

RESOURCES FOR BIBLICAL LIVING

# SELF-IMAGE

HOW TO OVERCOME  
INFERIORITY JUDGMENTS



LOU PRIOLO

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Lou Priolo, series editor

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P U B L I S H I N G

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*Italics within Scripture quotations indicate emphasis added.*

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“My self-esteem has been at an all-time low ever since the divorce. I’ll never be the same again because of all the hurt Fred has caused me. My feelings of inferiority have turned me into an emotional basket case. I’ve got to learn how to improve my poor self-image and feel good about myself again so I can get over this mess and get on with my life. I know I’ll never be able to grow as a Christian until I overcome my self-esteem issues.”

Thoughts such as this are common today—even among Christians. It’s little wonder. Christian books, magazines, radio, television, and video programs (not to mention pulpits) are promoting certain ideas about self-image that are not taught in Scripture. The idea that “self-esteem” is essential for one’s happiness ought to raise a red flag in the mind of any discerning believer who understands the implications of Philippians 2:3: “Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves.”

Our happiness is not related as much to how we esteem ourselves as it is to how we esteem others. Christians have been inundated with humanistic presuppositions that they believe to be theologically sound.

Did you catch the fallacies implicit in the opening paragraph? Here are a few of them:

1. There is a part of man’s nonmaterial being (such as his mind, conscience, or will) called a “self-image” (cf. 1 Cor. 2:13).
2. *Inferiority* is a *feeling* rather than a *judgment* or self-evaluation (cf. Rom. 2:14–15).

3. People are victims of something beyond their control (cf. Gen. 3:12–13).
4. A good self-image is a prerequisite to success and happiness (cf. Josh. 1:8).
5. God’s ability to help people change depends on one’s having a good self-image (cf. Rom. 8:29).

The construct of self-image doesn’t exist in the Bible.<sup>1</sup> The Scriptures speak of man’s heart, his mind, his conscience, his emotions, his thoughts, and his motives, but say nothing about self-image. We are mistaken when we view self-image as an entity in and of itself. It is not an organ of the soul that can be squashed, flattened, punctured, inflated, deflated, damaged, or devastated. It can’t be isolated, fixed, or modified—at least not directly.

“What do you mean by ‘not directly’?”

To answer that question, we must first look at and interpret the idea of self-image “not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual thoughts with spiritual words” (1 Cor. 2:13).

Self-image can best be classified as a judgment one makes as he evaluates himself. You and I continually make judgments about ourselves in a variety of areas (cf. 1 Cor. 2:15–16; 11:31; Titus 3:11). These judgments form our self-evaluation. This internal evaluation is what is commonly referred to as our self-image. Self-image, therefore, is not an emotion or a feeling, but rather a part of our cognitive process. It is fundamentally thought—not feeling.

We may feel good about our self-evaluation, or we may feel bad about it. But the feelings are the result of our thoughts.

1. We are indebted to John Bettler and Jay Adams for the fine work they have done in unpacking the construct of self-image and repackaging it into biblical concepts.



People don't actually "feel inferior." Rather, they judge themselves to be inferior and feel awful about their self-evaluation. These inferiority judgments are at the root of all so-called self-image problems. As a Christian, you should have as your objective not a "good" or "positive" self-image, but rather an accurate self-image based on biblically correct perceptions and evaluations.

Our self-evaluations invariably fall into one or more of three separate categories.

### **Three Categories of Inferiority Judgments**

The *first* classification has to do with the accuracy of our perceptions. The effects of sin on our minds hinder us from interpreting life from God's point of view. That's one reason we're so dependent on the Bible for perspective. What's more, our sinful hearts are capable of seriously distorting our judgments. Self-evaluations are often wrong. A person whose inferiority judgments are the result of inaccurate self-perceptions can learn how to change those perceptions, primarily with the assistance of Scripture and secondarily with the assistance of wise (objective) and trusted friends.

The *second* kind of inferiority judgment has to do with a conscience or value system that has not been biblically programmed. Sometimes people judge themselves to be inadequate in a particular area in which the Bible does not require adequacy. I can't fly an airplane, or quilt, or box. But I don't consider myself to be an inadequate person because God doesn't say I'm supposed to do any of those things. Since it's not a sin for me to not be a