; 1 Corinthians 1:31),

2 Corinthians 10:17, But He who boasts is to boast in the Lord.

in the cross of Jesus Christ (Galatians 6:14),

Galatians 6:14, But may it never be that I would boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.

in your weaknesses (2 Corinthians 11:30, 12:9).

2 Corinthians 11:30, If I have to boast, I will boast of what pertains to my weakness.

2 Corinthians 12:9, And He has said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness." Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me.

If you exalt yourself, you will be humbled; yet, if you humble yourself under the mighty hand of God, He will exalt you at the proper time (Matthew 23:12; 1 Peter 5:6).

Matthew 23:12, Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted.

1 Peter 5:6, Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time,

CONCLUSION

From Adam and Eve to the present, mankind has sinfully exalted self. Death to self can only occur through Jesus Christ (*Romans 5:12-21*). Disregarding God's way, man habitually turns to his own inadequate wisdom to deal with problems (*Proverbs 14:12; Isaiah 55:8-9*) and develops unbiblical solutions that focus on self instead of focusing on God.

Man's philosophies, having rejected God's redemptive solutions, place man on the throne and substitute a self-oriented focus as the substance and solution to life's failures and successes. Since this is the essence of materialistic humanism, the integration of man's way and God's way is an impossibility.

God's solution to the problem of "self" is a transformation (*Romans 6:3-6, 12:2; 2 Corinthians 5:17; Ephesians 4:22-24*), which allows you to die to self and live for Jesus Christ (*Matthew 10:38-39; Luke 9:23-24; Galatians 2:20*).

¹ The above is adapted with permission from the Biblical Counseling Foundation's 480 page in-depth discipleship manual entitled, *Self-Confrontation* (1991 edition). For further information on this and other biblical counseling/in-depth discipleship training materials, please write or call:

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