

Spiritual Growth and Self Esteem

(Compiled by Paul R. Blake)

Introduction:

- A. Spiritual growth is a choice based on a determined mind and active body; it does not occur by passively waiting for it to come to us.
 - 1. Directed by God - 2Peter 3:18
 - 2. Assisted by God - Phil. 2:13
 - 3. Blessed by God - 2Peter 1:8-11
 - 4. Requires diligent effort - Phil. 2:12
- B. Many Christians do not reach their potential for spiritual growth
 - 1. Character development is random and minimal; consequently, abilities are underdeveloped
 - 2. Years pass by with little or no progress
- C. In some cases, the reason is poor self-image
 - 1. This causes many Christians to underestimate their potential
 - 2. Do not believe in themselves; in some cases, misled into thinking self-abasement is a virtue
 - 3. Because they do not believe in themselves, they do not see what God and many others see in them.
 - 4. Why does God want you to live in His house forever? Why has the Divine gone to such extreme and eternal lengths to get you there?
 - a. Because He loves you!
 - b. Why does He love you -- just because? Do you think He is an idiot? He must see something in you worth His love.
 - c. You need to come to see in you what God sees in you.
 - 5. Undermines their efforts to grow
 - 6. What is self-esteem? How does it affect our spiritual growth?

I. SELF-ESTEEM AND CHRISTIANS

- A. Understanding self-esteem
 - 1. Self-esteem is our internal feelings and evaluation of ourselves based on our personally "perceived" self-image. It is how we feel about ourselves, based on how we view ourselves
 - 2. Self-esteem and self-image are closely related; often on feedback during childhood and school years
 - 3. Feedback comes first from others (parents, peers, other persons important to us)
 - 4. Over time, it is reinforced by our own self-talk (what we tell ourselves)
- B. Healthy self-esteem is enhanced by childhood experiences that include:
 - 1. Being complimented for doing well and reaching your potential
 - 2. Being listened to and spoken to with respect for you as a person
 - 3. Getting healthy attention and expressions of affection
 - 4. Experiencing success in education, sports, creativity, chores, etc.
 - 5. Having trusted relationships
 - 6. Being corrected in a manner that demonstrates concern for their well-being, and not as an inconvenience for others

- C. Childhood experiences that lead to low self-esteem include:
1. Being harshly criticized, yelled at, or punished erratically or unfairly
 2. Being ignored, ridiculed, or bullied
 3. Being expected to be "perfect" all the time
 4. Experiencing constant failure in daily activities and challenges
 5. People with low self-esteem were often given the message that failed experiences (losing a game, getting a poor grade, etc.) means that they are failures as persons
- D. The consequences of poor self-esteem:
1. Can create anxiety, stress, loneliness, and a risk of depression
 2. Can cause problems with relationships
 3. Can seriously impair academic and job performance
 4. Can lead to a lifetime of underachievement and increased vulnerability to drug and alcohol abuse and promiscuity
 5. Most importantly in spiritual matters, they do not believe they are worth saving and often act in ways to make that true.
 - a. If they remain in the church, they do so believing they are evil, hypocritical, always doubting they will ever get to heaven.
 - b. They have little or no confidence and joy in the Lord
 - c. They are marginally involved in the Lord's work believing they are incapable of good or that they will fail or lead others to fail
 6. These negative consequences reinforce the negative self-image and take one into a downward spiral of lower and lower self-esteem and increasingly nonproductive and often actively self-destructive behavior
- E. Christians' basis of self-esteem -- Christians have two primary reasons for having a healthy self-image:
1. Dignity by virtue of Divine generation
 - a. We were created in God's image - Gen. 1:26-27
 - b. We were created to exercise dominion - Gen. 1:28
 - c. God has fully demonstrated His high estimation of humankind by His love for us - John 3:16; 1John 4:10; Rom. 5:8
 2. Dignity by virtue of spiritual regeneration
 - a. Once we were sinners, but we have been regenerated - Titus 3:5
 - b. We are now reborn as His children - 1John 3:1
- F. Christians have other reasons for having self-respect
1. The blessing of continued forgiveness and renewal when we stumble back into sin - 1John 1:9 - 2:2
 2. The blessing of being a part of the greatest family this world will ever enjoy -- God's family (the church), who, like the best of families, is there for each other - Heb. 3:12-13, 10:25
 3. The blessing of God's own assurance never to forsake us, distinct from the manipulative, co-dependent relationships of this world that threaten to leave or withhold love or else - Heb. 13:5-6
 4. The fact is, God highly esteems His children. Even though we sin, He wants us to have a healthy estimation of ourselves.

II. SELF-ESTEEM AND SPIRITUAL GROWTH

A. Poor self-image hinders spiritual growth

1. Unwilling to believe they are capable of growth, they say to themselves: "I could never do that (teach a class, teach a neighbor, et al)" "I will make too many mistakes" "I can't learn that"
2. Tending to giving up without an earnest effort, some tell themselves: "I just don't have the ability" "I am only a one talent person"
3. Poor self-esteem in several individuals can easily develop into how the congregation feels about itself: "We are too small as a church to do" "We are too poor, too uneducated, too old"
4. All such defenses are indicators of poor self-esteem that prevent spiritual growth from occurring

B. Proper self-esteem enhances spiritual growth

1. Consider the healthy self-esteem of the apostle Paul:
 - a. For himself - Phil. 4:13
 - b. For others - Phil. 1:6, 2:12-13
2. We would do well to cultivate a similar estimation of ourselves
 - a. We can do whatever God wants us to do, because Christ strengthens us. Instead of making excuses, say - Phil. 4:13

C. Practical steps for improving self-esteem

1. Identify and accept your strengths, weaknesses; everyone has them, no one is completely perfect
2. Envision an "I can" attitude and try it on, and offer yourself encouragement along the way. Coach yourself
3. Set small, realistic goals in the beginning, and then take joy in your achievements (giving God the glory), and reward yourself with a kind word and encouraging self-talk
4. Each success will fuel the next one; achieve a small one yesterday, set a larger today
5. Don't try to be someone else; be thankful for who you are. I will have been here 16 ½ years. I spent the first 18 ½ years of my life here. I have been at TR for 35 years. I know all of you, and I know this, that every person here has within them admirable qualities and incredible potential for good.
 - a. What breaks my heart is not when one of you stumbles or makes a mistake or sins; I actually identify with that.
 - b. What hurts is to see what you can do but are unwilling to try because you don't believe in yourself.
 - c. God believes in you; look at what He has done to show His faith in you.
 - d. The church here believes in you; we are often frustrated at our limited capacity to communicate that to you.
 - e. Please come to see what God and His children see in you
6. Explore your own talents; learn to love and appreciate the unique person you are (God loves you, your brethren love you, shouldn't you?)

7. Eliminate negative self-talk; consider the following:
 - a. It takes about twenty positive statements about ourselves to counteract just one negative personal statement
 - b. It doesn't take a continual repetition of negative statements from our parents, peers, and others throughout our childhood to maintain our low self-esteem.
 - c. Once we get a couple of them fixed in our head, we use them over and over again, taking those false negatives and repeating them unconsciously, like having a constant heckler in our heads

Conclusion:

- A. Poor self-esteem is a major hindrance to spiritual growth
 1. We make excuses for not trying
 2. We often give up before we make progress
- B. On the other hand, spiritual growth greatly enhances self-esteem
 1. As we grow, our achievements encourage us to do more
 2. As we grow, we gain confidence that we are on the right track
- C. Rather than let a mistaken estimation of self to hinder our service to God:
 1. Allow God's estimation of us to enhance our self-image and self-esteem
 2. Allow God's estimation of us to encourage the spiritual growth of which we are capable
 3. We will feel better about ourselves leading to doing better which will lead to feeling better which will lead to doing better which will lead to... ad infinitum