

Embodying Grace & Peace | How to Be the Church

“Self-Image and Membership In the Body”

1st Corinthians 3.16-19a & 4.1-7; Romans 12.1-5

5.22.22

1st Corinthians 3.16-19a Do you not know that you are a temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?

¹⁷ If any man destroys the temple of God, God will destroy him, for the temple of God is holy, and that is what you are. ¹⁸ Let no man deceive himself. If any man among you thinks that he is wise in this age, he must become foolish, so that he may become wise. ¹⁹ For the wisdom of this world is foolishness before God.

^{4.1} Let a man regard us in this manner, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. ² In this case, moreover, it is required of stewards that one be found trustworthy. ³ But to me it is a very small thing that I may be examined by you, or by any human court; in fact, I do not even examine myself. ⁴ For I am conscious of nothing against myself, yet I am not by this acquitted; but the one who examines me is the Lord. ⁵ Therefore do not go on passing judgment before the time, but wait until the Lord comes who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men's hearts; and then each man's praise will come to him from God ⁶ Now these things, brethren, I have figuratively applied to myself and Apollos for your sakes, so that in us you may learn not to exceed what is written, so that no one of you will become arrogant in behalf of one against the other. ⁷ For who regards you as superior? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?

Romans 12.1 Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. ² And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect. ³ For through the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith. ⁴ For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, ⁵ so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.

We've been looking at how to BE the church – how to embody grace and peace to a world in need. The Church is meant to make Christ substantial to a watching world – the Church is a Body animated and alive by the Holy Spirit: God's corporate witness.

In saying these things we've been careful to hitch the horse to the cart, i.e. before we dive into Romans CH 12 where we find all these instructions and tasks for the Church to perform, FIRST we picked up the engine in Romans CH 8. The Spirit of God has to BE that engine; He has to indwell and enliven the Body.

Now, today, we look at the role the Spirit plays in the Church as a Body made up of PERSONS. How are believers in Jesus Christ supposed to think about themselves in relation to other persons, to the Church as a whole and to the Leader or Head of the Church, Jesus Christ? How

do YOU think about yourself? The whole idea of self-esteem, self-image, self-concept, personality: that's our inquiry for today.

There are *issues* with self-image and I plan to look at some of the difficulties in defining or understanding ourselves and the self...AND *there are resources IN the gospel* (basic message of Christianity) for settling questions of self-concept. Finally what would it look like to take advantage of those resources – how would using those benefits help us?

Let's look at:

- 1) Self-Concept Quandary**
- 2) Power of Paradox**
- 3) Morphing to Morons**

Somewhere along the way... in modern America and in the Western World we began to wonder if maybe our greatest psychological problem is that we think too lowly of ourselves. That disorder came to be known as "having low/bad self-esteem." This could be a factor in certain people committing crimes: "she stole a car because she didn't think she could ever earn or deserve a car; lack of self-respect was the motive for the crime." And the answer for that (in this view) is a kind of therapeutic one: to help the offending person think more highly of herself.

Jonathan Haidt and Greg Lukianoff wrote an article that became a book, *The Coddling of the American Mind* indirectly questioning this kind of therapeutic approach. And as far back as 2002 Lauren Slater wrote an article* in *The New York Times* called "The Trouble With Self-Esteem" (Sunday, February 3, 2002) that directly opposed the idea that low-self-esteem leads to crimes.

She even quoted researchers from *The London School of Economics* and *Case Western Reserve University* suggesting that it's actually the opposite of LOW self-esteem that's the problem: "high self-regard, can maim and even kill."

If you're younger you may lean toward the idea that low-self-esteem leads to crime and needs to be healed. And if you're older you may see this as a case for the police not a therapist, BUT maybe it's NOT that simple – the self is apparently a quandary.

A simplistic view of the self won't help us. There's what C.S. Lewis called, "The Collective" and what others have called "group-think" where the goal is uniformity and NO individuality or personality. Cults and dictators aim for this. Self-image can be very simple IF we simply do away with the self.

We could talk about people-pleasing. My sense of self is totally dependent on getting recognized, affirmed and appreciated by others. Criticism kills.

We could mention...people who are somehow utterly oblivious to the self: "The Unexamined Life" (Plato's *The Apology of Socrates*) Sometimes a person who has no self-awareness – tone-deaf to what's glaring to everyone else; a person unreflective in the extreme and therefore

oblivious to others – the opposite of too self-conscious, this person is self-unconscious (solipsistic).

Carly Simon sang about some unknown boyfriend who was so vain: “You had one eye in the mirror, as you watched yourself gavotte (dance); And all the girls dreamed that they'd be your partner”

And that overwhelming desire to look into a mirror CAN come from too high a self-image OR too low. Some people keep one eye in the mirror because they simply “know” that everyone is looking at them and judging them. It’s a kind of social paranoia that LOOKS like really LOW self-esteem... but it’s really the other side of the coin of TOO HIGH self-esteem: it’s self-obsession – one is obsessed with how good he looks and the other self-obsessed with how bad he looks... both are trapped inside the self.

Finally, to end this part of the sermon on the Self-Concept Quandary, I’ll mention one other song, “Garden Party” by Ricky Nelson where he reflects on all the competing demands people have imposed on him and how it’s just impossible to satisfy all those demands and he concludes: “But it's all right now / I learned my lesson well / You see, you can't please everyone / So you got to please yourself” (Garden Party, 1972)

I think he was talking about being authentic (not just a people pleaser – and there’s a point to that) but that has translated today into the “Duty to Self Ethic”: “my number one priority has to be ME – gotta look out for number one.” Reminds me of the saying: “two wrongs don’t make a right” (people pleasing is not corrected by self-pleasing).

So... let’s talk about the Bible. The view of the Bible is what someone described as Blessed Self-Forgetfulness. And St Paul states this position in v. 3 “But to me,” says Paul, “it’s the smallest concern to be examined by you, or by any human court; in fact I don’t even examine myself. I’m unaware of anything (any glaring, life-controlling sin) in myself – but that’s NOT why I think I’m ok...it’s because the Lord says so.”

The Corinthian Church was getting sectarian. Some were following THIS leader, some THAT leader. Some were devoted to Apollos and others to Paul. (Even though both teachers taught the same TRUTH!) And Paul says, “You’re being really immature here and you're endangering the unity of the church.

“And that’s my concern,” says Paul, “I’m not hurt or stung that you're listening to my friend...because my self-image isn’t dependent on YOU... in fact...it’s NOT even dependent on ME... I mean, I’m NOT aware of any great spiritual failing in my life but that’s NOT why I feel OK about myself (because I’ve been around enough to KNOW that some people are so oblivious to their own failings that they feel good about themselves when everyone else knows that they are real jerks!) – I’m ok NOT because I don’t see sin in my life but because Jesus Christ has justified/acquitted me... That’s what sets me free from all these inadequate solutions to the self-concept quandaries.”

So, Paul... if you're so free...what's YOUR self-image? Is the answer to think higher about ourselves or to think lower of ourselves?

Well... both. (Hmmm?)

On one hand – I'm the lowest of the low. In 4.1 he says, "Think of us apostles as under-servants" That's the word given to rowers... those slaves that were shackled and pulled oars under the deck of ships...under the whips of the cruel task-masters. That's the lowest of the low! (I don't know what everyone does for a living in this congregation... but c'mon!)

"Wow, Paul you really think LOWLY of yourself! I think you have a self-esteem problem!"

But it gets worse! If we could read on down to v 13 (not included) we'd find Paul saying, "when we Apostles are slandered by you people in the churches we planted, we repay you with encouragement; we have become like the scum of the world, the dregs of society; I don't write these things to shame you, but to instruct you as my beloved children."

Paul, did you just refer to yourself as "the scum of the earth and the dregs of society" – WOW! You have to feel better about yourself! You need more confidence! Do some daily affirmations or go to a spa or something!"

But in the very verse where he called himself an under-servant – a rower (4.1) – he also says, "Let a people think of us this way: as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God."

"We're the lowest of the low and the highest of the High! We have been given God's secrets to share with the world! We have the treasure that can save this world from judgment and death! God has entrusted the medicine that can heal this whole planet to US – to us Apostles and to you Christians!"

So ...what is it? Are you the lowest of the low or the highest of the high?

Yes! That's what I'm trying to tell you! That's what we are! And that's what YOU CHRISTIANS are too!

What? Low or High?

Yes!

You're sinners, deserving God's eternal displeasure and judgment... AND YOU ARE THE TEMPLE OF GOD and the Holy Spirit lives in YOU!

(Last verse in the middle paragraph:) "We see you as you are – What do you have that you didn't receive? Everything you have and enjoy is a gift of grace from the God of the Universe who is become the Father who cherishes you...BUT why do you act like you earned it... you earned nothing...it's a grace!"

You have NOTHING but by God's grace in Jesus, you have everything!

It's why Paul could say to the Roman Christians: (last paragraph, v. 3), "For through the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith."

Don't get your self-image the way the world does – by bragging about their productivity or their looks or their possessions or their connections – and then when they lose those things, they crumble and life is not worth living! NO! Instead have sound judgment – see your self in the New and Living Way: God has allotted to all His people, faith to believe, gifts to share with the Body (Church) – grace is received by faith and GOD GAVE YOU THE FAITH by which you have received grace – forgiveness, the indwelling Spirit, New Life, a New Family, adoption as God's own children – unshakeable love from which you CAN NOT BE SEPARATED (8.31ff).

See the unique Christian self-image is a paradox (like so many truths in the Christian life -- a statement or that seems self-contradictory or absurd but in actually expresses a powerful truth – the one who serves is the greatest [Luke 22.26]; you find your life by losing it [Luke 9.24]; happy are the sad [Mat 5.4]) – and to summarize THIS paradox of the Christian self-image, we really can't do better than Jack Miller who famously said:

"Cheer up! You are much worse than you think but IN CHRIST you are more cherished, more significant and more secure than you've ever imagined!"

To have and to hold THIS way of thinking about yourself – THIS is a central feature in the mind-renewal that is so CRUCIAL to the Christian Life.

Jesus Christ had the Highest Possible Self-Esteem – because He was God, the Son, eternally loved by the Father and communing together with the Eternal Spirit AND He had the lowest possible self-image in that He was willing for the sake of love to empty Himself of these privileges in a position of perfect security (John 13.1-4) He washed the yucky feet of fishermen and the feet of one "follower" whom He knew was betraying Him.

Now, how do we get IN on the power of this paradox? How does it play out in daily life?

Well, the Apostle Paul says, "If anyone THINKS he/she is wise in this age, HE MUST BECOME FOOLISH" – that's the Greek word, "μωρὸν" and that's our last point: morph to moron, i.e. become a fool. Learn to reject the patterns the world uses to feel better about themselves using patterns of escape and comparison and performance and boasting in our credentials and achievements.

Becoming a Christian is trading in the world's way of self-esteem for the power of paradox IN CHRIST! And it's how we move forward as well!

See yourself as a great sinner with all kinds of potential for sin (sensational sexy sin...AND the more slippery spiritual sin like the Pharisees – Matt 23!) AND know that you are standing on the record of Someone else: be a great sinner saved by a great Savior! Preach that to yourself! See it as more important than all the identifiers people normally use to feel good about themselves.

See yourself as acquitted by Christ and as one whose praise will come NOT from the fleeting approvals and affirmations and recognitions of fickle people.

And if you wake up tomorrow in a funk... if you're down on yourself and you've failed and you're barely holding it together - know that your own feelings about yourself REALLY DON'T MATTER VERY MUCH!

Learn to laugh at yourself – like a fool! Morph to a moron and say, “Whatever ‘they’ say about me... whatever I know or feel...all the voices in the world are but a faint and fleeting whisper in comparison with the Mighty Roar of the Lion of Judah who loved me and gave Himself for me (Gal 2.20). His acquittal and His praise (1 Cor 4.5) will drown out everything else.

And when you morph to moron – think of me, will ya? Think of US...your family IN THE CHURCH and see one another in the same way – big sinners, with a Big Savior...We're NOT (as we hope to see next week) we're NOT a collective of cookie-cutter-conformists in a cult but a Body and we belong to one another – we are very different – each unique and each having gifts that differ – personalities, and backgrounds and functions... and yet, brought together by the Master of Ceremonies.

One of the greatest blessings and benefits of this morphing to morons: Membership in the Body. I hope to explore it more next week

* Nicholas Emler of the London School of Economics and Roy Baumeister of Case Western Reserve University ... consider the unexpected notion that self-esteem is overrated and to suggest that it may even be a culprit, not a cure.

"There is absolutely no evidence that low self-esteem is particularly harmful," Emler says. "It's not at all a cause of poor academic performance; people with low self-esteem seem to do just as well in life as people with high self-esteem. In fact, they may do better, because they often try harder." Baumeister takes Emler's findings a bit further, claiming not only that low self-esteem is in most cases a socially benign if not beneficent condition but also that its opposite, high self-regard, can maim and even kill.

Baumeister, R. F., Smart, L., & Boden, J. M. (January 01, 1996). Relation of Threatened Egotism to Violence and Aggression: The Dark Side of High Self-Esteem. *Psychological Review*, 103, 1, 5.