

How do you esteem?

Self-esteem is one of the buzzwords of our modern world. We're told to pursue high self-esteem; there's a perceived problem if we have self-esteem that is too low. In our culture, the goodness of self-esteem - feeling good about yourself - is often viewed as an incontrovertible truth. But what does Scripture say about esteem?

Not too high

There are clear warnings about thinking of ourselves too highly (Romans 12:3). There are dangers in thinking of ourselves as more gifted, more influential, or more powerful than we really are. There is ugliness in being "puffed up" whether that is through knowledge devoid of love (1 Corinthians 8:1) or simple arrogance over trivial matters (1 Timothy 6:4). Most of us recognise someone with an over-inflated sense of self and instinctively want to steer clear. Most of us see the beauty of humility – there's something wonderful about those who put others first - and to be faithful means pursuing the kind of humility that Jesus himself knew (Philippians 2:5-11).

Not too low

However, the antidote to thinking too highly of ourselves is not self-loathing. In Romans 12, we see the biblical call is to have "sober judgement" - to see ourselves as God has truly made us to be. Exploring our identity should never leave us despondent. After all, God has made us to be "in his image" (Genesis 1:27) and, after salvation, has given us a precious new start "in Christ" (Ephesians 1:4). Our in-Christness brings a plethora of blessings, every spiritual blessing in Christ in fact (Ephesians 1:3) - blessings that include being adopted, redeemed, set apart to be holy, gifted and loved, so unendingly loved. There is incredible dignity and delight in being human.

Not mainly about us

But whilst there are many encouragements about being in Christ, when the Bible talks about esteeming, it is not usually speaking about our view of ourselves. Scripture speaks far more about esteeming God – Jesus is the truly precious one (1 Peter 2:4); we are called to esteem the Lord's name not our own (Malachi 3:16).

Scripture also speaks of esteeming others. Sometimes we esteem those saints whose passion for the Lord may bowl us over (Romans 16:7). But the main command to give special honour to others comes in the context of honouring the weak (1 Corinthians 12:23) - we esteem those who know their need of the Lord deeply and are left with no option but to depend on him. Esteem is not meant to be focused on us.

Not the path to peace

One of culture's theses is that high self-esteem will lead to peace. To see ourselves as more lovely, more worthy, is bound to bring about a greater sense of contentment and joy – right? Wrong! More often all that it does is produce a competitive spirit within us. It doesn't matter how many mantras we say each morning, affirming our self-worth, focusing on self is never going to be the path to finding life and life in all its fullness, that's the kind of life that only Jesus can give (John 10:10). To truly flourish, we need not to focus on seeing ourselves as higher but on seeing him as highest. It is as we fix our eyes on the author and perfecter of our faith (Hebrews 12:2) - it is as we stand in awe of our creator and King – that we find true contentment, fulfilment and peace.

A better word – a better way

So, rather than pursuing self-esteem, as Christians, we might find it appropriately reorientating to pursue a passion for God-esteem and self-forgetfulness. It is as we acknowledge him as the biggest, best and most beautiful one that we worship him rightly, and locate ourselves rightly in his world. And, as we see ourselves in the light of his generous grace, we discover that the gift he has given us – of being in his image, in his righteousness, in his covenant love – is far more precious and encouraging than any dose of self-defined self-esteem will ever be.