



SELF-ESTEEM

VS.

JUSTIFICATION



S. Michael Durham



For years I struggled to see myself as an object of God's love. Before my conversion at 26, I mouthed the words "God loves me," but my heart was never persuaded no matter how many times I said it. There were many factors that contributed to my poor self-image, but that doesn't really matter now that I've learned the truth.

Those who struggle as I did are often told the answer is as simple as replacing the negative self-image with a positive one. But it isn't that easy. Trying to feel good about yourself doesn't solve the problem. Pumping more pride into a pride-filled vessel makes a big mess. Those who struggle with low self-esteem, poor self-image, and feelings of unworthiness are people who have real pride issues. Appealing to their pride will not help because they have too much pride already.

How is pride the problem? Several ways. Some sufferers of "low self-esteem" want people to feel sorry for them, to pity them, and pay attention to them. They like, the braggart, make the announcement, "Hey world, look at me." They are obsessed with themselves. They are always comparing themselves with others whom they desire to be like. They believe they deserve to be successful or liked as much as anyone else, but for some reason they're not. Usually, they believe the defect is in them and so they see themselves in a negative way. They think if they could improve or try harder or get a specific skill, then they would be appreciated.

In my case, I thought not even God could love me. In other words, I was special in my own estimation, not in the normal way of being conceited, but conceited nonetheless. No one was as unlovable as me. That is pride, and it was pride that barred my way to God. But what was odd was if you didn't treat me as I thought I deserved, I would be angry. There was something in me that thought, *surely one day I will get God to love me, and then people will know I'm somebody*. Even though I suffered from low esteem I wanted to be better than everyone else. That's why trying to make someone with low self-esteem feel better about himself is like pouring gasoline on the fire.

What made the difference in my case? The grace of God—literally! He made me to see how truly unworthy I really am in a way I had never seen it. And then He showed me what Jesus did for unworthy sinners. The light came on. I understood for the first time what grace really meant. It was no longer an acronym, *God's Riches At Christ's Expense*. It was more than "undeserved kindness." It was holy God loving an unholy sinner through His Son, Jesus Christ. Self-awareness seemed unconscious as the love of God was poured into my heart, wave after wave of love. All I could do was praise the Lord for His amazing love for me.

As wonderful as that experience was, the problem was not over. My issues with pride, self-image, and God's love did not cease. At the moment of faith the guilt of sin was forever removed. Sin's power was broken, defeated, and I died to it. But being dead to sin doesn't mean sin is dead. The Apostle Paul pled with Roman Christians, "Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts" (Romans 6:12). Sin was no longer my master but that didn't mean it didn't try to rule me. Paul continued, "And do not present your members as instruments of unrighteousness to sin, but present yourselves to God as being alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God" (Romans 6:13). Sin must still be confronted. Conversion is not perfection, at least not now. That's coming. Now is God's work conforming us into the image of His Son (Romans 8:29; Ephesians 2:10).

I had a new heart but an old head. My thought patterns had been shocked by grace but not altogether changed. From time to time I struggled with feeling God didn't love me as much as He did others. Usually it was when my performance wasn't what I thought God expected. I may have not witnessed for Christ as much as I believed I should, or didn't pray as much as I imagined God wanted. Other times this feeling would occur when my ministry seemed unproductive. Unfortunately, it would be several years before I understood what the Bible had been saying for centuries.

What did I finally learn? Several things. Some of the lessons I'd had knowledge of and accepted them to be true but had little reality of them in my soul. This is the blight of the American church scene, an intellectual agreement with no sensible reality in the heart. Surely you have experienced the "wow" moment when something you knew and believed in theory became real and experimental. This is what I'm talking about; that's what happened to me.

The one "wow" that made the most difference was I came to understand with a deeper reality the doctrine of justification by faith. Again, I knew about this truth. I could theologially explain it; in fact, I had preached it strongly. But I was not living its powerful implications. I had experienced it, yet I somehow relegated the entire doctrine to the act of my conversion, i.e., getting saved. To put it simply, I knew I was justified but I didn't really understand how to apply it to walking with God in perfect peace.

How does justification by faith work in everyday life, especially when it comes to fellowship with God? It works when you remember it's the basis of your fellowship with God. Justification is the act of God

giving you perfect standing with Him, forever. Because of Calvary you can be on this kind of standing with God. The death and resurrection of our dear Savior sounded the death knell to the guilt of our sin. As Jesus struggled to breathe His last breath and proclaim, "It is finished!" our guilt before God was also breathing its last gasp. Through the sacrifice of Christ the penalty of sin was paid. There is nothing left for the believer to suffer. Jesus became our whipping boy. A whipping boy was a common young boy who was assigned to a young prince and was punished when the prince disobeyed. In our case, the Prince of Heaven was punished on behalf of us commoners. There is nothing standing between the Prince's Father and the sinner who trusts in the Prince. The Apostle Paul explains, "Therefore, having been

justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 5:1). There is no other work for us to do except believe this with all of our hearts.

This is so momentous. We must receive this truth and its radical implications; otherwise, we will base our relationship with God upon our performance. When you

trust Christ, God removes all of your sin, guilt and penalty. He accepts you as His adopted child. You, too, become a prince of heaven! Never, ever, will your Heavenly Father hold you guilty for your sin, any sin, past, present or future. Your legal standing before God is the standing of Jesus Christ. Not only does He not account your sin to you, but also He graciously gives you an alien righteousness. In other words, a righteousness you did not perform. He gives you the righteousness of the Lord Jesus. Your life is hidden in Christ and His spotless purity is accounted to you as your righteousness. I love how the Apostle Paul traces this glorious theme through the Old Testament and strings verses together by the Messianic thread

**THIS IS THE BLIGHT OF THE
AMERICAN CHURCH SCENE, AN
INTELLECTUAL AGREEMENT
WITH NO SENSIBLE REALITY IN
THE HEART.**

of our Savior's redemption. He begins with the life of Abraham and shows that Abraham was justified, even as we are, by faith.

"For what does the Scripture say? 'Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.'" (Romans 4:3)

And then Paul moves to the life of David and quotes the psalmist rejoicing in the beauty of God's acquittal:

"'Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, And whose sins are covered; Blessed is the man to whom the LORD shall not impute sin.'" (Romans 4:7, 8)

How can you not be joyful when you believe the Lord will not "impute sin," your sin, to you? If you're truly a Christian, sin you commit will not be accredited to you. The word impute means to reckon to one's account. God does not put your sin on your account, nor will He. Why? Because all your sin was reckoned to Jesus' account. Isaiah prophesied, "the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all" (Isaiah 53:6). God the Father put our guilt on the record of Jesus and made Him to suffer for it. Your sin has been penalized in the person of Christ. There is no more for you to suffer. He does not impute your rebellion to you; He imputed it the Lamb of God.

As I said earlier, this is the basis of your standing with God. This is the foundation upon which you stand. Jesus absorbed God's anger for your sin. He took the blunt force, the awful and righteous rage against your lawless deeds. Therefore, as Romans 5:1 says, you have peace with God. You have been reconciled and are no longer His enemy. This is true of all who believe, not a believing that is just a mental agreement with the facts, but also a commitment of oneself to Christ. We are united to Him through faith. He isn't opposed to us in the very least. Never will we come under His holy wrath. Jesus came under its terrible cloud and there died. With His death was the death of our separation from God. Believe it!

The most wonderful implication of this, dear child of God, is that you and I are forever acceptable to the Father. He accepts you. You are His inheritance, His joyful claim, and His prized possession. His acceptance of you has nothing to do with your performance. He didn't accept you because your performance, and if you were not accepted because of performance you cannot be unaccepted because of it either. You are accepted, loved, and appreciated on the basis of Christ's union with you. Jesus identified Himself and joined Himself to you by the Holy Spirit. You have become bone of His bone, flesh of His flesh (Ephesians 5:30). Therefore, no accusation against you will stand, no more than an accusation would stand against the Only Begotten.

"Who shall bring a charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is he who condemns? It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us." (Romans 8:33, 34)

The writer to the Hebrews also presents the same heavenly logic, "For both He who sanctifies and those who are being sanctified are all of one, for which reason He is not ashamed to call them brethren" (Hebrews 2:11). There is no separation between Christ Jesus and His brethren. Inseparably linked in the love of the Father and the righteousness of the Son.

I will never forget the day when this became so real to me. As I was suffering from self-pity and feelings of failure, the Lord penetrated my heart with His unchanging love and acceptance. I clearly saw that my Father through Jesus, and for His sake, had brought me into relationship with Him knowing all my faults and failures. He loved me in spite of me. I was His. And if the God of the universe accepted me, why should I need anyone else's acceptance? I experienced the rest

of divine love. From that moment I have experienced the security of what it means to be justified.



One day I counseled a young man who could not forgive himself of a serious sin he had committed. He had repented and given evidence of it. But he could not feel he was acceptable to God as he had been before his fall. Condemnation dogged him. He couldn't experience the presence of God. I asked him if he believed God had forgiven him. He said, "Yes, God has forgiven me, but I

must suffer the consequences of my sin and part of that is the loss of God's presence." I was amazed at the level of the enemy's deception the young man had believed.

I asked him how long did he think he would have to remain outside the "favorable son" status that he once enjoyed. He answered that he didn't know and then said, "I guess until God sees I'm really sorry for what I've done." I told him that if he were justified before God, then there was no condemnation. This is what the Bible says. Condemnation is the very opposite of justification. God cannot see you justified and condemned. I continued to explain to him the wonderful implications of justification. I showed him that he had believed the devil and doubted God. He was trying to pay a form of penance by wallowing in condemnation. And if our getting into God's favor and blessing depended on our performance, we could never receive it. We will never perform what is necessary for God's approval. He began to weep, as he believed the truth of Scripture acknowledging that Christ had suffered all of sin's separation from God.

The young man had to believe the truth and reject the lie. That's our work. The work we are to do is trust God. We must trust what He said, we must trust so that we'll do what He said; and we must trust that He will supply what we need to do what He said. And the work of faith begins with the truth that if we are justified, then we are forever righteous before Him based upon the work of Christ and not our own work. All your performance is the product of God's justification. As a result of justifying the guilty, the no-longer-guilty love Him, serve Him in complete freedom, joy, and full-acceptance.

Most Christians today are like the Galatians the Apostle Paul corrected in his epistle bearing their name. He said to them, "Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh?" (Galatians 3:3). In other words, Paul was asking them why they thought they could grow in godliness simply by their efforts and not by faith in the Holy Spirit. Performance didn't save any Galatian and it hasn't saved you. God declares you righteous. "It is God who justifies" (Romans 8:33). And if God justifies through faith, why do you think you can keep yourself justified by your performance? Do you really believe He turns you over to yourself and says, "I saved you; now you finish it"? Not at all. Paul showed the Galatians that the grace that justifies is the same grace that sanctifies. If God's grace is sufficient to forgive me of sin and rescue me from sin's penalty, then surely it is sufficient to work holiness in me. We're not saved by works, but the faith that God imparts by grace works. It will work in me so that I will obey and strive to be Christ-like. This striving to be Christ-like is the result of the grace of God and not me. Paul tells the Philippians to work out their salvation with fear and trembling for it was God who worked in them both to desire God's will and to do it (Philippians 2:13).

What has this done for me? It has made me to see that God is truly my Father. I never need fear that He is opposed to me, even if my performance is less than what either He or I thinks it should be. Instead of trying to run and hide from Him, thinking He is angry with

me, it makes me quick to repent. The implications of my justification has made me to know, with a reality that goes beyond the mind and fills the heart, that He delights in me and is perfectly at rest with me. His love for me keeps Him from complaining or murmuring against me that I'm not sufficient for Him, or that He should find another who is better. No, His love is at rest with His children. "The LORD thy God in the midst of thee is mighty; he will save, he will rejoice over thee with joy; he will rest in his love, he will joy over thee with singing" (Zephaniah 3:17). The word rest means to be quiet. In other words, the Lord is silent against you. He offers no complaint. This is completely amazing since I have enough complaints against me for both Him and me. But Jesus suffered those complaints and more. Now all that is left is God's rejoicing over me.

You may ask, "Doesn't this understanding of justification and God's love lead to pride as much as trying to build your self-esteem? It sounds like it would make individuals to think highly of themselves and make light of their sin and disobedience?" Just the opposite. The cross takes away that kind of boasting. The Apostle Paul says, "But God forbid that I should boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world" (Galatians 6:14). Paul knew his only boast was the death of Jesus Christ for by it Paul had relationship with God. This is an acknowledgement that Paul knew he was nothing special, in and of himself. He was special in the sight of God because of God's love and not anything he did. The cross made it possible for God to pour out His blessings on Paul since Jesus received the blunt force of God's condemnation.

This is what the apostle says in Romans 5:11: "And not only that, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation." The word *rejoice* is the same word *boast* in Galatians 6:14. We boast in God and have this astonishing relationship because of the reconciliation of the cross of Christ. The cross removes any reason for pride and self-satisfaction. The believer rejoices in a God who loves the unlovable, and lifts up the undeserving. You and I can exult in the faithful love of God who shows infinite mercy by elevating us who were enemies to the status of sons, co-heirs with the Only Begotten Son. It is the gospel and only the gospel that can make the proud, humble and the self-obsessed become Christ-consumed.

The pop-psychology of self-esteem wrapped in the Christian banner cannot fix the person who sees himself in a negative light. It can never teach self-denial, which means it can never set a person free of self-absorption, negative or positive. Self cannot undercut self. To try to do so only leads one deeper into the dark maze of introspection. What one needs is something bigger than self to lead away from self. The cross of Jesus Christ is the only thing able to do so. It is the very place where you and I are brought to the real truth about who we are. By accepting its declaration about us and its demonstration of God is love we can boast in the same who loves us based on no reason but that He delights to do so. Jesus' death didn't make God love us; rather, His death is the evidence of God's love. "But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). For me to think somehow I cannot go to my Father because of my sins, failures, and unworthiness is to diminish the work of Jesus on the cross. It is rank unbelief, and it breaks the Father's heart. In the end, I am nothing, but God loves me in Christ Jesus, and more than that, He accepts me in the beloved. This is the news that can cure the pride issue of all who will rejoice in the God of the gospel. 