

Question: Isn't the doctrine of total hereditary depravity a rather severe attack on self-esteem?

Many theologians have long held that we have inherited the sin of Adam. This assertion is usually supported by selected biblical statements and by reference to the prevalence of human sin. Instead of the doctrine of "hereditary depravity," I believe that the Bible teaches that we have inherited death as a consequence of Adam's sin but we have not inherited the guilt of that sin (Romans 5:12). The prophet Ezekiel stated: "The soul who sins is the one who will die. The son will not share the guilt of the father, nor will the father share the guilt of the son. The righteousness of the righteous man will be credited to him, and the wickedness of the wicked will be charged against him" (Ezekiel 18:20). The prevalence of sin is best explained as the result of each person's choosing to sin and not as a sign of guilt by nature (Romans 3:21). Jesus told his disciples: "Unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:3). This statement does not sound as though Jesus thought little children were born depraved sinners.

While it is true that low self-esteem may sometimes be the result of our sense of guilt because of sin in our lives, we can know assuredly that God values each one of us and that he has provided a way for us to be free from the guilt and power of sin. The biblical affirmation that we have all sinned (Romans 3:21) is intended to bring us to an awareness of our guilt and need of forgiveness. This affirmation means that we should not continue to wallow in our guilt and low self-esteem but that we can find freedom from that guilt by the grace of God through faith (Ephesians 2:1-8). This freedom is found when we turn to Jesus in repentance and obedient faith.

Instead of teaching that we are all born as depraved sinners, the Bible says that God created us in his own image (Genesis 1:27), giving something of himself to each created person. Because that image of God has been marred by the sins we have committed, Jesus came into our world to renew that image in us (2 Corinthians 3:18; Colossians 3:10). Moreover, God has given each of us neither less nor more of himself than he gave any other human being, regardless of attributes like physical beauty or intellectual capacity.

In addition, the gospel message declares that “God so loved the world” (John 3:16). But his love for the whole world does not keep him from knowing and loving each of us individually. He knows our strengths and weaknesses, our failures as well as our successes; yet, he loves us and paid the price of his Son’s blood to purchase us for himself (Acts 20:28; 1 Corinthians 6:19). Knowing that God so highly values us should provide the encouragement and hope that we need to build a proper self-esteem based on God’s love instead of upon our human works.

Although the biblical statement that we are all sinners may seem destructive to self-esteem, the Bible has placed an even greater emphasis on redemption from sin and re-creation in the image of God. May each of us learn to emphasize our strengths found through faith in Jesus Christ so we can put our past failures and guilt behind us. God values each of us. Even if this present world devalues us, our value before God is what ultimately matters. Jesus said: “Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten by God. Indeed, the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows” (Luke 12:6-7). Most importantly, we do not need to remain guilty sinners, we can become children of the King.

[Send questions or comments to University Church of Christ, 801 N. 12th, Murray, KY 42071 or phone 270-753-1881. This article is reproduced on the web: www.nchrist.org] 2011/06/24