

**THE**

**HUNGER**

**FOR**

SEEING THE IMAGE  
OF GOD IN MAN

**SIGNIFICANCE**

**R.C. SPROUL**

“We live in an age of great confusion about many things. We are even seriously confused about who we are. Clear thinking about what it means to be humans created in the image of God is a pressing need of our time. This new edition of R.C. Sproul’s *The Hunger for Significance* is both timely and very helpful to stimulate us to think biblically about ourselves. This book is accessible and engaging, vivid and wide-ranging. It is also remarkably personal at times. In many ways, this is R.C. Sproul at his best.”

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Emeritus of Church History, Westminster Seminary California

“No theologian in recent days has combined such penetrating insight into the vast realms of theology with the rare ability to be easily understood like R.C. Sproul. This master teacher possesses an uncanny gift to break down profound truth and present it in a compelling and lively fashion. This book is yet another Sproul classic, expounding the doctrine of the image of God and man. You need to embrace the message of this book to have an accurate self-awareness of who God has made you to be.”

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“It takes someone who so profoundly wrestled with the question *Who is God?* to help us so clearly and cogently with the question *Who am I?* In our current moment of identity confusion, chaos, and crisis, this new edition is urgently needed. With biblical wisdom, theological maturity, and generous anecdotes, Dr. Sproul covers every aspect of our lives, painting the portrait of true human dignity.”

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“In this penetrating analysis, R.C. Sproul explores our search for meaning in a variety of circumstances and places. We were created in God’s image to live in communion with our Creator and under his Lordship. Sproul uses his keen mind to teach us how and why

we all want our lives to count. This book is a must-read for everyone: pastors, church leaders, and laypeople.”

—**Miguel Núñez**, Pastor Titular, Iglesia Bautista Internacional

“This is classic R.C. Sproul. It is precisely the book the church needs to help us to rightly grasp the dignity and purpose of each and every human being, all image bearers of our holy, loving, and gracious God.”

—**Burk Parsons**, Senior Pastor, Saint Andrew’s Chapel, Sanford, Florida

“So why is it that everyone has an innate, undeniable, and (in varying degrees) motivating desire for significance? *The Hunger for Significance* by R.C. Sproul brings us, with content clarity as well as an engaging style, to the biblical answer to the insatiable search for our significance. Spoiler alert! Enjoy a page-turning experience to discover why our ‘hunger for significance’ reveals the reality of a Creator who not only creates us *on* purpose but also *with* purpose and then by his grace provides a salvation that enables us to embrace and enjoy that purpose.”

—**Harry Reeder**, Senior Pastor, Briarwood Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, Alabama

“The world may think it possesses the prerogative to demean some and venerate others, but God’s Word thinks otherwise. Each individual, no matter what their limitations, must be treated with dignity and respect because each is a God-reflector—I learned that from years of serving among people with significant disabilities. That’s why I’m thrilled that a fresh edition of *The Hunger for Significance* by R.C. Sproul is being released to a new generation of readers. As Dr. Sproul unpacks the powerful and biblical axiom of human dignity, he shows the reader how to effectively ascribe life-worth to the people we encounter every day. In an age of identity politics where the weak and vulnerable are forgotten, *The Hunger for Significance* is a must-read!”

—**Joni Eareckson Tada**, Founder, Joni and Friends International Disability Center

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**P U B L I S H I N G**

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To James McIntyre, who bestowed upon me  
the priceless gift of dignity,  
and  
to my comrades on the staff  
of Ligonier Ministries.



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# PREFACE

A search can be fun—from hide-and-seek to hunting Easter eggs on the White House lawn; from looking for a hot spot where the fish are biting to the scavenger hunt at a Halloween party.

A search can be futile—from the ancient Diogenes examining the darkest corners of Athens with his lantern, looking in vain for an honest man, to the medieval knight pursuing the Holy Grail; from the quest for the Lost Dutchman mine to the lure of discovering Shangri-La.

A search can be tedious, yielding its reward after countless hours and lingering years of failure—Thomas Edison experimenting with a thousand substances before finding one suitable for use as a glowing filament; Jonas Salk peering through a thousand microscopes before finding a vaccine for polio.

A search can be quixotic—the alchemist seeking a formula to turn lead into gold; Ponce De León tracking down the Fountain of Youth. It is searching for gold at the end of the rainbow and chasing the will-o'-the-wisp with a butterfly net.

A search can be maniacal—Captain Ahab sailing his troubled

soul into uncharted waters, risking his crew and his mission to gain revenge on his loathsome nemesis, the great white whale Moby Dick. It is the giant in Jack and the Beanstalk shouting, “Fee fi fo fum” while frantically chasing after his golden harp.

Man is by nature a hunter. He longs to discover the new frontier, the lost horizon, the magic formula, and the ultimate trophy. From Nimrod stalking the primordial lion to Nazi-hunter Simon Wiesenthal’s relentless pursuit of Adolf Eichmann and Dr. Josef Mengele, the hunt is fierce. It is Columbus seeking a new world, Galileo a new moon around Jupiter, and Christian Dior a new flair for fashion.

We are the seekers. We hunt for animals and precious gems; for a cure for cancer and a way to solve the national debt. We look for jobs, for dates, for bargains, and for thrills. The pursuit of happiness is our inalienable right. We are like Dorothy, off to see the Wizard, the wonderful Wizard of Oz.

Ours is a new world, fraught with the peril of nuclear annihilation, torn by the violence of international terrorism, embittered by our failure to build the great society. The rigorous pursuit of our day is the search for dignity and personal worth. It is a mighty quest fueled by the flames of passion that burn in the souls of people who refuse to surrender to the voices that declare we are nothing.

The search for dignity is a titanic struggle, an epic adventure, prodded by a pain that will not go away. Modern man has an aching void. The emptiness we feel cannot be relieved by one more gourmet meal or another snort of cocaine. We carry water in a sieve when we try to fill the empty space with a better job or a bigger house.

Dignity is never found in plastic. We must search further and probe deeper if the haunting cries of indignity are to be silenced. Ours must be a transcendent quest—going beyond the trivial to the ultimate questions of our worth as human beings.

## *Preface*

It was Saint Augustine who declared that within each of us is a vacuum that must be filled if the scourge of insignificance is to miss us in its vicious attack. We must seek our roots, our origin, and our destiny if we are to know our present value.

This book is written by a Christian for Christians and for anyone else who shares in the search. It explores the human cry for dignity, the deep desire for significance, the hallowed longing for love and respect. It touches the aching void in the home, the school, the hospital, the prison, the church, and the workplace. Wherever people come together, hunters meet in common cause—the discovery of worth, the assurance of our dignity.

At times the book is autobiographical—not as if I alone have felt the aching void but that I may speak from the most intimate chamber of my quest, my own heart. Some will identify and others will not. My pain is not always your pain. And my delight may leave you bored.

But my earnest hope is that at some point our kindred spirits will meet, and whatever else our differences, we will be cemented together in a renewed commitment to preserve and protect the dignity of the men, women, and children who surround us every day.

My gratitude must be expressed to Bob and Lillian Love for providing me with a place to work, far from the intrusions of ringing phones and administrative pressures, and to Leo and Todge Collins for helping me with support material. Special thanks go to Mrs. Lillian Rowe for allowing the tender moments of her husband's death to be included in the book.

Thanks also to Karen Snellback for typing the manuscript, to Tim Couch and Dave Fox for running the ship of Ligonier Ministries in my absence, to my son R.C. Sproul Jr. for editorial assistance, and to my friends at Regal Books: William Greig, David Malme, and my patient editor Donald Pugh for prodding me to write the book, and for all their encouragement and assistance.

*Preface*

Finally, my heartfelt thanks to my wife, Vesta, without whose help this book would be far more abstract and far less readable.

R.C. Sproul  
Altamonte Springs, Florida  
July 1991

# 1

## OUR SEARCH FOR PERSONAL WORTH

The shrill blast of the whistle reverberated from the cold walls of the gymnasium. All action ceased instantly as boys froze in position, halting in midstride as if playing the childhood game of statues. Every eye turned to Mac who was standing in front of the bench, his face crimson from rage and the paroxysm of fury unleashed in the whistle blast. He stood in the menacing position of a policeman who has just caught wayward youths in an act of vandalism: hands on hips, legs spread apart, chin jutting aggressively, signaling a dare for anyone to make a false move.

Mac was not just a coach—he was *the* coach, commanding all the blend of fear and respect the platoon sergeant engenders in raw recruits. His face was angular with high granite cheekbones, sharp chin, and eyes deeply recessed within bony sockets. His hair was red, splashed with a sandy tint. At the moment, picking up the hue radiating from his face, his hair appeared vermilion as if flames were bursting from the crown of his head.

The whistle dropped from his lips, bobbing from the chain around his neck. A sardonic grin spread slowly across his face as he spoke softly but powerfully: “Well, what have we here? A prima donna?”

The smile evaporated and through clenched teeth he shouted my name, “Sproul! Take a walk. Hit the showers. You’re done for today.”

I was standing twenty feet from the locker room but the distance seemed infinite, as if my feet would have to carry me across an unbridgeable chasm to safety. I buried my chin in my chest, trying desperately to lift my shoulders high enough to conceal my blushing face as I began to slink toward the sanctuary of the locker room. Every eye was riveted on me as I made my exit, feeling the disgrace and shame of the cadet forced to march the parade of dishonor before his peers.

The seemingly interminable walk finally ended as the door swung shut behind me and the rhythmic bouncing of basketballs thumping against the hardwood floors started up again. I exhaled a deep sigh as I sat down on the bench in front of my locker and began peeling off my uniform and unraveling the tape from my ankles. The room seemed eerie to me, sitting there alone, without the usual banter and playful jostling that was part of the daily ritual of suiting up. The silence was dreadful; I could hear my every breath echoing from the steel lockers and tiled walls.

My feeling of isolation grew more intense as I stepped into the spacious shower stall, built to accommodate twelve boys at a time, each with his own shower nozzle and soap dish. As the sharp spray of hot water pounded my shoulders I was feeling the sting of the coach’s words.

What had I done to deserve expulsion? I was not guilty of a temper tantrum or sassing the coach. I had merely engaged in a little bit of harmless clowning around.

Practice began each day with a routine passing drill that involved groups of boys moving from one end of the court to the other by passes alone. No dribbles were allowed, no steps could be taken, as the drill was designed to sharpen the skill of dexterous ball handling. For some of the players the drill was excruciating, revealing tendencies toward clumsiness.

But my hero was Marquis Haynes, the dribble-wizard of the Harlem Globetrotters, and I had spent hours in my own backyard court practicing moves far more advanced than this elementary exercise. What could be the harm in showing off? Besides, I was the team captain and the star, which should entitle me to the privileges of status.

So on this day, instead of going through the paces of the normal routine, I dressed it up a little with stutter steps to make the rhythm more complex, and behind the back passes to my comrades, moving up the floor culminating with the *pièce de résistance*, the *coup de grâce*, a shot I had perfected in my backyard, which was a new invention. I held the ball completely behind my back and, with a hard flick of my wrist with neck bent forward, I flipped the ball over my head toward the basket.

The play was a thing of beauty to behold and I carried it off adroitly, moving down the floor in graceful fluidity, not missing a beat, executing my magic shot with a perfect swish. That was when the whistle blasted me out of my glory.

I quit the shower and dressed quickly, slipping out a back-door of the school, hoping no one would see me leave. It was snowing and instead of savoring the five-mile ride home in Mac's car, I had to walk. The road ribboned through rural countryside before it entered the suburb where I lived. I tramped through the snow, oblivious to the surroundings as two words kept attacking my brain over and over again: "prima donna, prima donna, prima donna . . ."

Twenty years later a friend jokingly called me a prima donna

and was flabbergasted by my reaction to the words. I hate them with a passion, as they are encased in my fragile psyche with a special toxic power to them. Those words are loaded for me in a way which makes them loathsome.

Words can be like that. I was once in a conversation that included Charles Colson, the Christian who founded Prison Fellowship International. Before he became a Christian, Colson had served as counsel to President Nixon and went to prison for his role in the Watergate scandal.

During the conversation, someone remarked, "You're beating a dead horse." Instantly Colson's countenance changed; his eyes glazed over and his face froze in pain. Though seemingly innocent, the remark was far too loaded for him to bear.

When Colson faced prison during the Watergate trials, his defense attorney was abruptly interrupted in the midst of his pleas before the bench by the stern words of the judge, "Hold it, counselor, you're beating a dead horse." With those words, Colson was sentenced to prison and the otherwise innocuous expression was branded in his mind forever.

Similarly, with the words *prima donna* I was humiliated, cut down from my pride. I was guilty as charged and I knew it, making the words all the more painful for me.

I wanted to be a good basketball player. I wanted to be a great basketball player. I never made it.

What was worse is that on that day I broke the athlete's code of humility and played the glory-hound, the show-off, the hotdog. That type of antic is readily acceptable now with the patented dunk shots of basketball players and carefully choreographed touchdown rituals of the National Football League, but in the 1950s such displays were anathema, communicating an intolerable lack of sportsmanship.

## OUR ASPIRATION FOR SIGNIFICANCE

Why do we do such things?

Deeply ensconced in the marrow of our bones is the *aspiration for significance*. The phrase is abstract, but it defines the clamoring beat of every human heart for self-esteem.

### **Why We Want Our Lives to Count**

We want our lives to count. We yearn to believe that in some way we are important. This inner drive is as intense as our need for water and oxygen.

We argue about religion and politics, abortion and homosexuality, nuclear weapons and welfare programs. We bicker about a host of things, but at one point we are all in harmony: every person among us wants to be treated with dignity and worth.

The hunger for esteem is the propelling force behind the entrepreneur's brilliant enterprise, the athlete's competitive spirit, the warrior's lust for conquest. This elemental drive has been dissected and analyzed by scholars, peeled layer by layer and subjected to the closest scrutiny, only to be praised by some and damned by others. No sentient person, however, denies the brute fact of this drive in all of us.

The aspiration for significance can be known by other names and called by other terms. The businessman might call it "success motivation" or the "goal of achievement." Our founding fathers spoke of it as the "pursuit of happiness."

The hunger for significance is consuming, and when it eludes us it leaves an empty void gnawing to be filled. The hollow point aches for satisfaction. We dream, we hope, we fantasize our moment in the sun, hoarding the scraps of success in the trophy room of our souls.

More often we fail. We lose. We come in second.

We fix tomorrow as the due date for success but tomorrow becomes today and the magic moment is postponed. Some adjust their goals, others surrender to despair, still others go mad. Some are driven to try harder, reaching down into a hidden reservoir of strength, finding new sources of energy to muffle the inner voices that accuse them. We cannot bear to lose. We weep for ourselves, sometimes with quiet dignity, other times with inarticulate moans and sometimes with piercing screams. We make excuses, point at others for cheating us, and march in protest with picket signs.

Why would women enter coal mines and risk their lives in subterranean caverns or climb in police cruisers to brave the felons' guns? Why? For the same reason men do it, to strive for significance. The quest for significance crosses sexual lines. It is a human quest that involves every man and every woman.

Consider Max Anderson and Ben Abruzzo, who ventured to be the first human beings to cross the Atlantic Ocean in a helium-filled balloon after all previous attempts had failed with the loss of five lives. Their first attempt in *Double Eagle* aborted in the frigid waters of Iceland, leaving Ben Abruzzo permanently crippled from severe frostbite and his body weakened by hypothermia. Why in 1978 would the two men, both millionaires in their own right, try it again and succeed in *Double Eagle II*?

Charles McCarry answers that question in his chronicle of the event.

It was possible to die. But if you did, you would first have lived through the worst things a man can face: storms at great altitudes, wind, rain, snow, ice, lightning—uncontrollable and unimaginable forces. You would go in one side of the unknown in an open gondola, suspended beneath a bag filled with gas so slippery, so thin, that it could pour through a mere pinhole in the fabric, hemorrhaging helium as a pierced heart spurts blood. If you had the skill and the nerve, and

the Spartan discipline, to come out the other side alive, you would be a man unlike any other.<sup>1</sup>

Our search for personal worth has been described in a variety of ways. The metaphor of the “pyramid principle” is used to describe the structure of society. Like the pyramid, society has a broad base with much room at the bottom.

From the base, society moves upward, not in parallel lines to form a square, but in lines which converge at the peak of the pyramid. Each level of the pyramid has a rank, a social echelon marked in ascending fashion moving toward the apex. There is but the tiniest space at the top and few can attain it. Yet people fight to move away from the masses buried at the bottom, seeking the higher esteem associated with the top levels.

We want to hold our index finger in the air, shouting, “We are number one!” We want to win the race of rats and move up the organizational ladder.

The principle of upward mobility defines the mad dash of the social climber and the importance of the “register” to the elitist. The right schools, the proper attire, the finely honed etiquette—all attest to one’s niche on the pyramid.

The world has been saturated with blood by madmen scrambling for the top. The desire to get ahead, to move up, can incite the worst degrees of selfishness and crudest forms of ruthlessness within us. The evil that flows from the quest can make our desire for significance nothing more than an animal-like lust to dominate.

We must pause for a moment of caution lest we throw the baby out with the bathwater. Our quest for esteem can take on a Jekyll-Hyde character; our virtues can become vices if not tempered by restraint. The quest for worth can become a lust for power; the desire for significance can make us egomaniacs, blind to everything but our own success.

### **When Our Goals Collide**

The problem is people. I am a person and I seek to be respected by other people. Those other people also want to be respected, and sometimes their goals and mine collide.

What happens when our goals collide determines how we value people. We can treat our differences in a spirit of mutual respect or seek to crush each other with brutality.

The search for significance is not wicked in itself; no evil dwells in the desire for achievement. To improve our performance adds to self-esteem while making us more productive in the process. But if our climb is over the dead and mutilated bodies of other people, then the aspiration for significance has run amuck.

There is a thin line between wickedness and nobility. The seven deadly sins are but seven created aspirations gone askew. They are seven blessed virtues become seven deadly distortions.

Self-esteem corrupts to *pride*; the quest for material welfare crosses the border to *covetousness*; the hunger for personal intimacy degenerates to *lust*. Pain turns to *anger* and hunger to *gluttony*. Admiration and honor are sullied by *envy*, and our need for rest surrenders to *sloth*.

What is it that makes us people and not mere animals? We speak of the rat race as if we were brutish rodents rushing about a maze, seeking the passage that will lead to one more bit of cheese. Sometimes we behave as beasts, but every fiber of our bodies protests that we are not dumb animals, and we resent it when others treat us as if we were.

### **When We Are Treated Beneath Our Dignity**

It hurts when we are treated beneath our dignity. We have unwritten rules that define our social status. Even in high school, a clear pecking order was established. The educational curriculum was divided into three parts: College Preparatory, General, and Vocational, ranked socially in that order.

Graduation brought other subtle distinctions to the surface. At the top of the social list were those enrolled in college, followed in order by nurses school, business or secretarial school, vocational school, the armed forces, and finally by those who were finished with formal education and opted for jobs.

I prided myself on my lack of snobbishness about going to college, where I found another structure of social prestige divided between the various academic majors. I endorsed the all-men-are-created-equal creed and despised the middle-class addiction to status symbols. Then something happened that caught me in the embarrassing discovery that I was lying to myself.

I was a philosophy major and proud of it, seeing the discipline as the domain of the intellectual elite. But summer vacation posed a problem. The want ads listed few requests for part-time neophyte philosophers.

While my friends from the science department landed lucrative summer jobs as laboratory assistants, I was looking for ditches to dig where I could cogitate between shovel loads. I spent one summer digging graves, and the next I was a laborer at a city hospital.

One summer morning as I was sweeping up cigarette butts and other debris from the front steps of the hospital, I noticed a group of nursing students approaching the entrance. I leaned on my broom, flashed my most charming smile and said, "Good morning."

No response. They passed me by as though I were a miserable beggar too lowly to be acknowledged.

I had to stifle the impulse to run after them, shouting, "Hey, wait. You don't understand. I'm not really a laborer. I'm a college guy—a philosophy major and everything!"

I identified for a moment with John H. Griffin, the investigative reporter who had written a series of articles and then a book

about the indignities he experienced while posing as a black man in a white man's world.

The snub by the student nurses did not go unnoticed. Another laborer, the janitor in charge of the nurses school across the street, observed my obvious discomfort. He crossed the street and warmly introduced himself, speaking with a thick foreign accent.

When I explained to him that I was a college student studying philosophy he started asking me pointed questions about heavy philosophical matters. I felt silly talking philosophy to a janitor who could hardly speak English. I was soon astonished, however, by his obvious mastery of the subject and started asking questions of him.

His story overwhelmed me as he explained that he was a survivor of Dachau, one of Hitler's infamous death camps. He had been arrested and sent to the concentration camp only weeks before he was due to complete his doctorate in philosophy in a German university. His views had attracted the interest of the Gestapo, the dreaded Nazi secret police organization.

His wife and three of his children died in the gas chambers of Dachau. He and one daughter survived. Since coming to the United States, he had labored continuously with one consuming passion: to get his daughter through school. He swelled with pride as he told me she had just graduated from the University of Pittsburgh a few weeks earlier.

I went back to my broom and the cigarette butts, profoundly ashamed of my own tale of the woes of indignity, wondering if I had just met an angel unawares.

### **How We Measure Our Self-Worth**

We tend to measure our self-worth by how our work is valued. Salary levels and pay scales mean more to us than the material goods money will buy. Whether it is appropriate or

not, multitudes of people take their pay level as a barometer to record their worth as persons.

In a society where such terms of human value are considered, a burden of doubt is cast upon the person at the lower end of the pay-scale mechanism. A shadow falls across the brightness of his own image, making him feel the sting of the question of whether his life is worthless.

Socrates declared, "The unexamined life is not worth living." True, few of the laboring class reach the Socratic level of self-examination, but the message of society gets through to the unlettered and uncultured just the same. Formal education is not needed for one to comprehend the judgment, "You really are not worth very much."

Yet the man labors on, hoping against hope that the judgment of society is at least partially wrong. "Someday," he thinks, "people will recognize that I have value."

In the meantime he seeks his affirmation from his wife and children and, if that fails, from his dog. Dogs tend to be totally ignorant of the protocol of status.

Beyond the home exists the camaraderie of the tavern, the vicarious thrill of the victories of his favorite sports team, the secret hope that he will hit it big in the numbers or win the lottery sweepstakes. Then, he thinks, he will be somebody. Others try to silence the accusing voices with too many boilermakers or to seek solace by conjuring up a tough-guy image.

### **When We Intimidate and Dominate to Fulfill Our Aspirations**

The tough-guy image, the macho syndrome, is a breeding ground for the bully. "There is always one in the crowd." Every large group has someone in it who adopts the style of the bully in an attempt to wrest a position of leadership and power.

The techniques of the bully may include physical coercion,

intellectual intimidation, or political extortion. The tactics vary, but the mood is the same. The bully may be successful for a season, but he attains his status with the sacrifice of love and friendship, incurring the contempt of his wounded victims.

The message of the bully is simple: If you will not love me, you will at least respect me. If you do not respect me, you will at least fear me.

A depressing book that became a best-seller was *Winning through Intimidation*. The author, Robert J. Ringer, adopts a cynical worldview and gives a handbook on power tactics for succeeding in business. He adopts a twisted version of the Golden Rule for a motto, “Do unto others before they do it unto you.”

The world is a highly competitive arena where weakness is rarely an asset. Where competition abounds, intimidation does more abound, as an edge is gained when an opponent is caught in the grip of fear. A frightened enemy is already half-beaten, as every athlete will attest. The tactics of intimidation may be seen in the growling of a linebacker, the stare of the boxer at the weigh-in, the message pitch of the brush-back artist, and the high-flying stick of the “enforcer” on the hockey rink.

Sam Snead, a three-time Masters champion, relates that in the golden era of match play on the golf circuit, he became more aggressive the moment he noticed the glint of fear in his opponent’s eyes or the change in tempo of his opponent’s rhythm of smoking. These were telltale signs of an inner tightening that is customarily described as “choking.” Since fear is so paralyzing a force, it is not strange that the intense competitor will seek to instill it in his opponent.

If the Lombardiism of “winning isn’t everything, it is the only thing” is true, then ethics have no place in the realm of competition. But Vince Lombardi did not believe the clever saying that is so often attributed to him.<sup>2</sup> His impeccable record as a

coach would not have earned him the accolades he received had his victories been sullied by unsportsmanlike conduct.

It does matter how you play the game, and the public soon tires of the antics of the athletic bully or the spoiled brats of professional sports whose tantrums violate the spirit of the games. The villains of the old video days of studio wrestling were carefully choreographed to lose, as the promoters understood that the public delights in seeing the bully vanquished. We root for the underdog, joining the plea of Adrian, "Win, Rocky."

The line between the intense competitor and the tyrant is thin. It is the line that separates beauty and ugliness. It is the line between Jack Nicklaus and Jack the Ripper, between Queen Elizabeth and Lizzie Borden.<sup>3</sup>

The tyrant's stock and trade is fear. Without fear, he cannot rule. To stay in power, the totalitarian government depends on keeping the populace in fear. The pogrom, the secret police, the bloody purge, and the art of extortion are the weapons of the tyrant. These are the politics of intimidation, and they find their less sophisticated counterparts on the floor of every factory, in the cloakrooms of every corporation, and in the sexual harassment of the business office.

Competition provides the zest for our aspirations, but the zest is burdened by the ease with which our nobility suffers from the fatal flaw of ruthless lust for dominance. Too little drive for significance yields personal inertia; too much breeds tyranny.

As evil reveals the brilliant glory of virtue, so tyranny and ruthless competition accent the reality of our innate need for significance. Let the instinct wither and life becomes paltry; let the instinct run rampant without restraint and life becomes cruel.

## THE SEARCH FOR RESPECT

Only in the United States can a man earn a million dollars by telling one joke. The joke is cast in a wide variety of backdrops and life situations, but the punch line remains forever the same. Comedian Rodney Dangerfield made his living with the same line repeated incessantly: "I get no respect."

### **Why We Laugh at Disrespect**

What is it that makes it possible for us to laugh at the dismal plight of a man who gets no respect? Are we a nation of masochists who enjoy a vicarious pleasure from suffering the pain of indignity? Or are we a nation of sadists who get our pleasure from reducing another person to abject humiliation?

Perhaps our laughter springs from a different source, being akin to the emotions that make it seem appropriate to whistle in the dark. Perhaps we laugh because we cannot afford to cry.

I remember a sugar maple tree that marked the outer edge of an apple orchard that had survived the bulldozers of a new suburban development. The orchard was a geographical anomaly, standing as a buffer zone between our tree-lined street and the community shopping center.

As a boy, I loved to walk through the orchard on my way to the store—except at night, and especially in the winter, as the boughs of that great maple were bare of leaves and stretched their grotesque tentacles into the night. When the moon was bright, I could look up from the center of the orchard and see the frightening arms of the tree looming in front of me like some giant bogeyman about to grab me. I used to experience stark terror as I walked past the tree.

My custom was to whistle softly as I passed by, stuffing my hands in my pockets and assuming a casual gait as I sauntered by my nemesis. My whistling was soft because fear had taken any

surplus breath from me. What a strange thing to do, as if the tree could be deceived by my outward display of cavalier courage.

So we laugh at disrespect as if by so doing we can fool its power, hoping it will not reach out and make us its next victim.

No one likes to be insulted or to be made fun of. The one who is the butt of other people's fun is left outside the camp of humor. To lose respect is to be crushed in the inner spirit; it is to be humiliated.

### **How Compliments Enhance Our Dignity**

Conversely, it is affirming to be praised and honored by other people. Such honors may be embarrassing at times, particularly if a shy person is thrust too swiftly into the center of attention, but generally we prefer the compliment to the insult, as the compliment enhances our dignity while the insult demeans it.

The organization that employs me once engaged the professional services of a management consultant. I looked forward to spending time with him to discover insights about management structures, models, and the like. My first encounter turned out to be a surprise as he devoted his attention to probing my personality and emotional makeup before we could get down to business.

His opening gambit was to raise the following question: "What are the five most meaningful compliments you've ever received?"

The consultant handed me a pencil and a piece of paper and asked me to jot down in brief the five compliments that came to my mind, noting from whom I had received them and at what point in my life they had come. I filled out the paper as instructed and was surprised by the things I discovered about myself and my life.

One of the five memorable compliments I wrote on the paper came from my eighth-grade English teacher after

completing a homework assignment. We had been instructed to write a descriptive paragraph, letting our imaginations roam freely as we made our virgin attempt at creative writing. When the papers were graded the teacher announced, "Before I return these papers, there is one I want to read aloud."

To my unmitigated shock, she exposed to the ears of everyone in the class the content of my descriptive paragraph and posted my paper on the bulletin board where everyone could see it. Few grasped the significance of that act for my dignity. The bulletin board was normally reserved for the display of the students' artwork. I was the poorest art student in the class and had the ignominious distinction of being the only student to never have had his artwork displayed on the bulletin board.

In one fell swoop, I made the big time as my English composition was considered a work of art. After class, I went to the front of the room to gaze at the impossible, to stare at my trophy that carried me to the heights of glory. There, emblazoned on the margin, beneath the grade, were the words of my teacher, "R.C., don't ever let anyone tell you that you can't write."

Do you have any idea how many people have since tried to tell me I cannot write?

Who in his right mind would be foolhardy enough to risk the red pencils of the critics by putting his work into print? Do you realize there are people out there who make money by being professional critics? They are the people who give meaning to the word anxiety for filmmakers, playwrights, and authors.

The scourge of the author is to compose a manuscript, submit it to the critical scrutiny of a publisher, only to receive the dreaded reply of rejection. If one is successful enough to get a manuscript accepted in provisional form, that is merely the beginning of the red pencil syndrome.

One of my books went through seven revisions before I submitted the final polished version. At that point, my editor voiced

fair warning, saying, “You’ve never been through our copy editing procedures. Don’t be discouraged if they make numerous critical suggestions.”

I assured my kindly editor that I would not be offended by a rigorous process of emendation, as it would afford me a much-needed free course in copy editing. When I received my manuscript back from the copy editor, however, it was covered with red ink.

I don’t know exactly how many marks were on the manuscript, but I made a fair estimate. I counted the number of marks on the first ten pages and then figured an average for the entire manuscript. The estimate totaled approximately ten thousand critical marks.

That finding should be enough to convince the most recalcitrant egomaniac that he ought to give up. But there they were, the words of my teacher, “Never let anyone tell you that you can’t write.” And here I am again, writing my fool fingers off.

*The treasured compliment.* After I had listed my “five most meaningful compliments,” my management consultant then went on to give me a crash course in the psychology of the well-timed and well-placed compliment. He asserted that we tend to treasure compliments given to us from *people we esteem*. If we respect the person who pays us a compliment, we will be more likely to cherish the praise and nurse it to our bosom. Such praise will add steel to our brittle self-respect.

The compliments that appear on a list of “most meaningful” are those given by people in positions of authority or leadership over us. The comment of the parent, the teacher, the coach, or the boss is the one that carries the extra weight.

*The credibility factor.* Another crucial element that weighs heavily in the value of the compliment is the *credibility factor*. For a

compliment to be embraced in the way of permanence, it must be believable. People exhibit an uncanny ability to distinguish the compliment from its fraudulent counterpart, flattery.

Flattery is really an insult disguised as a compliment. It appears affirming on the surface, but its dishonest motive sabotages its esteem value. Flattery is designed as a tool of manipulation and is stiff-armed by the recipient.

We have an expression that has moved to the rank of the cliché because of its obvious truth: “Flattery will get you nowhere.” The expression exposes the hypocritical design of the remark.

We resist flattery because we do not believe it. A genuine compliment, on the other hand, is believable and we leap to embrace it.

People flatter us at times by lauding our genuine virtues, but they do so with ulterior motives that mar the message, and any complimentary value contained is lost in the morass of manipulation. It is the authentic compliment, sincerely offered, that enhances human dignity and builds a reservoir of encouragement from which we draw when our souls become arid.

### **How Insults Debase Our Self-Image**

My consultant’s paper had a reverse side to it. After I had finished the above experiment he directed me to turn the paper and list the five most painful insults I had ever received. This was an exercise in pain with no pleasure in it.

Just the writing down of remarks made long ago awakened old wounds within me. I asked myself in the process, “I wonder if the people who said these things to me have any idea how painful they have been?”

My next thought was terrifying: “I wonder how many people would number things I’ve said to them on their lists of painful insults?”

The power of human speech was suddenly awesome to me.

Just as the genuine compliment can be a catalyst for human encouragement and positive character development, so the insult or thoughtless criticism can have a crippling and paralyzing effect. I think of a stunningly beautiful woman who came to me for counseling. In her mid-thirties, she had reached a crisis point in her marriage that was pushing her to despair. She confided that she was affected by a form of sexual frigidity that was ruining her relationship with her husband.

As we discussed her marital history, she revealed that she suffered from a debased self-image, centering on her physical appearance. Twisting her handkerchief in anguish, she blurted out that she couldn't enter freely into sex with her husband because she was so ugly. I was wary at this point, as the woman sitting in front of me, if measured by modern numerical standards, would surely be a "10."

Her story harkened me back to my youth when I had to endure fishing trips from my mother who, after appearing in a dazzling new dress and with her hair artfully coiffed, would say in mock despair, "I look awful."

I was the "fish" who was to respond to the bait on cue with the appropriate compliment, "Oh, no, Mother, you look wonderful."

I was sure this was a *déjà vu* experience calling for the same kind of laudatory assurance. I soon discovered that her grief was not a coquette's charade and that she truly did believe she was ugly. On the surface the self-image appeared utterly groundless. When we probed the past, however, the reasons for her feeling of ugliness emerged with clarity.

The feeling stemmed from an incident that violated her adolescence. As a teenager, her body blossomed early, eliciting hungry looks and words of praise from boys admiring her figure. From the neck down, she was a winner.

The problem centered on her face. She was tormented by

recurring acne and made homely by an extra-thick-lensed pair of glasses. Added to these barriers to pulchritude were the cumbersome wires attached to her teeth, designed to make straight what nature had made crooked.

Painfully aware of these physical impediments, she was walking across the playground one day when she overheard one of the upper-class boys comment *sotto voce* to his buddies, “She wouldn’t be bad if you put a bag over her head.”

The words pierced like a dagger, carrying extra force since their author was a young man deemed the most popular in school. The “standard” of good looks had just delivered a judgment from Olympus, and the verdict was devastating.

She carried a poem in her wallet throughout her high school years:

If love is blind  
And lovers can’t see,  
Why in the world  
Doesn’t someone love me?

Twenty years later, men would look at her and behold no sign of adolescent acne, no evidence of glasses—as the spectacles had long ago given way to contact lenses and the magic of orthodontia had done its work with braces. The ugly duckling had been marvelously transformed into a beautiful swan in everybody’s eyes but her own. She was still looking for an appropriate bag in which to hide her head.

Mothers usually give good advice, but not always. My initial encounter with the brutality of social discourse came when an older boy in our neighborhood assaulted me with taunting names. I sought the solace of home and mother’s apron.

Drying my tears tenderly, she took the opportunity to instill in me some homespun wisdom designed to serve as a shield

against such torment. She said, “Son, when people call you nasty names, don’t let that get you down. Just say to them, ‘Sticks and stones will break my bones, but names will never hurt me.’”

Armed with this dart-quenching platitude, I returned once more to the arena of social interplay. The bully saw me coming and met me with a maelstrom of verbal abuse. I unleashed my psychological weapon and began to sing, “Sticks and stones . . .”

I was not able to finish the ditty as my words gave way to choking sobs. My shield collapsed under fire.

The reason my mother’s panacea failed is elementary—it simply was not true. Names can hurt, and the damage they inflict can be more severe than that wrought by sticks and stones.

Hit me with a stick and break my arm, and in six weeks I have recovered from my injury. Hit me in the head with a stone, opening a bloody gash, and a few stitches can repair the wound. But play havoc with my soul with a brutal insult or an insensitive criticism, and you scar me for the rest of my life.

### **When Our Weaknesses Are Criticized**

There is a kind of criticism that is duly named “constructive criticism.” Such criticism can peel the opaque film from our eyes, removing the cataracts of self-blindness. Constructive criticism is beneficial, but there are few examples of it. Most of what passes for constructive criticism is, in fact, destructive criticism. The actual ratio cannot be plotted but an educated guess would place it around 95 percent.

*Destructive criticism.* Many criticisms we receive are about weaknesses we are already painfully aware of, and most such criticisms tend to tear down rather than to build up. When the criticism is prefaced by the words, “I’m only telling you this for your own good,” look out. What follows usually is not designed with a view toward your well-being.

We have been taught to accept such criticism with grace when at times it would be better to run for our lives. When you or I seek to mollify a verbal attack by words of self-defense, the explanation provokes the adversary's further rebuke, "Now don't get defensive."

The perpetrator of verbal abuse not only wants the right to assault you but demands the further right to do it unimpeded by your natural defense mechanisms. For our critics to presume such rights of assault would be like Joe Montana lining up the San Francisco 49ers for an offensive play only to call time out and protest to the referee that the opposing team was being unfair in placing a defensive unit on the field.

Christians are particularly vulnerable to the unbridled assault of the tongue. We are taught that sanctification requires the practice of humility and a spirit of long-suffering patience. Those virtues are holy indeed, but there is a vast difference between meekness and voluntary doormat-ism.

Religious persons also may be guilty of abusing the biblical mandate to exhortation and admonishment as a subterfuge for imposing harmful criticism. Be wary of the spiritual "brother" who prefaces his comments with "I want to say something to you in love . . ." Often what is said in the name of love is a travesty of love.

Authentic constructive criticism may be genuinely offered in love. And its value is inestimable. The point is we must be careful to discern between the constructive and the destructive varieties.

When someone plunges a knife into our soul, it is not our Christian duty to say, "Thank you, dear brother, I needed that. Please push the blade in deeper and twist it a little. It is doing spiritual wonders for me."

The inflicting of thoughtless criticism or the demeaning insult is not only destructive but foolish as well. Little of a

positive nature can be gained by it. Even the novice dog trainer knows you cannot improve the animal's obedience by calling the dog "stupid." Yet we not only call our animals dumb, we use the same kind of disrespectful language for human beings.

I know a highly successful businessman who confesses that the drive in his life was initiated by an irate comment from his mother, "You will never amount to anything." This poor man is driven to prove his mother wrong and takes little satisfaction from his accomplishments as he lives in mortal fear that if he relaxes for a moment, his mother's negative verdict will be proven correct.

*Constructive criticism.* During a seminar with recently graduated registered nurses, we discussed the subject of criticism. During the conversation, one senior supervisor's name was frequently mentioned. The nurses were unsparing in their accolades for that woman's style of giving constructive criticism.

As we inquired about her style, the nurses revealed her secret. At the end of every working day, she met privately with each nurse under her charge and asked the same three questions.

She first asked, "What was the most gratifying thing you accomplished today?" The student nurse was encouraged to begin her evaluation period by discussing her daily successes, bringing them to the attention of the supervisor.

The second question was, "What did you do today that you would do differently if you had another opportunity?" This allowed the student to practice self-criticism, which is easier on the ego than listening to the critical evaluation of someone else.

The final question was, "In what areas of your work can I give you help?"

The discussion of the three questions was all that was usually necessary to keep the students on target and in a growing mode. Some tried to invent successes and deny failures, but the

supervisor was sharp enough to detect that and put a stop to it. The system worked admirably, producing sound results. Her students felt that she was on their team and were encouraged to greater efforts toward excellence.

The biblical concern for respect is built on the concept of “honor.” The mandate is given repeatedly that we are to show honor to one another (see Rom. 12:10). We are called to “honor the king” (1 Peter 2:17 NKJV), to “honor those in authority” (see Rom. 13:1–6) and to “love the brotherhood” (see 1 Peter 2:17 NKJV). The Decalogue (the Ten Commandments) itself contains a precept to “honor your father and your mother” (Exod. 20:12).

The honor enjoined is not the superficial sort easily attained by the presentation of a plaque or the awarding of a testimonial dinner. It is the routine daily respect accorded the dignity of other people that is in view. It requires sensitivity to the self-esteem of other people.

Honoring and respecting others admits to a realization that the most fragile mechanism on this planet is the human ego and to a corresponding awareness that the most potent weapon against the ego is the human tongue. Though insults may be humorous when wielded by a master comedian at a Hollywood roast, it is impossible to honor people with the insult of malice.

## **OUR SEARCH FOR RECOGNITION**

In *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, Dale Carnegie asserts that the easiest way to penetrate the inner sanctum of an important executive’s office or to gain an appointment with him is by indicating that the purpose of your call is to gather information for an article of praise about him or to present him with an invitation to be the honored guest at a testimonial dinner. Carnegie understood that people like to be recognized for their achievements.

I recall being seated at an annual convocation at a college where I had just completed my first year on the faculty. Part of the academic ceremony was given over to the announcements of the elevations in rank of the professors. The strata ranged from *instructor* to *full professor*, and I was serving my apprenticeship on the bottom of the totem pole as an instructor.

I listened eagerly for my name as the promotions were announced and was crestfallen when I realized it was absent from the list. I was particularly troubled because when the president of the institution hired me, he told me if I performed well I would be elevated to the rank of assistant professor after the first year.

On numerous occasions throughout the academic year, the president had taken me aside to give me compliments for my work. So when I was passed over for promotion, I was hurt and confused and went to the president for an explanation. He was embarrassed by the omission and confessed that he did remember his commitment.

But it was a sticky problem, as he had later discovered there was a policy that a faculty member had to be on the staff for a minimum of two years before being eligible for promotion. The president was in an awkward position when the dean informed him of the policy. The dean felt the pain of the president's plight but was caught in the policy squeeze.

To rectify matters, the dean invited me into his office for a private conference. Stumbling for a graceful exit from the dilemma he said to me, "We have been very impressed with your performance here and in order to enhance your prestige with the student body, we have decided to promote you to the rank of assistant professor."

He went on to explain the matter of the policy and the error of the president and concluded his remarks by saying, "Since this goes against faculty policy, we will have to keep this a secret between us as there can be no formal announcement about it."

The compromise was clear; I was to be promoted but in secrecy. Having forgotten his original gambit, the dean turned crimson when I begged the obvious question, “If the reason for the promotion is to give me prestige, with whom will I have it if nobody knows about it?”

Then we both held our sides as we roared in laughter at the humor of the whole thing.

Secret recognition does not do the job. It is recognition before one’s peers that enhances self-esteem. The awarding of trophies and medals can be far more valuable to the recipients than their monetary cost. Tokens become treasures when they carry the symbolic clout of recognition.

The gold watch for loyal service, the plaque commemorating participation in a civic project, the diamond ring signaling visible commitment to the engaged woman—all are symbols that capture emotion in tangible form. They guarantee a niche in a special group of people; they carve our names into a timeless tree; they paint a portrait in the faceless crowd; they testify, “I am somebody.”

Pat Conroy, in his epic novel *The Lords of Discipline*, describes the moment when the military college senior is awarded his coveted ring:

My hand felt different as I looked at the ring for the first time. I studied its adroit, inexorable images and translated the silent eloquence of its mythology and language so simply and unceasingly uttered in gold. Until this moment an essential part of me, some vital and unnamable center, had never felt that I was really part of the school. But now the cold gleam of the ring had enclosed me, bound me, and linked me to the Line, for as long as I lived. My hand had sprung suddenly alive as though I had taken its existence for granted. The ring on my finger made an articulate statement; it conveyed a piece of

extraordinarily important information to me. It said—no, it shouted out—that Will McLean had added his weight and his story and his own bruised witness to the history of the ring, to the meaning of the ring, and its symbolism. I had encoded my own messages, scripts, and testimonies into the blazonry of the ring. I studied my new identity, my validation, and I felt changed, completely transfigured in the surprising grandeur of its gold. I was part of it. I had made it.<sup>4</sup>

It might be helpful to go back and read the excerpt again as Conroy captures the power of the symbol of human recognition. It is the green jacket of the Masters golf champion, the Olympic gold medal, the Oscar, the Phi Beta Kappa key, the Super Bowl ring, and the Nobel Prize all wrapped into one. These things are inestimable in value.

Some people are so gifted and talented that they receive a surplus of honor. Most people spend their days under a cloak of anonymity, hungry for crumbs of honor that may fall their way. There is a surplus of criticism that crushes their spirits an inch at a time.

One psychologist worked out a calculus of criticism and praise by which he argued that it takes nine compliments to undo the pain of one criticism. Our minds tend to fix on the negative when it is directed at us. The minister who hears fifty compliments for his sermon can have his afternoon meal soured by one burning criticism.

Every human being has something about him that is praiseworthy. The genuine compliment is one that crystallizes the strength of a person in words as trophies inscribe it in silver. To be recognized as one who is esteemed, who has worth, is to feel the heady exultation of discovery. We cry with Archimedes, “Eureka! I have found it!”<sup>5</sup>

## FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

1. How does your work affect your self-dignity?
2. Where are your aspirations for significance invested?
3. What are the status symbols of your community and work?
4. What kind of bullies do you encounter in your community and workplace?
5. What are the most meaningful compliments you've ever received? Who gave them?
6. What are the most powerful insults or criticisms you've ever received? Who gave them?
7. How do you handle constructive criticism?
8. How do you rate the recognition level you receive for your work?
9. What are your most important tokens or symbols of esteem? Why?
10. What are your greatest achievements? Your worst failures?