

# The Search for Significance

## Part 1. An introduction

A few months ago, when Mike and Drena Byrne shared an evening service at this church, Mike referred to a time of stress and depression in his life, and he also shared that one of the tools that had helped him overcome this was the Book *The Search for Significance* by Robert McGee. (£12 from Wesley Owen).

It's a book all about self esteem and how Christians ought to approach the subject. It's a great book, that will help us apply scripture to our lives in a way that brings freedom and transformation into many areas of our personalities, relationships, work and worship.

Our society seems so self-absorbed. Our book shops are stuffed with books on how to be a happier, healthier me, better at making money, a better lover, fitter, leaner, etc. Many magazines deal with the subject of how to be happy – how to feel good, this month's *Psychologies* magazine even has an article on "Spirituality for Atheists"!

As Christians we are very uncomfortable with all this for a number of reasons:

1. We've been brought up to look at others rather than ourselves, we tend to feel guilty for focusing on our own needs.
2. Pop psychology – derived from Gustav Jung but increasingly owing more to marketing than genuine insight into the human personality – Is not Christian. Indeed some of it may be anti-Christian, in that it claims that the solution to many of our problems lies within ourselves. Yet it is from pop psychology that the fixation with self-esteem comes. Of course, it is very influential, getting at us through books, novels, films, magazines, TV shows, music. So we need to be aware of it and not just let it affect us unawares, and we need to offer a Christian response
3. We say that the bible stresses human sinfulness resulting from the Fall. Looking at me is a form of selfish rebellion against God.

But the issue of self-esteem is one which Christians need to take seriously and examine biblically:

1. God made us. I am fearfully and wonderfully made. I ought to know myself and marvel at God's handiwork.
2. Jesus died for us. So God must care about us and we ought to care about ourselves as well – certainly care enough to respond to God's offer of salvation in Christ.
3. So many Christians have chronically low self-esteem and it affects their ability to live fruitful lives for God and robs them of the sheer joy of knowing God through Jesus in the power of His Spirit. So, you could say that low self-esteem is a satanic strategy to weaken the church.

## What is self-esteem?

Here's one helpful definition:

“Self Esteem is how I view myself, my capabilities and my worth. It's something we tend to most strongly discern by the way other people react to us, especially people we consider important, or whose approval we value highly.”

Often Christians seek the basis of their self-esteem in the world not in God. We look to work, success, status, beauty, wealth, the approval of others. We measure our personal worth according to other people: what do they think of me? how am I doing compared with them? This is in keeping with much of what pop psychology tells us as it invades our lives through the media.

The Bible, however, tells us that our security as individuals, our self-esteem should be rooted in the cross and in what Christ achieved for us there as we find clearly reflected in Paul's letter to the Philippians..

### Paul's self-esteem

Paul's letter to the Philippians has a great deal to teach us about healthy self-esteem: what it's based on and how it's maintained. Paul tells us three things about his self-esteem that ought to feed ours:

#### 1) Focused on Christ: 1:21; 2:5-11; 3:7-10

Christ was the centre of Paul's life, the source of his right standing with God, the one through whom the love of God has come flooding into his life and thus the basis of his self esteem. Christian authors Joanna and Alister McGrath say that Self-esteem is generated in us by four things: pedigree, love of another, the performance of meaningful roles and a feeling of significance. All those things Paul finds in Christ.

1. Pedigree: He was high-born and well connected, but Paul laid all that aside for the greater joy and honour of being God's servant (1:1). Elsewhere he speaks of Christians being children of God (Rom 8:15-17) and descendants by faith of Abraham (Rom 4)
2. Love of another: Gal 2:20; Rom 5:5: Paul is secure in the love of God expressed in Jesus, something he knows in his head and feels in his heart
3. The performance of meaningful roles. Secular psychologists tells us that this creates our self-esteem by winning the love of others. The New Testament reverses the picture: it is because we are loved that we can perform a meaningful role within the Kingdom of God. So Paul speaks of his ministry in Philippians 1:12-14; see also Colossians 1:23
4. Feelings of significance. Despite being in prison, Paul feels good about himself: 1:20; he has nothing to be ashamed of; 4:10; he is rejoicing in fellowship with others.

## **2) Facing the future 3:4-16**

Psychologists tell us that poor self-esteem nearly always has its roots in the past – childhood traumas, unresolved adolescent difficulties and the like. In order to feel good about ourselves we need to deal with the past. This has spilled over into the church in the form of ‘healing of the memories’ or ‘inner healing’.

Paul would agree that the past is a problem. But he went, not into therapy, but to the foot of the cross where he ditched his past – good as well as bad – and went off into the rest of his life free of it, following Christ. His faith always looked forwards not backwards. Paul’s self-esteem had been rooted in his birth and breeding, social status, his role in Jerusalem society, his fame, even notoriety among his peer group. He was a driven man, ambitious, possibly seeking affirmation in that, persecuting the church for the good effect it had on his self-esteem – no doubt fuelled by his upbringing and background.

That was all ditched at the cross. Suddenly Paul wanted to know Jesus, for in him and only in him, lay the satisfaction and ability to feel good about himself that he’d always sought. In Christ and the future Christ had called him to, Paul found the only way to negate the false beliefs about his self-esteem and root his feelings about himself in a secure place. In Christ, Paul found a way out of the four traps that McGee identifies as holding Christians back:

1. The performance trap: once it had been the Law and persecuting the church that made him feel he amounted to something. Now his right relationship with God came through Christ, what he had done, not anything Paul could do. He was free. He could relax in that relationship and press on with Jesus into whatever the future held for him.
2. Approval addict: God accepted him through his faith in Jesus. He was reconciled to God and any who shared his faith. He no longer sought human approval (Gal 1:10) or feared their rejection. He served God with whatever consequences that brought.
3. The blame game: Jesus has taken his punishment, so even in prison he can rejoice that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.
4. Shame: He was not trapped in past patterns of behaviour. The selfish pharisee who persecuted the church was becoming a suffering servant, one who followed a messiah who walked the way of the cross (2:5). He was confident in his God that he would suffer no shame: 1:20; 3:20-21. Paul was open to the grace to God and thus he could be content: 4:10-14

## **3) Fighting for freedom**

In 3:12 Paul makes it clear that he hasn’t attained everything yet. There is always the need for struggle and pressing on in laying hold of all God has for us – it was for freedom that you were set free. There are two things to note here:

- ✓ This is a spiritual battle – our enemy wants us in chains – and therefore we need to draw on God’s resources of prayer, the Bible and Christian community.

- ✓ It's an uncomfortable battle – facing up to the truth about ourselves can be painful. But it is a battle we can win through faith in Jesus

#### **4) Fed by fellowship 1:3-11; 2:1-4**

A self-esteem rooted in the cross recognises that we need other people. On the cross Jesus died to redeem individuals *and* to create a new humanity of those coming together in love at the foot of his cross regardless of race, background, age, sex or class. We need affirming relationships with others. That's why we need to be in the church, where in an atmosphere of Christian love and acceptance we can affirm and strengthen one another in our mutual faith. Paul valued the love of others, their support and prayers – that's why he wanted Euodia and Syntyche to quit fighting! And Paul always spoke well of other Christians – even those he had to do some sharp talking to (1 Corinthians 1:1-9)

2:1-4 backed up by the appeal to Christ's example in 5-11 is crucial here. And the key is humility. There are two aspects to humility that Paul wants to emphasise:

1. Thinking about me: I need to be realistic about myself, know myself (Romans 12:3). I need to be aware that sometimes I will be working out of conceit and vain ambition – even when I'm doing Christian work! I need to be seeking God's help with that. But often I will not be acting out of such motives and I need to be aware of that too: God is working in me, giving me desires and the strength to carry them out (2:12-13).
2. Thinking about others. Humility is not about lowering my valuation of myself (like Uriah Heap) but about raising my valuation of others. Humility tells me everything I have comes from God. It also helps me to rejoice in all that God has given others, recognising that God gifts his church to be the affirming community I need to live fruitfully for Jesus in this world.

So we need to recognise that we don't do this alone – read 3:17: we follow the example of others who have done it and are doing it alongside us.