

# The Cry of Self-Esteem

No one is more hated than he who speaks the truth  
-Plato

I understand that this will be a very emotional discussion for certain readers. I want to apologize ahead of time if anyone is offended. It is not my intent to judge another for the pain they suffer, but rather to give this person the vocabulary to better explain the pain they may have. It is by necessity I will be speaking in broad terms, which means I cannot cover all the particulars in each person's situation.

Psychologists Elliot R. Smith and Diane M. Mackie define "self-esteem" as "the positive or negative evaluations of the self, as in how we feel about [ourselves]." As a feeling, self-esteem is an emotional state. As it's an emotional state, facts about oneself may or may not be relevant to one's self-esteem. One who is demonstratively successful may still think poorly of oneself, and one who is clearly inadequate to their tasks may still think well of oneself.

Being emotional, self-esteem is affected by many factors: biological makeup, neural-transmitter levels, upbringing, sleep quality, nutrition, attitude, motivation, current environment, self-image, anonymity, and so on. Notice that many of these factors, especially attitude, motivation, the environment, self-image, and anonymity are largely controllable by the person in question. To a certain extent, one can change their self-esteem.

Despite the complex factors that contribute to self-esteem, it is rather easy to talk about self-esteem itself. This is because the different types of self-esteem all rely on how much confidence one has in oneself. Those with low self-confidence tend to be reclusive and often victimized, whereas those we call successful or outstanding tend to display a high degree of self-confidence. There are three types of self-esteem, each with its own cry.

The first type is called "low self-esteem." It is here where the concept of "low self-confidence" or having a "poor self-image" is most obvious. Many people who have low self-esteem are actually quite capable people, and most are certainly capable of doing more than what they actually accomplish. It is not that they don't have the ability to do better than they are doing, but that they lack the confidence to try. While those with a low self-image invariably have low self-esteem, there are many who have a positive self-image and yet still have low self-esteem. Those with low self-confidence tend to have the following behaviors\*:

- Critical of and unhappy with oneself
- Overtly sensitive to "personal attacks"
- Fear of making mistakes/being indecisive
- Excessive desire for affirmation
- Perfectionist, which leads to frustration because things never turn out completely right
- Excessive guilt over past mistakes
- Pessimism, envy and resentment
- Exaggerates impact of minor setbacks
- Finds self-value by proxy (e.g., how well a sports team performs)

They are much more likely than others to experience depression, anxiety, eating disorders,

various psychotic disorders, marginalization by peers and supervisors, and victimization by predators.

In contrast, those with a high degree of self-confidence tend to have the following behaviors\*:

Strong values, willingness to both defend them and to modify them after new experiences

Trusts own judgment, not intimidated by other opinions

Learns from past, plans for the future, and lives in present

Trusts ability to solve own problems, but asks for help when needed

Is able to see self as equal to others while also respecting the diversity of others

Understands ones own value to others, especially among friends

Able to cooperate with others, but resists being manipulated

Enjoys a variety of activities

Empathetic to others, respects societal norms, does not seek to exploit others

Works towards solutions, willing to challenge others' beliefs

But note that while these things are normally considered desirable, they can also cause problems as well. So when looking at people with high self-confidence, we must look at both sides of these characteristics. We have to look at what it is that drives them to have this high self-confidence. It is not *what* they do; it is *why* they do it. If a person with high self-confidence is driven by the Christian idea of pride, then he has what is called "narcissism." If a person is driven by the Christian idea of humility, then he has what is called "high self-esteem." Both will defend their positions, but the narcissist will do so because he will refuse to admit he is wrong, whereas the one with high self-esteem will seek to defend the truth. Both will act on their own initiative, but the narcissist does it on an impulse or to impress others, whereas the one with high self-esteem balances the good against the bad. And so on throughout the list.

It is important to note that high self-esteem is not the "happy medium" between narcissism and low self-esteem, but rather the marriage of high confidence with humility. This is the Christian ideal, as I will get to shortly. But all three types of self-esteem have their own cries.

The cry of low self-esteem is the most obvious, at least in terms of harm being done. While it manifests itself in a myriad of ways, it ultimately comes to crying because one cannot find the divine image of God within themselves. There are not many examples in the Bible of low self-esteem, but the two I want to address are exceptionally powerful: Moses and King Herod. Moses spent half a chapter in Genesis trying to talk God out of picking him for the job (Exodus 4:1-17). King Herod was simultaneously fascinated by and repulsed by Saint John the Baptist, but always under the thumb of his brother's wife. But we see that God never gives up trying to help those with low self-esteem. For every concern Moses had, God had an answer. Even after being murdered, Saint John was never far from King Herod's thoughts: "It is John whom I beheaded, he has been raised up" (Mark 6:16).

The cry of narcissism is perhaps the most pitiful, as those who are crying this cry often won't admit that they are crying. It is hard to get someone to fix a problem when they deny there is a problem at all. There are many narcissists in the Bible. Some of the more famous ones include Cain, Jacob, King Solomon, the prophet Jonah and, of course, Judas. Despite their narcissism, God still uses them for the master plan. It is not that God gave up on them; it is that they refuse to admit His role in their lives. In the final moments, Jesus prayed for those who crucified Him when He said, "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do." (Luke 23:34)

But the cry of those with high self-esteem is perhaps the hardest for others to understand. The

confidence the humble have comes from knowing "the truth." The truth is often not wanted by others, and knowing that what one will say will not be wanted is part of knowing the truth ("If I tell you, you will not believe, and if I question, you will not respond" Luke 22:67-68). High self-esteem is best able to deal with the pain and suffering the world gives it, but that does not stop the pain from coming. And the pain itself is usually misunderstood. The pain that hurts the most is *not* attacks on their person, but rather in how their voice is being ignored. Especially when those ignoring the help are loved ones. As Jesus said in Matthew 13:30: "Jerusalem ... I yearned to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her young under her wings, but you were unwilling" And the Bible is full of examples. Two Biblical books in their entirety speak of this cry: Job and Jeremiah. And as Jesus is high self-esteem perfected, we have four books that spend a lot of time discussing this cry in detail. From being rejected by his townsfolk, to being abandoned by his followers, to being mocked on the cross, we have as many examples as one could want.

I am not qualified to "fix" those with deep-rooted problems, but I can encourage the gentle reader to work on what *is* within one's power to fix. By holding high self-esteem as the ideal, those with low self-esteem should constantly try to find God's image within themselves, and to avoid toxic environments. Those with narcissism should focus on obedience and self-examination to offset their pride. Those *with* high self-esteem must never give up on the theological virtues of hope and faith, lest they fall into despair and despondency. And regardless of what category one finds oneself in, one should humbly seek and accept help for matters beyond one's ability to handle on one's own. All of our crosses are different, yet they are all crosses in Christ. If nothing else, that is the truth we all have in common.

I have given a common, professional definition of what self-esteem is, I have given examples of what to look for in those who have low self-esteem and in those with high degrees of self-confidence. I have explained the difference between narcissism and high self-esteem. I have given Biblical examples of all three types of self-esteem and provided a starting point for self-improvement. I hope that the gentle reader may now be better able to articulate his own cry of self-esteem and use this new voice to find the peace Jesus offers all of us.

Do not heed much if men mock you and speak lies of you, or in goodwill defend you unworthily. Heed not much if even the righteous turn their backs upon you. Only take heed that you turn not from them.

-George MacDonald, UNSPOKEN SERMONS, Third Series, *The Final Unmasking*

\*based on information collected from Wikipedia "self-esteem" article

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