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HUMILITY: THE DEVALUED JEWEL OF THE HUMAN PSYCHE?

By

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Humility is the Cinderella of the Christian graces, banished into obscurity, yet a true jewel of the faith. It is the fertile soil from which the other graces bloom beautifully. Yet it is rarely identified as a desirable human attribute in our times. It is not recognised in psychological assessments of personality. The high value society places on self-sufficiency, perhaps influenced by five decades of humanistic psychology, and more recently self-esteem psychology, may have led to humility being misunderstood as inferiority.

Furthermore, inner drives may have worked from deep within the human psyche to hinder the expression of humility. At best, drives for autonomy, freedom, self-advancement and self-prominence have fired the human trail to emancipation. At worst, in our fallen human state, they have led us into a false psychological liberation in which we seek independence from our Creator, relationship with whom and worship of whom ought to be our *raison d'être*. Since humility is a state of being unpretentious and realistic in relation to God and others about our significance, we are at risk of losing it. For much of our society is subtly engaged in replacing the worship of the Creator with the worship of His creation, man, and in finding significance in self, outside of Him. The purpose of this paper is to heighten our awareness, as Christians and counsellors, of the insidious erosion of humility as a core aspect of spiritual formation, an erosion which impacts us, our clientele and our societies today.

The apostle Paul's counsel about realistic self-appraisal is foundational to Christian

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discipleship.

For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgement ...(Rom. 12:3 NIV)

His warning against self-importance is sobering.

If anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself... Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked ... The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction. (Gal. 6:3, 7-8 NIV)

Self-centred teaching, and the euphoria it has caused, has been viewed as dangerous to the church. Although somewhat exaggerated, the point has been made that

... the real enemy in the church...is the self-esteem, positive confession, and positive self-image teaching. These teachings seduce the people of God into focusing their attention upon enlarging themselves, feeling good about themselves, and even in some situations, desiring to be like God. (Metz 1990, 81)

In part, the issue before us is the current focus on self as a contributor to the narcissism of our day, and its impact on humility.

Self and the benefits of Christian humility

What does humility mean? It is not self-denigration or humiliation. Though its full implications are difficult to explain, it involves:

recognizing who we are as created by God. It is being content with who we are, acknowledging that we are God's children, who have worth and are loved even though we have gone astray. Humility is accepting our strengths as well as our weaknesses. (Carlson 1988, 26)

It involves self-examination without self-absorption. It is willingness to look honestly at the good and evil in our make-up and to submit to others. And of what value is it to us? Humility is an

important part of understanding redemption. ... The posture of redemption is one of humility. Like stopping at a service station for directions, we must fall on our face before God and admit we are lost. (McMinn 1996, 251)

Andrew Murray (1980, 14) described humility as “the secret, hidden root of thy redemption” He emphasized it as the most important of all virtues:

Humility is the only soil in which the graces root; the lack of humility is the sufficient explanation of every defect and failure. Humility is not so much a grace or virtue along with others; it is the root of all, because it alone takes the right attitude before God, and allows Him as God to do all. (Murray 1980, 14; emphasis mine)

Submissiveness to the indwelling Holy Spirit produces a cluster of virtues or “fruit” which please God. Humility is at the core of these.

Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, *humility*, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another...And over all these virtues put on love. (Col. 3:12-14 NIV; emphasis mine).

C.S. Lewis gave this refreshingly perceptive insight on how humility brings benefit:

We must not think ... humility is something He demands as due to His own dignity – as if God Himself was proud. If you really get into any kind of touch with Him you will, in fact, be humble – delightedly humble, feeling the infinite relief of having for once got rid of all the silly nonsense about your own dignity which has made you restless and unhappy all your life. He is trying to make you humble in order to make this moment possible. (Lewis 1952, 113-114)

King Nebuchadnezzar, important as he truly was, held too high a view of himself. To correct self-exaltation, he was subjected to a humbling experience from which he came to a fuller appreciation of God as the truly Supreme One and of himself as he was before Him (Daniel 4).

What is the puzzling concept of the “self”? The Bible does not define it. This description of the current focus on self and how the self is now viewed is pertinent.

There seems to have been a slow, steady, and now massive return to the self, which is present in almost every tradition. This is perhaps most evident in third-force psychologies: humanistic psychology, existential psychology, and phenomenology. In these movements *the person is clearly seen as a self-conscious, responsible being who not only is driven by urges but also is*

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moved by meanings and values. (Benner and Hill 1999, 1068; emphasis mine)

The Biblical terms “heart” and “flesh” may be similar to what psychologists refer to as the self¹. Prior to the Fall, man’s sense of human self-hood would have been intact. With the fracturing of the human psyche at the Fall, man’s sense of self became tainted by the introjection of sin into the various dimensions of his personality. This has resulted not only in behaviours that are overtly sinful but attitudes that are covertly so, for example, lack of humility. The struggle faced by the Lord Jesus Christ in the garden of Gethsemane is a case in point. Had He declined to do the will of the Father, He would have made, from a human viewpoint, a legitimate choice i.e. self-preservation. This would not normally be considered sinful. Yet He would have been guilty of lack of humble submission, or disobedience to the will of the Father. This would have been sinful.

Humility involves aspects of personhood, viz. attitudes, thoughts, will and behaviour. For Christians, its development requires an attitude of submission, deliberate choices of the will, and conscious acts of human responsibility towards man and God. There is a clear command to believers to cultivate humility:

Young men in the same way, be submissive to those who are older. All of you, *clothe yourselves with humility toward one another*, because, God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand, that He may lift you up in due time. (1 Pet 5:5-6 NIV; emphasis mine)

The favour of God is the high reward promised for obeying this command. The humble are also promised God’s direction:

He guides the humble in what is right and teaches them his way. (Ps. 25:9 NIV)

Humility before and after the Fall

After God’s creative work was complete, “God saw all that He had made and it was very good.” (Gen. 1:31, NIV). Unfallen man had God’s

¹ Various concepts of the self have been reviewed by Benner and Hill, pages 1066-1071.

complete approval. Adam and Eve stood before Him perfect physically, perfect psychologically and perfect in purity. In such a state, they were able to enjoy rich person-to-person fellowship with their Creator. This implies that at creation they would have been endowed with a psychological make-up completely conducive to living in complete dependence on, and right relationship with, God. Humility would logically have been at the core of that make-up, the essence of man's unfallen humanness before his majestic Creator. It follows then that humility was the very core quality pinpointed and targeted by Satan in his attack: "You will be like God" (Gen. 3:4b, NIV). This poisoned arrow was thrown at both man's psychological wholeness and spiritual purity. By the same token it follows that humility would need to be an essential part of man's route back to a restored relationship with God. Since God is all truth, pride – an untrue, unrealistic, evaluation of one's significance – is a distortion of God's image in man. To act in pride was both to desecrate the image of God in man and to devalue the essence of the psychological make-up bestowed by God to enable man to live in right relationship with Him and others.

Pride, humility's antagonist and the cause of Satan's downfall, was used by him to bring about the fall of man in the garden of Eden. The effects have been profound. For there in an arrogant, self-assertive drive for autonomy from God, man committed his first act of rebellion. Eve, and then Adam, struck at the heart of the submission required of them by a benevolent God who had bountifully met their needs. Not only had He given them unalloyed joy in proverbial paradise, supremacy and lordship over all the world around, social and sexual fulfilment, and meaningful occupation, but He had provided abundantly for their material needs. Yet in their drive to be equal with God they broke the sole restriction God had placed on them. When man's pristine purity was lost, the image of God in man was defaced. However, the image of a person is not the person himself, in the same way that a child of a father is not the father himself. So in imposing judgement God did not dishonour Himself. In applying the consequences of rebellion that He had previously indicated would follow, God referred not to the divine nature in man but to man's humble cosmic origins:

...until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return. (Gen 3:19b NIV)

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Was God pointing man back to a posture of humility? Since life was God's original design for the human race this was catastrophic indeed!

The core of man's personality became evil when he failed to act in humility.

The first sin was ... the choosing of self-interests rather than God's interests, the preferring of self to God, the making of self the chief end rather than God. ... depravity has infected the whole man - mind, emotions and will. (Theissen 1979, 181; 192)

Attitudes and acts of rebellion against authority are among the major problems being addressed by psychologists today. Man's fellowship with a God who had bowed low to seek his companionship was also broken. The sense of alienation from one's centre, of inner dislocation, that is expressed in counselling rooms today may have origins in that broken relationship. Pastoral counsellors may have a more realistic grasp of the true nature of man than their humanist counterparts.

Humility, human dignity and the image of God

Man (as a species) is unique in that he is the pinnacle of God's creation and God found both companionship and pleasure in him. Some of the dignity he enjoyed when he stood in perfection before God was lost at the Fall. However, he retains elements of that dignity because of the image of God, and the sanctity of God's in-breathed life, in him. Redemption through Christ further affirms man's dignity and the value God places on the human person. Remnants of God's image wonderfully still remain and have shone brightly throughout history.

It is in the context of a very high view of God that man takes this dignity. Psalm 8:2-8, often quoted to extol man's dignity, is actually set in a hymn of praise to God's majesty and glory. It opens and closes with an emphatic repetition of "O Lord, our Lord, how excellent is Your name in all the earth" (Psalm 8:1, 9, NIV). This exalted God is the One whose image man bears, and the One who has crowned man with "glory and honour." One commentary explains that the Psalmist was impressed with

the astonishing condescension of God to be mindful of puny man, to crown him with glory almost godlike and to grant him lordly power over His creation. (NIV Study Bible)

Man has been doubly crowned by the Lord who, in His abundant provision for forgiveness, restoration and renewal, has also crowned him with "loving kindness and tender mercies." (Psalm 103:2-5). Despite man's "puniness", there is no doubt that man has worth and dignity.

Is there a conflict between humility and man's need for dignity? Humility is one of the outstanding characteristics of the second Person of the Godhead. The scriptures consistently present His humility as a positive attribute. God lost perfect pleasure in man when man's pride brought about the Fall. By contrast, God found exceptional pleasure in the extreme humility of the Lord Jesus Christ who "being in very nature God...humbled Himself" (Phil. 2:6-8). His dignity was expressed in His humility. The suffering Son is an eternal image of both humility and dignity. Humility recaptures what was lost at the Fall. Could these be the reason why God delights in and confers dignity on the humble, i.e. "crowns the humble with salvation" (Psalm 149:4), but "detests all the proud of heart" (Prov. 16:5)?

Self-esteem, pride and humility

Self-esteem development requires one to make value judgements about the self. Of the valuable definitions of self-esteem that exist, the following has been selected because it blends both cognitive and emotional aspects, with emphasis on the cognitive:

Self-esteem consists of a global evaluation or judgement about personal acceptability and worthiness to be loved, which carries with it pleasant or unpleasant feelings. It is strongly related to the perceived views of the person by important others in his life. (McGrath and McGrath 1992,29).

"Self-worth" and "self-regard" are practically the same as self-esteem (while "self-concept" and self-awareness" refer to the non-evaluative process from which self-esteem develops). The life of the Lord Jesus shows that a positive self-esteem is compatible with humility. His secure self-esteem seemed rooted in His oneness with, and pleasure He brought, His Father (John 10:30,38; Matt. 3:17). One is more likely to cultivate an attitude of humility when one has a secure and realistic view of self. The difficulty seems to lie, not in one having a positive self-esteem *per se*, but in placing an undue emphasis on self-esteem which may distort one's view of self in relation to God and others.

Further, from a Biblical perspective, the Christian's focus ought not to be primarily inward i.e. on developing healthy self-esteem, but outward i.e. developing healthy love for God and for one's neighbour. Jesus did not specifically command or emphasize self-love. As fallen human beings our self-love would have been tainted by the Fall. He seemed to have acknowledged it as simply a part of what it means to be human. In support of this is the fact that self-love has served as a useful reference point or standard with which love for others could be compared. For example, husbands are exhorted to care for their wives as themselves "for no one ever hated his own flesh but nourishes and cherishes it" (Eph. 5:28-29 NKJV). Here self-love was taken for granted, not commanded. The Lord Jesus pointed to a focus outside of self-love. First in His order of priority was a strong and vibrant love for God. Second in importance was love for one's neighbour, using self-love as a measuring stick by which to evaluate that love. (Matt. 22:37-39, Mark 12:29-31, Luke 10:27). The "new" commandment added to these was "love one another as I have loved you" i.e. sacrificially (John 13:34). What is the source of our love? God's love, "poured out ...into our hearts by the Holy Spirit" (Rom. 5:5 NIV). This generates, in the surrendered believer, a healthy love for one's neighbour and fellow believers, balanced with a healthy self-love. When love for God takes first place all other loves fall in their rightful place. Such love has roots in an attitude of humility towards God and others.

The current impact of humanism, now popular in our pulpits, churches and counselling rooms, may be to emphasize the majesty of man at the expense of the glory of God, to minimize the difference between God and man, and to trivialize the redemptive work of the Lord Jesus Christ. Biblical humanism, which arose as a variant of secular humanism, perhaps portrays an unbalanced perspective of man. It is

based upon the revelation of the image of God in man...and makes much of the Incarnation of the eternal Son of God.. (Allen 1984, 93)

The absolute difference between these two views of pride and humility reveal the impact of the newer self-esteem psychologies. The first points to lack of humility as a serious problem.

Pride is ever the cause of the trouble, and there is nothing that so hurts the natural man's pride as the cross of Christ. How does the cross do this? What has happened that there should ever have been a cross? It is because we are failures, because we are sinners, because we are lost. The Christian is not a

good man. He is a vile wretch wh has been saved by the grace of God (Lloyd-Jones 1986, 49-50).

By contrast, this second view dismisses the need for one to "clothe" oneself with humility in the belief that the cross will "sanctify" one's "ego trip."

Do not fear pride; the easiest job God has is to humble us ... Don't worry about humility. The easiest job God has to do is to keep you and me humble. God's biggest job is to get us to believe that *we are* somebody and that we really can *do* something.. Remember, if your pride is rooted in your divine call, your humility is assured. The Cross will sanctify your ego trip. (Schuller 1982, 57 and 74).

In the cross of Jesus Christ we may find both a true judgement of self and relief from negative aspects of self. The "twin concepts" of creation and redemption provide a rich foundation from which to build self-esteem in Christ:

Rightly understood the Christian concepts of creation and redemption provide a sufficient ground and an adequate anchorage for the formation of a positive self-concept. (Noelliste 1997, 54)

Since self-esteem is based largely on the views of "important others", God's approval ought to be central to the Christian's self-esteem. It follows that self-esteem may further develop as the believer submits himself -thoughts, feelings, choices, attitudes, behaviours and lifestyle - to pleasing God. Humility before God is essential for this. Above all, to please God the believer submits himself to learn to love God supremely, others as himself, and fellow believers sacrificially, as the Lord Jesus loved. To do so humility towards men is required. In these ways the believer moves closer to recapturing the original image of God in man. In Christ, self-esteem is based not merely on self-love but on pleasing God with the Lord Jesus as the model.

Mephibosheth offers a picture of hope for those who live with self-depreciation and low self-esteem. Physically disabled, and woefully describing himself as a "dead dog" (one of the most deprecatory terms in his culture), his self-esteem could have only increased by King David's gracious life-long invitation to sit in his company at his table (2 Sam.9). If David is representative of the Lord Jesus, Mephibosheth is a model of how one may begin to build positive self-esteem on the redeeming work of

Jesus Christ (Rom. 5:17-21). The contributions made by Noelliste (1997) and Whittle (2002) towards moving the Caribbean psyche from a false inferiority based on a hierarchy of colour, race and social class to a true identity rooted in the original Creation and the "new creation" (II Cor.5:17) are a valuable step forward. It would be healthy for humility to be part of the matrix of such a Christian identity.

From a humble position at the foot of the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ, one can grasp that self-esteem and significance come from being loved and being sought in one's "lostness" by the Saviour, from being valued despite one's sinfulness, from being purchased with the highest price possible – His blood, from becoming His bride, a temple of the living God, from living as branches in moment-by-moment connectedness to the divine vine, from finding our uniqueness in the niche He has specifically cut out for us in His Body, from becoming His chosen agents to reach our generation, by having Him renew in us the *imago Dei* and ultimately the *imago Christi*. For the building up of the self, the way up is down, – down at the foot of the cross in humility.

Possible impact of Caribbean history on attitudes to servanthood, and of culture on behaviour

Caribbean history has contributed to a low value being placed by our peoples on humility and servanthood. The concept of servanthood touches a sensitive nerve with us. It is perceived as demeaning. For in the pre-emancipation era dominated by the plantocracy, workers were commonly treated harshly, without dignity and respect. Physically stronger or less favoured slaves did heavy manual labour in the fields while the more favoured worked in plantation houses at the mercy of their owners, all unpaid. Jamaican history is marked by uprisings against the oppression and injustices of slavery. National honours have been bestowed on some who blazed the trail to freedom. Understandably then, rumblings of discontent with the notion of servanthood continue today. In Jamaican households, for example, persons are called "helpers" rather than "servants" in recognition of this. It has been noted that some Caribbean "blacks, especially, still struggle with self-hate and self-depreciation" (Whittle 2002, 4), related to the perpetuation of plantation issues of colour, social and financial status.

Against this background the Caribbean psyche may well recoil from any situation that is reminiscent of slavery, resembles servitude or requires

submission to another. Humility may be misconstrued as humiliation or may be seen as synonymous with it. Similarly submission may be viewed as weakness. The Apostle Paul's statement "So then, men ought to regard us as servants" (I Cor. 4:1a NIV), may not find favour with some today. Difficult to emulate in any culture – and perhaps more so ours – is the servant-style leadership shown by the Lord Jesus Christ who asserted that He "did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many" (Matt. 20:28 NIV). He demonstrated this spirit practically by washing His disciples' feet! Without the humility to follow this pattern, Christian leadership will fall short, and Christian maturity suffer. Servanthood belongs to the very heart of the Christian faith, and humility is essential to it.

Thorne (1984) has recognized that North American culture "stifles the growth of character traits such as sympathy, kindness, gentleness and tenderness." This may also be said of Caribbean culture in which it would seem that aggressiveness, arrogance, "brashness" and toughness are valued above the gentle traits. Our rather harsh child-rearing practices and the bombardment of our minds with violence from the local and North American media may have contributed to this. There is no evidence that we are progressively developing more noble characteristics. Over the past two decades, statistics show that problems related to attitudes, behaviours and lack of concern for others have increasingly displaced somatic (or physically caused illnesses) as leading causes of morbidity and mortality in the English-speaking Caribbean (Pan-American Health Organisation 1997). Examples of these are homicide – an expression of violence, motor vehicle accidents – often related to aggression and impatience, suicide – anger turned in on the self and lack of support from others, sexually transmitted diseases including HIV/AIDS – self-satisfaction without concern for others, and substance abuse – misuse of self and others. Child abuse (sexual followed by physical), representing adult aggression towards children, is one of the most frequently made diagnoses at child mental health facilities in Jamaica. (Ministry of Health, Jamaica 2002). Child abuse is also reported as rampant in other Caribbean countries.

These trends would suggest that negative traits are increasingly becoming ingrained in our psyche. The widely upheld principle of "might is right" directly contradicts the laws of Christ. It fuels violence in our communities as members, in their drive to assert self, become more unwilling to yield to others and less willing to seek peaceful solutions. There is a need for a resurgence of the kinder style of Caribbean

community life of past decades in which care for one's neighbour was a part. If the "gentle" traits, of which humility is a hallmark, are valued and cultivated in our societies our people would be better served.

**Implications of modern psychology for humility in the therapist,
the client and the society**

Two psychological theories which relate to the lack of development of humility will be mentioned. These have been selected because of their pervasive effect on other theories and psychotherapies. First in chronological order is the Adlerian school.

It is commonly noted that Alder has influenced the thought of the ego psychologies, rational-emotive therapy, family therapy and many other systems (Jones and Butman 1991, 227).

For Adler (1870-1937), the driving force of human personality is the drive for superiority or power. Through this drive for superiority or power, man seeks to attain a secure position, one from which he cannot be threatened.

The striving for superiority i.e. from minus to plus, never ceases. In fact it is the essence of our psyche (Adler 1929, 79).

He held that "to live is to feel inferior." From this the drive to feel significant develops. His views may well be part of man's *status quo*. If this is so, the drive for supremacy would oppose the desire for and development of humility. Man's fall in the garden of Eden would support this.

The second psychological theory to be considered is humanistic psychology, which sprang from secular humanism. Humanists regard man (not God) as supreme because, in evolutionary theory, he has ascended to the pinnacle of development. In keeping with its roots, the key emphasis of humanistic psychology is on the value of man. In the Rogerian approach, one of the therapist's major tasks is to create a therapeutic atmosphere which enriches the client's self-esteem. This he achieves by affirming the client with "unconditional positive regard." He also allows the client to direct the course of therapy while "taking a back seat." Rogers (1902-1987), for a time a theological seminary student, recommended that the therapist demonstrate attitudes supportive of these goals. These attitudes have since been integrated into most forms of modern therapy

and so merit mention. The first is genuineness or transparency through which the therapist shows himself to be a real person as opposed to hiding behind a "higher-than-thou" professional facade.

A second is empathetic understanding in which the therapist enters the client's inner world with sensitivity to thoughts and feelings, some of which may lie just below the client's level of awareness. The third is unconditional acceptance in which he communicates a non-threatening level of care. To these Thorne (1984) added tenderness as shown in gentleness and kindness. All of these are also core characteristics of the Christian and Christian therapist. The problem lies not in the values, which are positives in themselves, but in the worldview that underlies them. Ironically these very attitudes have been undermined by the belief system which recommends them. Could Christians who embrace the attractive tenets of humanistic psychology without careful examination of its worldview (especially its view of God and its view of man) be taking into their very midst a Trojan horse which could strike a fatal blow to the very heart of their Christian faith or that of a Christian society? The Great Commandments are generally held as part of the heart of this faith.

The most important one ... is this: ... love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this: love your neighbour as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these. (Mark 12:29-31 NIV).

The following scenarios illustrate the dangers. It is clear that if man is at the centre of the universe and his own world, then he can in no way whole-heartedly love God as the first commandment directs. In such a belief system, self-love must take priority over the love of God. Here is idolatry with self as the idol! This is the first strike from the Trojan horse. If we have led others to love themselves supremely then we have led them to disobey the first commandment: "you shall have no other gods before Me" (Ex. 20:3 NIV). The second strike from the Trojan horse comes when we believe we, or lead clients to believe they, should take priority over others. The scenario is this – my neighbour's interests and mine clash. If I am my number one priority, my needs and interests will take precedence over those of my neighbour's. When this happens I no longer "love my neighbour as myself." I have then broken – or led my client to break – the second commandment. My neighbour is devalued. I have not acted in humility towards him, in "honour preferring him." The system then has backfired in that it has worked against its very aim of protecting human

worth and dignity. If however, I were to act from a worldview with Christian underpinnings, the risk of devaluing my neighbour would be minimized.

A third strike can come from the Trojan horse based on belief in my human right to achieve my full potential, to "self-actualize" – outside of God. In the name of freedom, self-development and self-expression I can claim the right to do whatever I please whenever I want. I have become "a law unto myself," and am no longer submissive to God or man. This may precipitate for me, as well as for clients, social and family difficulties as I may end up in conflict with family, society or the law. Has this contributed to the decadence of modern society? And has this "me first" attitude played a part in the deterioration of family life? It would seem so.

Humility, self-denial and Christian discipleship

Self-denial has always been unpopular. It may be more so in a world preoccupied as it is with self. For the Christian, then, a tension exists between the call of the Lord Jesus to self-denial and the call of the flesh for self-fulfilment. Since the entire life and work of the Lord Jesus Christ modelled self-denial and humility, self-denial must not be seen as self-degradation or self-rejection. It is explained as

putting service to God first and giving up having self-needs as our highest priority. Jesus declared this to be his life purpose (John 4:34). (Benner and Hill 1999, 1079)

Self-denial is also described as being

willing to put off my sinful, selfish, desires and behaviour. It does not mean that I am going to put myself down or psychologically annihilate myself. (Carlson 1988, 27)

Another view usefully explains how far self-denial could go.

Self-denial consists of the voluntary renunciation of everything which is inconsistent with the glory of God and the highest good of our fellowmen ... Self-denial is diametrically opposite to supreme selfishness. Selfishness is making a man's self his own centre, the beginning and end of all he does ... How far must a man deny himself for the good of others and the glory of God? I answer just as far as the good of others and the glory of God require him to deny himself. So long as this is the criterion it is impossible that self-denial can be carried too far. (Spring n.d., 40, 43-44)

Indeed there will be times when non-sinful desires may have to be set aside for the good of others. To do this may be a humanistic self-denial. Biblical self-denial goes deeper. It is the death of self by identification in the death of the Lord Jesus Christ on the cross. This is not personal nihilism but a voluntary yielding of self to be "crucified with Christ: it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me" (Gal. 2:20 NKJV). It means a voluntary setting aside of one's personal will and desires to do those of another – of God.

Self-denial springs from the love for God and for one's neighbour, instilled in the believer by the Holy Spirit. In true love for neighbours, one seeks the best for others by denying oneself of pleasures or benefits one might otherwise enjoy. The choice for self-denial is one deliberately made by the believer who seeks to be humble and obedient to God, and so walk in the steps of the Saviour. In doing so the believer is controlled by the Holy Spirit, not by any type of psychological dysfunction which may cause him to be manipulated, misused or abused by others for their own selfish ends. The believer, who "in humility consider(s) others better than" himself (Phil. 2:3 NIV), or "esteem(s) others better than himself" (Phil. 2:3 NKJV), does not take advantage of others for his own self-aggrandizement, nor does he allow others to abuse him for their own self-aggrandizement in a pathological manner. For he recognizes that from pathological weakness, spiritual and emotional destruction could come to them, and others. On a different level, however, the believer who is "persecuted", "reviled" or insulted "for righteousness' sake" accepts it humbly in self-denial, praying for and forgiving the aggressors (Matt. 5:10-12). He recognizes the spiritual and emotional harm that would come to him if he fails to do so. He also knows that no sacrifice is too great for the sake of the Kingdom of God. To the secular mind such self-denial may seem irrational, even dysfunctional. It clashes strongly with the mindset of a worldly culture which uplifts the self. For the Christian, whose priority is love for God and one's neighbour, this is humble discipleship.

In this context some modern self-esteem psychologies, have dealt a blow to Christian discipleship and servanthood by teaching that self-fulfilment comes through giving priority to self-interests. The words of the Lord Jesus Christ radically challenge this:

If anyone would come after Me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for Me will find it. (Matt. 16:24-25 NIV)

The cross of the Saviour poses a challenge to the human ego.

In stark contrast to the narcissism of our age stands another movement. Its symbol is a cross. Visualized to generations of children as a huge I with a line through it, the cross stands for the ego demanding its own fulfilment crossed out. (Moore 1989, 92)

Letting go of the “selfist self” and of its will is described as

no easy task ... it is precisely for this reason that the New Testament is characterized by motives and metaphors that are directly antithetical to the psychology of the independent, rebellious, autonomous, self-created self. (Vitz 1994, 160)

One of the paradoxes of Christian discipleship is that we lose our lives in order to gain them. The path must be through surrender of our autonomy in voluntary submission. “Not as I will, but as You will”(Matt. 26: 39 NIV) is the posture which man failed to keep in the Garden of Eden. Yet it is the one that brings God-given fulfilment. How can this become ours experientially? All the freedoms we hold so dear are tainted - the freedom to choose, to will, to think, to feel. They are therefore to be humbly submitted to Him as an act of the will, to be made pure, freed from self. The image of God is more likely to be restored in us when our wills, intellects and emotions are yielded to Him. This surrendering needs to be deliberate and ongoing. Therefore, Christians must resist those cultural currents around us which would push us away from submission to God.

The charge to “honour one another above yourselves” (Rom. 12:10 NIV) promotes brotherly love and unity. Loving others as ourselves also helps to lighten the otherwise hard task of giving preferential treatment to others and, in fact, brings joy. To do so is not optional, as selfist psychology may say. It is part of Christian discipleship.

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit... Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped but made Himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant... He humbled Himself and became obedient to death, even death on a cross. Therefore God exalted Him to the highest place and gave Him the Name that is above every name. (Phil 2:3-8 NIV)

The call to emulate His humility rings clear:

Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart. (Matt. 11:29 NIV).

The relationship between humility, self-denial and pleasing God is inescapable. The outcome brings blessing, for out of humility comes God-given triumph.

Self-appraisal and humility in Biblical leaders and pre-humanistic hymnology

One motif seen in both Old and New Testaments is: "He must increase but I must decrease" (John 3:30 NIV). Throughout history, men of God have graphically expressed their own insignificance and/or depravity before God when presented with glimpses of God in His glory. This seemed quite independent of their self-esteem. Isaiah's cry of insightful self-discovery on seeing God brought about a liberating purity which prepared him for service:

Woe to me I cried. I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips ... (Isa. 6:5)

There is no reason to believe that Abraham, Job, David, Isaiah, John the Baptist, Peter and Paul - among others - all suffered from low self-esteem. It would be more reasonable to believe that each showed a more realistic self-appraisal after contact with God.

Abraham the patriarch prayed "Indeed now, I who am but dust and ashes have taken it upon myself to speak to the Lord" (Gen. 18:27 NKJV). After "seeing" the Lord, Job recorded: "My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen You. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:5-6 NIV). David exclaimed: "You are enthroned as the Holy One; You are the praise of Israel ... But I am a worm and not a man" (Psalm 22:3, 6 NIV). John the Baptist pointed to the coming of "One more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie" (Mark 1:7 NIV). Struck by the realization that Jesus was God, Peter "fell down at Jesus' knees saying 'Depart from me for I am a sinful man, O Lord!'" (Luke 5:8 NIV). The apostle Paul, having had a life-changing encounter with the Lord on the Damascus road, wrote

that God so works with us that “no flesh should glory in His presence” (1 Cor.1:29 NIV).

The biblical reality is that man, though made in God’s image, eternally loved, and a recipient of His loving grace, is puny! Biblical language is unequivocal:

Who has understood the mind of the Lord, or instructed Him as his counsellor? Surely the nations are like a drop in a bucket; ... before Him all the nations are as nothing; they are regarded by Him as worthless and less than nothing. To whom, then, will you compare God? ... He sits enthroned above the circle of the earth, and its people are like grasshoppers. (Isa. 40:13-22 NIV)

After his humbling experience with God Nebuchadnezzar exclaimed:

His dominion is an eternal dominion ... all the peoples of the earth are regarded as nothing. (Dan 4:34-35)

Throughout church history believers have graphically expressed in hymns the reality of our fallen state. Today, influenced by self-esteem psychology, some hold that the language of hymnology is sometimes demeaning. However it may not be so much an issue of self-esteem as it is self-appraisal of the evil within in relation to the holiness of God. The word “worm,” used to refer to the self in this hymn by Isaac Watts (1674-1748), is no longer considered acceptable:

Alas! And did my Saviour bleed! And did my Sovereign die? Would He devote that sacred head for such a worm as I!

Yet King David, whose self-esteem seemed appropriate, applied this very word to himself in a Messianic psalm (Psalm 22:6)! Before God, he saw himself as unworthy – a “worm”, if you will – but nonetheless a recipient of divine favour. Reference to the self as a “wretch” in John Newton’s (1725-1807) once popular hymn: “Amazing Grace how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me,” is also considered damaging to self-esteem. Yet admission of one’s “wretchedness” is the very starting point from which self-esteem in Christ can be built. Could modern opinions be eroding the underpinnings of such a humility as is essential to the redemptive process? Perhaps our understanding of the extent of God’s grace is unwittingly being undermined.

Redeeming love and our sinfulness are both Biblical truths, aptly captured in awe-filled words of E.C. Clephane (1830-1869):

Upon the cross of Jesus, mine eye at times can see the very dying form of One who suffered there for me. And from my stricken heart with tears two wonders I confess – the wonders of redeeming love and my own worthlessness.

And of Charles Wesley (1707-1788):

Died He for me, who caused His pain? For me, who Him to death pursued?
Amazing love! How can it be that thou, my God, should'st die for me?

When believers today “survey the wondrous cross” do the words of Isaac Watts remain appropriate: “My richest gain I count but loss, and pour contempt on all my pride?” Could we be robbing God of His glory by not doing so?

Selfist psychology must not be permitted to erase from our minds the fact that we are “unworthy sinners” condemned under the law, yet not worthless, but loved enough to be saved by God’s redemptive grace. Grace would no longer be grace if we were to be worthy of it. Humility requires that we never consider ourselves worthy of the blood of Jesus or of His love! We are not worthy of “the least of His favour...Jesus left heaven to die in (our) place...what mercy, what love, and what grace!”² What then “does the Lord require of you but to do justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God?” (Mic 6:8 NKJV). Through God’s grace may the jewel of humility regain its lost value.

² From a song written by Beatrice Bush Bixler, 1949

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