

WHAT JESUS TAUGHT ABOUT SELF

We see an increasing interest and emphasis on self esteem and its importance concerning a person being able to function in a world where relationships with others are essential. We cannot think of many situations in which interpersonal relationships are not essential. It could be in family, work, church, school, or the neighborhood. A balanced perspective of self, an understanding of basic human needs regarding self, and a knowledge of what our Creator intended for us can help us function effectively in whatever culture we may find ourselves. Yes, there are cultural influences regarding acceptable ways an individual may express himself. In Western societies, the individual is encouraged to “standout” and to seek recognition. A person would have a sense of joy and importance (pride) if he or she were singled out and individually honored for an achievement. In Eastern societies, such recognition would be an embarrassment to the person. Group recognition would be acceptable and welcomed but not individual recognition. Such differences find expression in the way the societies conduct business. A Western culture business meeting might typically be dominated by one or two people who would be attempting to express their ideas and sell them to the group. In an Eastern culture business meeting, the participants are very careful to not promote their opinions but to seek a consensus. The issues of “self” are present in both situations. In the former, the issues are centered around the individual. In the latter, the issues are there; however, they are focused on the group. Pride is still there as well as the desire to dominate and be recognized; however, it is a group dynamic at work.

There are four basic human drives and these are all natural. The first and most basic is self-preservation. This is our survival instinct at work. This drive causes us to get out of the way of an onrushing car. We don’t want to die. For Christians, we may be ready for eternity, but may have the same attitude as Bob Harrington (the Chaplain of Bourbon Street) who said, “I’m ready to go, I just don’t particularly want to be in the next load.”

Once we have satisfied the first basic drive, our attention can then be focused on the second level in our hierarchy of needs, self-reproduction. This drive can be channeled effectively into a family situation where the next generation is nurtured. It is also used to motivate people to seek recruits for their political party or to convert someone to their way of thinking.

The third level need is self-recognition. This is basically seeking the approval of others. A person who is driven by this need requires attention and feedback to confirm that what they are doing is the right thing.

The fourth basic drive is self-power. The issues here are prestige and position. This need is sometimes exploited in contrived job titles. The janitor might be the vice-president of custodial care. Other issues may involve “control” in interpersonal relationships.

Christians need to recognize these basic “natural” needs of humanity. It helps us understand why people behave the way they do. However, relative to the way we (as Christians) are to live, we need to hear what Jesus said about these matters.

Self Preservation: Jesus said “Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for My sake will find it.” (Matt 10:39) This paradoxical statement refers to the work of the cross in the life of the believer. As we identify with Christ in His death on the cross and His resurrection, we die to our old nature and experience a new birth in our spirits. The continuing work in our lives is that we take up our cross daily and follow Jesus by denying (dying to) self in practical ways. We do not take offense when we are hurt, we forgive others, and we do not insist on our own way. It is turning

the other cheek and going the second mile. We recognize that everything that comes our way is there to “transform us into the image of Jesus” and we cooperate with the Holy Spirit as “God works in us both to will and to do of His good pleasure.”

Self Reproduction: In Matthew 23:15 we find these words of Jesus. "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as you are." There are groups that call themselves churches but deny the truth of the gospel message. They invite others to join them and become as they are. Many do join and they think they are OK because they are members of that group and they perform certain duties and rituals. They have never been taught the absolute necessity of being born again of the Spirit of God before they can even “see the Kingdom of Heaven.” I fear our “church organizations” are filled with members who are going to be told on the Day of Judgement, “I never knew you, depart from Me.” God’s eternal plan of salvation is and has always been, Trust and Obey. The extent to which we invite people to follow us must be only in so far as we are following Christ. It is Christ that is to be reproduced in others.

Self Recognition: Dealing with the issue of “approval of others” is a difficult area. We desperately want to be accepted. Much of what we do is done with the hope of winning approval from friends, family or even strangers. Often we don’t even consider the rightness or wrongness of our action but consider only of what someone may think of us. The Lord Jesus had advice for us in this area. In Matthew 5:16 He said “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.” Therefore, our motivation is not what people will think of us, but we must be driven by consideration of how the act will glorify God.

Self Power: Prestige and fame were the things that cause the mother of James and John to ask Jesus to grant that her two sons sit on either side of Him when He came into His Kingdom. The need for self power is seen in a “me-first” and “mine is better” attitude. This attitude is contrary to the nature of Jesus. In Matthew 20:26 and 27 He said “Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first (chief) must be your slave -- just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

A vast difference exists between the natural way of man and the supernatural way of God. The natural man exalts self. The child of God sees self in a completely different light. The power of selfishness is a foe whose hidden strength is something we need to be on guard against. It is the reason we must experience the “cross” before we experience the “resurrection.” Unless we die to self, we cannot expect to have the Lord Jesus living in us.

Finally, Jesus told His disciples in John 10:10, “I have come that they might have life and have it abundantly.” He also told them in John 14:6, “I am the way, the truth, and the life . . .” These statements help us understand the apparent paradox of “dying (to self) so that we might live (in Christ).”

What will it be? Will we go for the natural human drives of self preservation, self reproduction, self recognition and self power or will we opt for God plan of dying to self so that we can experience the life of Christ?