

## PSALM 139:13-16 7-19-15

### *SELF ACCEPTANCE*

(Psalm 139) The internet world has been flooded for the last six weeks with pictures and stories about Bruce Jenner or Caitlyn Jenner. Is he or she one person or two? For our purposes I will go with one person named Bruce Jenner who decided to change his name and a lot of other things. This is Bruce Jenner as I once knew him, the handsome Olympic champion in the decathlon in 1976 which gave him some right to be considered the greatest athlete in the world. Jenner has managed to stay in the spotlight in recent years by his association with the Kardashian family of television fame. But apparently, despite his success and his fame, this man of multiple marriages and children was tormented for many years with a self-loathing, an inability to accept who he was and how he was made. In his case this was a gender dysphoria. He said he felt more like a woman. Because the technology and the money was available to him, Bruce, at the age of 65 went through a couple of surgeries and has re-introduced himself to the world as Caitlyn, a female. Now, this is a news item that is a gift to late-night comedians but in point of fact is truly tragic, tragic for our society, and certainly for him. How tormented he must have been for so very long – and, I am sure, still is because his choices are not solutions at all.

Curiously, at the same time the news is full of Jenner tales there is also this bizarre story coming out of Spokane, Washington where a 37 year-old woman named Rachel Dolezal was the head of the local chapter of the NAACP or the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Rachel had for years claimed to be African-American but was revealed by her parents to have actually been born as entirely Caucasian. Rachel apparently longed to be accepted as a black person, and so presented herself and had sought to darken her skin via rays and sprays. Once exposed, Rachel defended her blackness while also admitting her heritage. But because many felt her credibility was shot, she resigned her position with the NAACP. The comparisons of the two stories has led to all kinds of intriguing conversations. If we are open to people changing gender, can they also change race? Is it possible for our externals to say one thing about us while we claim to be something else on the inside?

These stories raise all kinds of difficult questions for us as a society and for us as a church. But what should be clear to all is that we have in Bruce and Rachel, two examples of persons who could not come to grips with how they were created by God. This is very sad. Mark Twain once wrote that, *the worst loneliness is to not be comfortable with yourself*. And this problem is not isolated to

an exceptional few. The basic problem for Bruce and Rachel is a problem that many of us have experienced and many of us do. Especially challenged by this are our adolescent young people. When top-level high school students were asked about whether they were satisfied with their basic appearance, 95% said, “No.” We can’t know for sure what kind of numbers we might have gotten on that a hundred years ago, but the experience of self-rejection is a contemporary epidemic. Why might that be? I think a big reason is the impact of evolutionary theory on our world. The precepts of evolution rob men of any sense of being designed by a wise God. We aren’t tall enough, attractive enough, smart enough and come to see ourselves as losers in the genetic lottery. That is understandably very hard to work through.

One segment in our society that has clearly struggled mightily with this are those with a same-sex attraction. Historically they were called names and cast out of mainstream society. For the last three decades they have fought for and largely won a cultural acceptance. Some may think that the Supreme Court’s ordering the states to sanction homosexual marriage will end the crusade, but I can assure you it will not. At the root, the homosexual activists are seeking something that goes beyond legal legitimacy. They want the abolition of all negative voices. They are desperate to be told, “You are okay” and to shut down any voices to the contrary because when those voices exist it makes self-acceptance more challenging regardless of any legal or cultural acceptance. So, expect over the next decade a knock-down drag-out struggle between free-speech rights and a new so-called “right” of unchallenged erotic license. It goes back to the struggle for self-acceptance.

Psalm 139 is a Psalm of David that expresses the perspective of one who has come to a place of self-acceptance grounded in the idea of creation by a personal, wise and loving God. 139:**13-16** *For You formed my inward parts; You wove me in my mother’s womb. 14 I will give thanks to You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; Wonderful are Your works, And my soul knows it very well. 15 My frame was not hidden from You, When I was made in secret, And skillfully wrought in the depths of the earth; 16 Your eyes have seen my unformed substance; And in Your book were all written The days that were ordained for me, When as yet there was not one of them.* In this we read no arrogance, but we do read a healthy sense of identity. The psalmist sees himself as wonderfully and purposefully made – a far cry from feeling like a loser in the genetic lottery. Such a self-concept provides a wonderful foundation on which to build a life, from which to navigate relationships to others and process both the negatives and positives that come our way. Those who lack such a self-acceptance struggle in mighty ways and typically manifest some very destructive

tendencies. Consider the following five signs or indicators of self-rejection. The first indicator would be envy. Envy or jealousy and here I think mostly of a personal quality, not of a possession. We can envy someone her good looks or his size and strength or intelligence. I expect all of us do this a little bit, but some are eaten up and bitter because of the perceived advantages of others. As a high-school athlete I was always wishing I was a few inches taller and could dunk a basketball. I also was tempted to envy John Brantley who was the most coordinated person I have ever known. He could go from the football field, to the basketball court, to the baseball diamond and succeed at all of it with very little effort. For a guy like me who wanted to be a star, how annoying was that! Envy can be a real problem and it finds root in a lack of self-acceptance.

A second indicator of self-rejection is excessive concern about clothes. This one wasn't me, but some of you can maybe relate. You have this preoccupation with whatever will enhance your appearance and that flows out of a basic dislike of your physique. Body image issues show up in several ways, but hyper-attention to clothing or makeup is often one of them. Thirdly, and related to that, is a fear of people and their rejection. Because we have not accepted ourselves there is this inordinate fear that others won't either. Our fourth indicator that we lack self-acceptance is extravagance in some area of life. We spend a lot on a car, or a house or jewelry or whatever it may be because we are looking for something that will say to the world, "Tracy has it all going on. He or she is with-it, cool, a worthwhile person – why look at that shiny new thing." Fifthly and finally, there is an inability to trust God. If we believe God made us and we think He blew it big-time in the design phase, why would we trust anything else He does or says? You find yourself anywhere on that list? Most of us do. The struggle of self-acceptance is common for sinners. Now – to clarify – when I speak today about self-acceptance, I am referring to an acceptance of how God has made me, not what I am as a result of sin. I am not including in that my fallenness, my sinful heart. My natural moral character as a fallen sinner is not acceptable. By grace it is forgivable and transformable but I would never advocate an acceptance of one's sin. Okay? The problem I address today is one that even forgiven sinners have - -which is an acceptance of how I am made. Let's talk next about why that is a struggle for many of us – maybe all of us.

What leads to a lack of self-acceptance is a misguided focus. We look for self-acceptance in the wrong places. Where do we turn to find acceptance? I have two answers for you. One is that we look to other humans. The Bible calls this the fear of man. Proverbs 29:25 says **25** *the fear of man brings a snare*. It brings a snare because the humans we look to are foolish, humans are

desperately seeking their own personal validation and they are often evil. Sometimes children have their self-acceptance wrecked at home, but many go to school for that experience. And there they are teased and ridiculed, for their name, their body-shape, their hair-color, their inabilities, you name it. You look to others to discover who you are and I promise you trouble. But you don't have to look there. Eleanor Roosevelt famously said: *No one can make you feel inferior without your consent.* Did you hear that? *No one can make you feel inferior without your consent.* But many of us have basically assigned our self-concept to a popularity poll – largely because we don't think there is any other way to find it. Jesus points us to a better way, to a different focus. In John 5 the Lord says in 5:**37** *the Father who sent Me, He has testified of Me.* He suggests there that His self-concept did not come from any human, but from His father in heaven. Four verses later He says **41** *I do not receive glory from men.* Oh, Jesus had plenty of praise from men – along with the criticism. But He tells us that He did not look to humans for his affirmation. **44** *How can you believe, when you receive glory from one another and you do not seek the glory that is from the one and only God?* So there you go. Wrong focus – on human opinion. Right focus -on divine opinion. And in God you have an absolute and fixed reference point. He is perfect and He does not change.

The second misguided focus that leads us to self-rejection is a focus on externals. This may just be an outcome of the first wrong focus – because, since humans only see our externals that is where we put the emphasis. Obviously, the first thing people discover about us is our appearance. When you meet Dan Hendley what first strikes you is that I am tall, middle-aged, have a long face, a crooked nose and rosacea. How important are those things? Not much – but that is what you all know. And if we are looking for human acceptance then we naturally focus a lot of attention on outward things like physical attractiveness. They become our obsession. But how much connection do you think there really is between a person's physical appearance, their looks and their long-term happiness? How about a connection between a person's character, their godliness and long-term happiness? Consider what Jesus says happiness is all about. In the section of the gospels we call *The Beatitudes* Jesus says: *Blessed (or happy) are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Blessed are those who are merciful. Blessed are the pure in heart.* It is the internal qualities and beauties that are to be our focus, our obsession. And that is wisdom. But comparing my externals to your externals is a recipe for emotional disaster. Granted, we all do it, but we do well to grow out of it. There is a new phenomena now called *Facebook depression.* Any idea what that is about? Facebook is a platform where many people post their highlight reels. They tell about how great

their kids are, how attentive their spouse has been. Their photos show everyone smiling. And, if your life doesn't measure up to your friend's Facebook world you can get down. Listen to II Corinthians 10: where the apostle speaks of some folks who serve us as bad examples in this area. **12** *When they measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves, they are not wise.* Your self-acceptance or lack thereof is going to largely depend on your focus. On others and externals, or on God and internals.

Now, we come to the meat of our message for today. Where is a proper self-concept or a biblical self-acceptance to be found? What would be the ground or basis for self-acceptance? Three Scriptural perspectives, the first of which is that I am fashioned by God. Say that with me: *I am fashioned by God.* Psalm 139:**13-15** *For You formed my inward parts; You wove me in my mother's womb. 14 I will give thanks to You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; Wonderful are Your works, And my soul knows it very well. 15 My frame was not hidden from You, When I was made in secret, And skillfully wrought in the depths of the earth.* This is where it must begin – the notion that God, the wise, the powerful, the loving is my designer. He makes no mistakes. This is the very thing that Satan will contradict. When he shows up in Genesis 3 he tells Eve that God's plan and design for her was not loving, that God was depriving her of the keys to happiness. That's the same lie some of you have believed because your complexion is not smooth or your nose is too large or your legs are too slow. God is depriving you. That voice comes to you from the pit. We know from II Samuel 16 which we looked at last week that David had an impressive looking older brother named Eliab. Taller than David, better-looking than David. But David was able still to rejoice in how God had fashioned him. He didn't bemoan not having Eliab's height or his broad shoulders. He understood that a loving, wise God had made him just right. Isaiah 45:**9** *Woe to the one who quarrels with his Maker—An earthenware vessel among the vessels of earth! Will the clay say to the potter, 'What are you doing?'* The prophet paints this absurd picture to expose just how foolish we are being when we argue with God's design and God's handiwork. Paul picks up this verse in Romans 9 and says Romans 9:**20** *The thing molded will not say to the molder, "Why did you make me like this," will it?* No- the thing molded – that's you and me, we will say with David: *I will give thanks to You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; Wonderful are Your works.* Of which, yes, I am one.

The second ground for self-acceptance is the truth that I am valuable to God. Jesus says that we are worth more than many sparrows. God has numbered all our hairs. We are precious to our

heavenly Father. We are the crowning glory of God's creation and His creation is magnificent beyond words. And then, in Christ, the Lord tells us that even when we stray and believe the lies and turn our back on Him that He is willing for His own son to die so that we could be in relationship with Him once again. Oh my! It feels both odd and wonderful to speak of how much I am valued by my Maker who has become my Father.

Thirdly, the ground for self-acceptance is found in our being called by God. Now largely we are called by God to be in relationship with Him, to be His friends, His adopted children, but here I am also thinking of our calling to be servants of God and to fulfill His purposes in the earth and in history. And this is where our individual design becomes so relevant. Psalm 139:16 *Your eyes have seen my unformed substance; And in Your book were all written The days that were ordained for me, When as yet there was not one of them.* David speaks here of a God with a plan for his life. God had designed something for David to do in his day and in his body. His body was shaped in accordance with that plan. Wow! That means that my physicality fits my life-purpose. Apparently, my purpose was not to play in the NFL or the NBA. It was not to be a jockey at the Derby. It was not to be a mother of children. But to become a daddy and a pastor this will do just fine.

My Pastor's Corner in our current newsletter is about Elizabeth Elliot. In the article I mention her book which encourages women to celebrate their womanhood and how they are made by the Lord. She tells the story of a woman named Gladys Aylward who was unable to accept the looks God had given her. Ms. Aylward told how when she was a child she had two great sorrows. One, that while all her friends had beautiful golden hair, hers was black. The other, that while her friends were still growing, she had stopped. She was about four feet ten inches tall. But when at last she reached the country to which God had called her to be a missionary, she stood on the wharf in Shanghai and looked around at the people to whom God had called her. "Every single one of them" she said, "had black hair. And every one of them had stopped growing when I did." She was able to look to God and exclaim, "Lord God, You know what You're doing!" Beautiful! You see, your distinctive physical and mental makeup is the unique frame through which you are to highlight the beauty and grace of Jesus. You are fashioned by God, valued by God, called by God. These are all truths about God more than they are about you. You see, self-acceptance is theological more than psychological. The ability to accept how you were made comes from your acceptance of God's word. In other words, self-acceptance comes from Jesus-acceptance. It is just a by-product of accepting the right of God to rule His universe, the wisdom of God that He knows what is best, and

the love of God that He cares for you. I will say that again. The ability to accept yourself as you are created is a by-product of accepting the right of God to rule His universe, the wisdom of God that He knows what is best, and the love of God that He cares for you. Can somebody give me an *amen*?

(watch video)

Are your perceived deficiencies limitations or directions? Do they stop you from serving Christ or guide you into how you can? Are you familiar with what is called the *Serenity Prayer*? It is a form of prayer used often in Alcoholics Anonymous and other 12-step programs. It was written by Reinhold Niebuhr, an American theologian. Read it with me: *God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.* Good isn't it? It may speak to some questions you have about self-acceptance. It suggests that there are things in my reality that I can change. Some of our physical qualities can be altered legitimately. These are things we can change somewhat. But if God's physical design tells me I am a man, then I am to seek to be the best man I can be, not to become a woman – if that were possible. There are things we cannot change and accepting them is the course of wisdom and the way to happiness. What things we can change within God's design – okay – you seek for the wisdom to know the difference. Using makeup? I don't see a problem if used temperately. Dressing to look nice? Sure – God doesn't care directly about that, but we live among humans and they do look on the outside. It is silly to deny that reality. But I want to close with this thought. Among the things we can change –well, that would include the matters of the heart, of the character. With God's help and He says He is eager to help, we can become more beautiful, more Christ-like, more perfect in the ways that matter most. Our God has made us for a purpose, but, for believers in Jesus, we read in God's word that we are being re-made. The Potter's work is not over. He is conforming us to the image of His Son (Romans 8), He is recreating us in righteousness and holiness (Ephesians 4), and Philippians 1:6 tells us that *He who began a good work in us will perfect it.* God has made me. That is awesome What's even better is that He is re-shaping me in the inner man day by day until He calls me home to glory. So, sure I want to give attention to the physical frame, to stewarding my physical health, but most of all I want to join with God in the ongoing endeavor of shaping my soul for His pleasure and His purpose and His glory, accepting how I am made because I accept God's rights, God's wisdom and God's love.

I invite you to join me in a closing prayer which speaks of our acceptance of God that leads to an acceptance of self. *Father, I thank You that I am fearfully and wonderfully made. I thank you for every strength, for every flaw, for every aspect of how you have made me. I accept that it is your right to make me as You have. I accept that You are the wise designer; and I accept that You shaped me in Your love. Help me to embrace your purposes for my life and to gladly work with you in the perfection of those internal qualities that matter the most and last the longest. Through Jesus I ask. Amen*