

An Imitation Of The Real Thing

I love hearing preaching which reveals how God loves all people – believers and unbelievers no matter how wicked they have been – and how precious or valuable they all are to Him. Also it is marvelous knowing believers are His purchased treasured possessions and accepted totally by Him in Christ.

But when discussing God’s attitude to the unsaved and to believers in Christ, I do not like using the secular expressions “self-worth” or “self-esteem”. The reason is neither of these expressions, in the ways they were originated by academics, describe fully and accurately what is God’s attitude to the unsaved and to believers in Christ. The humanist, Abraham Maslow defined self-esteem or self-worth in this way:

*“All people in our society (with a few pathological exceptions) have a need or desire for a stable, firmly based, usually high evaluation of themselves, for self-respect, or self-esteem, and for the esteem of others. These needs may therefore be classified into two subsidiary sets. These are, first, the desire for strength, for achievement, for adequacy, for mastery and competence, for confidence in the face of the world, and for independence and freedom. Second, we have what we may call the desire for reputation or prestige (defining it as respect or esteem from other people), status, dominance, recognition, attention, importance, or appreciation. These needs have been relatively stressed by Alfred Adler and his followers, and have been relatively neglected by Freud. More and more today, however, there is appearing widespread appreciation of their central importance, among psychoanalysts as well as among clinical psychologists. Satisfaction of the self-esteem need leads to feelings of self-confidence, worth, strength, capability, and adequacy, of being useful and necessary in the world. But thwarting of these needs produces feelings of inferiority, of weakness, and of helplessness...we have been learning more and more of the dangers of basing self-esteem on the opinions of others rather than on real capacity, competence and adequacy to the task. The most stable and therefore most healthy self-esteem is based on deserved respect from others rather than on external fame or celebrity and unwarranted adulation.”*¹

Note Maslow here:

a) saw self-esteem and self-worth as having *no relation to God or Jesus Christ*. He did not see self-esteem and self-worth in reference to the fact all humans are *created* by God, and *owned* by Him and loved by Him with an *unconditional perfect love*. Nor did Maslow see self-esteem and self-worth in terms of God’s total acceptance of all believers through Jesus Christ. Maslow did not teach God values believers as treasured or priceless possessions.

b) did not regard self-esteem as relating in any way to *God’s undeserved grace and mercy*. But unless our view of ourselves is based on His grace and mercy, we *must see ourselves wrongly*. The fullest revelation of God’s enormous love for us and the exceptional value or worth He places on us comes when we receive a glimpse of His grace and mercy offered to us as previously condemned sinners. Also, it is only through having a revelation of His grace and mercy that we can understand His total acceptance of us through Jesus Christ.

c) taught our esteem from others must be *deserved*. But our esteem from God in the sense of Him loving and accepting us through Christ are *not deserved* in even the slightest way. As stated previously Maslow said, *“The most stable and therefore most healthy self-esteem is based*

¹ Abraham H. Maslow, “Motivation and Personality,” Harper and Row Publishers, New York, 1954, pages 90-91.

on deserved respect from others...”² But note God values and prizes us as unbelievers or believers not because we deserve it, but simply because He is love (see 1 John 4:16) and therefore cannot help but love us unconditionally. Also, He accepts us totally as believers not because we deserve it due to our supposed goodness or right behaviour.

In Mark 10:18, Jesus said, **“No one is good, but One, that is, God.”** The Scriptures teach that no human can be accepted by God through their right behaviour (see Titus 1:8 and Ephesians 2:7-9). Because Maslow’s teaching is based on deserving esteem from others and is not related to God’s undeserved grace and mercy, it is a *subtle form of legalism*. It teaches us to merit the esteem of others.

d) teaches us to value ourselves primarily on the basis of our abilities, achievements, strengths and so on. But note in Jeremiah 9:23-24, God commands us as believers to value ourselves not on the basis of our abilities or achievements but because we have a relationship with Him and have experienced a revelation of His lovingkindness and other glorious features of His character: **“Thus says the Lord: ‘Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, let not the mighty man glory in his might, nor let the rich man glory in his riches; but let him who glories glory in this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the Lord, exercising lovingkindness, judgement, and righteousness in the earth. For in these I delight,’ says the Lord.”** In Hebrew, the word **“lovingkindness”** here is “hesed” which also means “steadfast love, grace, mercy”.³ So a true valuing of ourselves must relate to His love, grace and mercy towards us.

When commenting on Jeremiah 9:23-24, G. W. Knight said: *“This passage, as do the entire OT and NT, repudiates boasting oriented to man as misplaced praise and enjoins boasting in God, which is appropriately directed praise offered to one worthy of praise. The theological premise for the impropriety of man’s boasting in himself and the propriety of his boasting in God is the creature/Creator distinction and the assumption that what man is and does is a gift from God (1 Cor. 4:7) and what God is and does is intrinsic to him. For man to boast in himself is to claim the praise and glory that belongs to God; it is arrogance (cf. James 4:16). For man to boast in God is to give God the praise and glory that are rightfully his.”*⁴

In Luke 16:15, Jesus revealed what is highly esteemed among humans is usually an abomination to God: **“And He said to them, ‘You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is highly esteemed among men is an abomination in the sight of God.’”** God does not esteem humans on the basis of their strengths, achievements, adequacy, mastery, competence, self-confidence, independence and good works.

Isaiah 53:3 shows humans did not esteem Jesus highly at the time of His death or greatest triumph: **“He is despised and rejected by men, a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And we hid, as it were, our faces from Him; He was despised, and we did not esteem Him.”** In Hebrew, the word **“esteem”** above is “hashab” which in this context means “esteem, value, regard”.⁵

² When commenting on what Maslow’s teaching on self-esteem means, the secular academic Duane Schultz says, *“It is vital that the status, prestige and good reputation a person may be accorded by others not consist solely of unearned or undeserved praise, but rather of earned recognition of real competence or adequacy”* (Duane Schultz, “Theories of Personality”, Brooks/Cole Publishing Company, Monterey, California, 1976, page 224).

³ Vine, page 142.

⁴ Walter Elwell (Editor), “Evangelical Dictionary of Theology”, Baker, Grand Rapids, 1984, page 164.

⁵ Brown, Driver and Briggs, page 363.

e) does not see our abilities, achievements and successes in life as gifts from God. In Romans 12:3, Paul commands us to not think too highly of ourselves but to think soberly of ourselves: ***“For I say, through the grace given to me, to everyone who is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think soberly, as God has dealt to each one a measure of faith.”*** In Greek, the expression ***“to think highly of oneself”*** is “huperphroneo” which means “to have an unwarranted pride in oneself or in one’s accomplishments”⁶ or “think too highly of oneself, be haughty”.⁷ In its broader context, Paul is referring here to *our attitude* to the ministry gifts God has given us.

In Romans 12:3-8, Paul reveals all believers have ministry gifts from God, but these must be viewed from a *faith perspective*. Faith is trust, reliance and surrender to God. So people with true faith in God will see all their ministry gifts are very *valuable* and *important*. But they will also view their gifts as being from God, glorifying to Him and needing to be surrendered to His use and purposes each day. Also faith people will honor God and not themselves in their usage of these gifts from Him. All of God’s ministry gifts are to be exercised with faith and humility. The same principles apply to all the other natural and spiritual gifts God gives to believers.

f) has no understanding of the fact that without Jesus Christ, all we do is really useless to us in the long run. In John 15:5, Jesus taught: ***“I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing.”***

g) has no concept of the fact the old humanity of believers *has been crucified with Christ*. Romans 6:6, 6:8, 2 Corinthians 5:14, Galatians 2:20 and Colossians 3:3 prove our old self-centred, self-reliant, self-trusting and self-confident human nature has been crucified with Christ when He died on the Cross as our substitute and representative.

Our old human nature *primarily focussed* on its strengths, weaknesses, achievements, successes, failures, physical appearance, the praises of others, the criticisms of others, fame, reputation, prestige, status, recognition from others, attention from others and similar things. Our old human nature had no concept of seeing our strengths, weaknesses, successes and other things listed above in terms of glorifying Jesus Christ and establishing His Kingdom. Our old humanity did not trust in Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, but instead relied on itself, other people and its own idols.

h) has no understanding of the fact that one of the main reasons our humanity has been crucified with Christ and then resurrected in union with Him is so it can be *centred* upon Him *instead of itself*. 2 Corinthians 5:14-15 declares: ***“For the love of Christ compels us, because we judge thus: that if One died for all, then all died; and He died for all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again.”***

i) does not recognize the fact receiving honour or recognition from others does not fully satisfy our hearts either. Haman in Esther’s time is an example of this (see Esther 3:1-6 and 5:9). Haman was honoured by everyone except Mordecai the Jew. Even though multiplied thousands gave him great recognition, he was still very hurt and angry because just one person did not honour him. No matter how much others give us recognition and honour, this is no substitute for deeply knowing God’s unconditional love and His total acceptance of us by grace through Jesus Christ.

⁶ Louw and Nida, page 765.

⁷ Bauer, page 842.

j) therefore teaches a *poor substitute* for the Biblical teachings on God's unconditional love, the enormous value He as Creator places on people and His total acceptance of all believers by His grace through Jesus Christ.

Having loving favour

Proverbs 22:1 states: *"A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, loving favor rather than silver and gold."* The words *"loving favour"* here are translated *"to be esteemed"* by the New International Version. In Hebrew, the word *"favour"* in the above verse is "hen". If in this context, *"favour"* is referring to favour in the eyes of people, it is teaching it is better to have favour in people's eyes than to be rich. But note this truth would have to be qualified by Paul's words in Galatians 1:10 when he taught that if our primary goal is to please people, we will not be able to be Jesus' servant.

If, however, the word "hen" in Proverbs 22:1 is relating to our favour in God's eyes, it is in terms of God's totally undeserved grace. This is because in relation to God, "hen" means "grace".⁸

The word "hen" is used in relation to God's unmerited grace or kindness to Noah (see Genesis 6:8), Abraham (see Genesis 18:3), Moses (see Exodus 33:12, 33:13 (twice), 33:16, 33:17 and 34:9), Gideon (see Judges 6:17), David (see 2 Samuel 15:25) and to sinful Israelites (see Jeremiah 31:2 and Zechariah 4:7). In Zechariah 12:10 "hen" is used of God's totally undeserved grace through Jesus Christ: *"And I will pour on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem the Spirit of grace and supplication; then they will look on Me whom they pierced; yes, they will mourn for Him as one mourns for his only son, and grieve for Him as one grieves for a firstborn."* So Proverbs 22:1 cannot be used to teach that our esteem by God is deserved.

So for anyone to suggest Proverbs 22:1 teaches believers should follow Maslow's self-esteem teachings is nonsense.

It is better to use expressions which are less easily confused

I believe it is far better for Christians who have been taught secular definitions of "self-esteem" and "self-worth" to not use these expressions at all in relation to God's attitudes to humans. The reason I say this is I have spoken to many Christians who confuse the secular understandings of these terms with God's attitudes to people.

I believe it is better to use expressions like "God values you enormously" or "you are precious to God" or "you are worth an exceptional amount to Him" when talking to both believers and unbelievers. Also it is better when talking to believers about the results of their relationship to Jesus Christ, to say, "You are accepted totally by God because of Jesus Christ. You are His purchased treasured possession".

Even in evangelism to unbelievers, it is better to use these types of latter easily understood expressions than to use the phrases "self-esteem" or "self-worth". This is because your unbelieving listeners are more likely to mistake what you are saying if you use phrases like

⁸ Harris, Archer and Waltke, pages 302-303.

“self-esteem” or “self-worth”. This is because they can easily interpret your words according to the secular definitions they have previously learnt of these.

For example, assume I preach to a group of non-Christians “God wants to build up your self-worth. He wants you to have a high self-esteem.” Their interpretation of my words is most likely to be in terms of God wanting them to be more self-confident and proud. So they will be misinterpreting my preaching.

You may say: “The word ‘Trinity’ is not used in the Bible, but the concept is. So why not use the terms ‘self-esteem’ and ‘self-worth’ even though the expressions are not used in the Scriptures?” My answer to this is the word “Trinity” expresses a Biblical teaching but the words “self-esteem” and “self-worth” in their normal secular definitions approve of human attitudes which the Bible opposes and mean something different from what the Bible describes as God’s attitude to people.

Humanistic assumptions produce humanistic interpretations

In the following, we will see how if researchers have humanistic unbiblical biases or assumptions, this will determine how they interpret the results of their academic research into matters like self-esteem. In his writing, “Dominance, Personality and Social Behaviour in Women”,⁹ Maslow says, “*Dominance-feeling (or ego-level) is an evaluation of the self; operationally defined it is what the subject says about herself in an intensive interview, after a good rapport has been established. High dominance-feeling empirically involves good self-confidence, self-assurance, high evaluation of the self, feelings of general capability or superiority, and lack of shyness, timidity, self-consciousness, or embarrassment. Low dominance feeling is seen as lack of self-confidence, self-assurance, and self-esteem; instead there are extensive feelings of general and specific inferiority, shyness, timidity, fearfulness, self-consciousness.*”

Here we see that in this early paper of Maslow, he equates high self-esteem closely with what he called high dominance feeling. Earlier in the same writing, he said near-synonyms for high-dominance feeling are “self-confidence, *self-esteem*, high self-respect and evaluation of self...a feeling of pride...”¹⁰

When discussing morals, Maslow stated that the features of a person with a high self-esteem (or dominance feeling) are as follows: “...people in our highest bracket of dominance feeling often could not remember a single thing that they felt guilty about, or that had bothered their conscience. ‘If I did it, it was all right.’ In the paper on sexuality, it is pointed out that, among the cases in this highest bracket, promiscuity, masturbation, homosexual experiences, and perversions of all sorts were often found. Not one of these women had experienced guilt about any of these. Some of them recognized that some of their behaviour was objectively bad or undesirable, but there was no affective reaction of self-castigation or shame. A typical comment was ‘I guess that was a pretty slimy thing to do, and I guess I won’t do it again, but I’ve never thought about it since, and it doesn’t bother me a bit.’ This was in connection with seducing a very young boy.”

In other words, Maslow had the humanistic bias that people with a high self-esteem always regarded themselves as good people and never felt guilty about any of their wicked behaviour. These women did not experience guilt about various sexual perversions. This included one high self-esteem woman seducing a little boy.

⁹ Richard I. Lowry (Editor), “Dominance, Self-esteem, Self-Actualisation: Germinal Papers of A. H. Maslow”, Brooks/Cole Publishers, Monterey, California, 1973, pages 73-74.

¹⁰ Ibid, page 52.

Let us now look at Maslow's definition of women with low self-esteem or low dominance feeling: "*Low-dominance women are different. They are apt to be very moral, ethical, and usually do not dare to break rules, even when they (rarely) disapprove of them. Their morality and ethics are usually entirely conventional. That is, they do what they have been taught to do by their parents, their teachers, or their religion*".¹¹ Here Maslow revealed his own humanistic bias that women who have high moral standards have a low self-esteem.

Note the method of research used in determining the characteristics of women with different levels of self-esteem was the interview method. Maslow said, "*The main method used in the research was what may be called the 'intensive interview' or 'personality investigation by conversational probing'*."¹²

But note studies of subjective human feelings and attitudes by interview questions formulated and interpreted according to the *prejudices* of the interviewers, are *not objective* determinants of what the truth is. For example, humanists like Maslow believe human nature basically good. So if born-again Christians would answer his interview questions from the Biblical perspective that human nature is fallen, corrupt and tends toward sin, they would score as having low self-esteem. The humanistic assumptions behind the questions and the supposedly "correct" answers result in such biased conclusions.

Also researchers with humanistic biases would most likely interpret responses related to having high Christian moral standards as being signs of a low self-esteem. This is because those with high Christian morals would, for example, tick questions which asked whether they were guilty if they had even been involved with various types of sex outside marriage or various sexual perversions. Most humanist researchers believe all or most forms of sex outside marriage and sex perversions such as sado-masochism, homosexuality and bisexuality are not wrong and there is no guilt attached to doing such things. Some even wickedly believe paedophilia and incest are acceptable behaviours. So the researchers' own biases would determine their interpretation of the results.

The results do not match the claims

One religious view suggests that the spread of Maslow's self-esteem teachings in Western societies will cause multitudes to learn to love and accept themselves in Biblical ways. This in turn will then supposedly make the latter more open to loving God, resulting in multitudes of conversions to Christ.

But the reality is that over the last 30 or more years, Maslow's false version of self-esteem teaching has produced multitudes of unbelievers in Western countries who are either:

- *self-righteous do-gooders* – unbelievers who highly esteem all of their own accomplishments, abilities and good works and would be shocked or horrified if you suggested they did things which God regards as evil, had a sinful nature, needed a Saviour and were required to turn from their sins to Jesus Christ as their Lord.
- *self-righteous do-bad-ers* – unbelievers who are involved in crime or other blatant sins but who are told by well-meaning but deluded others that they are really "good people" who will stop doing bad things once they see how good they are.

¹¹ Ibid, page 83.

¹² Ibid, page 75.

It is possible that the spread of self-esteem teachings in Western countries is one of the reasons for the small percentage of converts and lukewarm state of many churchgoers.

Not all people in Western countries follow Maslow's teachings about self-esteem, but most do. Also despite the claims of many, such teachings have not liberated their followers from bondage but instead have often replaced the people's old sets of bondages with new sets.

Everywhere we need to have the Biblical teachings about God's unconditional love and valuing of all people, His total acceptance of believers through Jesus Christ and His treasuring of believers as His purchased possessions replace their poor secular imitations. Only then will people begin to be truly liberated from their bondages.

Bible Study Questions

1. What is wrong with Abraham Maslow's teaching about self-esteem or self-worth?
2. Why is it wrong to use Proverbs 22:1 as a support for Maslow's self-esteem teachings?
3. Why is it better to not use secular non-Biblical expressions like "self-esteem" and "self-worth" to describe God's attitudes to humans?
4. What are the two types of people which Maslow's false version of self-esteem teaching has produced in Western countries in the last 30 years or so?