

FAITH AND HUMILITY

By

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One of the few occasions on record where Jesus commended a person for great faith was when the Canaanitish woman came seeking healing for her daughter.¹ Jesus' response was blunt: "It is not meet to take the children's bread and cast it to the dogs."

Such an expression in our time would be totally unacceptable to our hypersensitive ears, no matter to whom it was addressed. But this woman understood that by the standards of the Israelites her society did, indeed, appear as dogs. They indulged in nature worship, cannibalism and infanticide, along with other vile practices. Jesus does not use careless speech, and when He made such a pointed statement, both she and the disciples knew that He spoke truth.

The disciples were eager to get rid of her and suggested that Jesus send her away. But she was unmoved by the epithet of dogs and humbled herself even more with her plea: "Truth, Lord: yet the dogs eat of the crumbs that fall from their master's table."

In the words of T. Robert Ingram, "What grace of humility is here! As a dog I come — but I ask what befits a dog. The humility itself, the very hallmark of faith, raises her to glory above measure. The kings, the scribes, the Pharisees, the righteous and clean-living men of the day, the multitudes of religious Jews that clamored after Jesus, have been forgotten. But this woman lives among us even in our day to give an example of true godliness and humility and faith."²

Jesus said, "O woman, great is thy faith: be it unto thee even as thou wilt." Her daughter was healed in that hour.

Note that Jesus did not commend her for her humility but for her faith. It was because she had faith in Jesus to heal her daughter that she could humbly accept the lowest role imaginable and plead for His help.

Humility, then, is an aspect of faith and is produced by faith. It is seeing oneself as he really is, a creature that has sinned and falls far short of God's glory and dependent upon God for mercy, grace, forgiveness and for life itself.

For over two decades educators and many church leaders have told us that the great need is for people to improve their "self-image" and raise their "self-esteem." Just recently I sat through a hearing on a community "Teen Pregnancy Task Force" and heard that one of the reasons girls get pregnant is because of low self-esteem. They have it backwards. In all the cases of pregnant teenagers which I have dealt with, the lack of self-esteem was a result of the guilt and shame which followed the pregnancy, not the cause of it.

The idea that raising self-esteem will keep kids off drugs and away from illicit sex is obviously wrong. Who has higher self-esteem than rock stars, Hollywood entertainers and rich politicians? Yet these super egotists are among the leaders in illegal drug use and promiscuous sex.

In the word of columnist and musician Mark Randall, "The problem is not a lack, but rather an excess of self-esteem. What hinders achievement is not so much a crisis of confidence but a crisis of humility."³

Children who are subjected to school programs of values clarification, self-esteem and self-realization may be expected to rebel when their parents instruct them on morals. They have been skillfully trained by the educators to think that whether a thing is right or wrong must be their own decision. Never mind the fact that they haven't the knowledge, experience or wisdom to make such decisions. The important thing, they are told, is that it is their own decision, which means that they can rule out decisions made by their parents or by other authorities, including God.

Making such decisions, we are told, makes them "feel good about themselves" and "enhances their self-esteem." Perhaps so, until drug addiction, pregnancy, or AIDS shows up.

This current emphasis on self-esteem and self-fulfillment, repeated incessantly on television, in newspapers, in advertising, in education and from the pulpit, has produced a generation of self-centered people who cannot maintain deep relationships with other people nor accept responsibilities which require personal sacrifice. The results are divorce, abortion, child abuse, and neglect of spouses, children and parents.

Self-centeredness belongs to the religion of the humanists. In analyzing the emergence of a post-Christian America, Yale scholar Harold Bloom says that the real religion of America is gnosticism (mystical Greek and oriental philosophies); and the god we worship is ourselves.⁴ This is what should be expected when churches promote self-esteem instead of calling for repentance and humility.

This is not to deny that there are children who have been ridiculed, criticized and put down by a parent until they are made to feel worthless and hopeless. The cure, however, is not in putting them on a pedestal of false esteem but in turning them to God through Christ, that they might have faith to emulate Him in true humility.

According to God's Word self-esteem is more of a liability than an asset. No man is to "think of himself more highly than he ought to think."⁵ "Let each esteem other better than themselves."⁶

If self-esteem is to be cultivated, one wonders why it is not encouraged in the Bible. Job could have used a heavy dose of it in the midst of his suffering. Instead, God reminded him of his frailty and ignorance, so that Job cried out, "I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes."⁷ No self-esteem at all! Instead it was humility generated by faith, faith in the power and holiness of God and Job's own frailty, ignorance and sinful nature. It was this humility produced by faith that God wanted to see, and such faith was greatly rewarded.

Jesus dealt with all kinds of people, but most of them were the "common" people, many of them poor and oppressed by circumstances. Yet He did not hesitate to say such things as, "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself..."⁸ "For whosoever would save his life shall lose it, and whosoever shall lose his life for my sake shall find it."⁹ Such self-denial requires faith that following Jesus has its own reward. Before one willingly loses life for Christ's sake, he must have faith that a better life will be given.

The example He gave is not that of self-love but humility. He was "meek and lowly of heart" and promised blessings to those who are "poor in spirit." Even though He is the Son of God, scripture says that "being found in fashion as a man he humbled himself, becoming obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. Wherefore also God highly exalted him..."¹⁰ He humbled himself to the point of obeying the most difficult demand: to become sin on our behalf and pay the penalty of death.¹¹ He did so with the

knowledge of the resurrection and glorification to follow. “Who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.”¹²

We are instructed to have the same mind of humility,¹³ that the Lord may exalt us in due time.¹⁴

Self-esteem was what Satan offered Eve in the garden. He said that if she would eat the forbidden fruit, she would be as God and be able to decide for herself what was right and wrong.¹⁵ Does that sound as if Satan had taken a course in values clarification in a modern public school? God had already set forth good and evil, and it wasn't left to Adam and Eve to decide. Theirs was to choose which to follow, and they took the wrong course, primarily because they lacked faith. “Does God know what He is doing in forbidding us this fruit? We don't believe it and will decide for ourselves.” Such is the course of unbelief. To reverse this course requires faith to accept God's way, which produces humility, obedience, and life.

I was one of the fortunate children who grew up never having heard of self-esteem, and when teachers and parents were not afraid of damaging a child's ego by laying down the rules. We didn't have to decide whether it was right or wrong to smoke, drink, steal, have sex or lie. That had all been decided before we came along. The temptation was there, but we had an advantage over today's kids. We still had to choose whether or not to break them, but the question was much clearer than for children today who make the choices before they have been given the rules.

The need today is not more self-esteem but the humility to bow to God and do His will.

“God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble.”¹⁶

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