

The Last Word

The Soothing Sin of Self-Esteem

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I often hear Christians summarise salvation as 'Jesus saved me from my sins'. They will then summarise the sins as a list of things 'I've done wrong'. Embedded in this anaemic understanding of salvation is an estimation of one's self that really isn't all that bad or at least isn't as bad as lots of other people. Christians are so glad they are saved from their sins when we look at really rotten people on TV or read about them in the newspaper and think to ourselves, 'How can someone do something like that? I can't imagine!'

Well, that's the problem. Why can't we imagine ourselves as equally rotten? As just as sinful? Apart from God's grace in our lives, 'those people' are you and me. And that's true because sin isn't just 'bad stuff we do' and that's not the problem Jesus saves us from. No, Jesus has in fact saved us, who we are. The problem is our sin nature and this is not what we do, but who we are. When Christians reduce salvation to sin-management and living self-controlled lives, the Saviour becomes just a part of self-esteem therapy and grace is swallowed like a 'happy pill'.

Taking a look at our lost-ness, our capacity for depravity, the real source of our sinful behaviour is hard. Christian bookstores have lots of books about boosting our self esteem, but books that take our sin nature seriously are either non-existent or old and out of print. No publisher today would touch these titles: 'Bad to the Bone: The Reality of Humanity' or 'Totally Depraved: Maybe Calvin was Right!' Christians today skip the Bad News and just sell the Good News. 'Jesus saved from my sins', so why worry?

Why worry? Why linger on the bad news before the good news? Because not taking our sin seriously means we don't take the utter necessity of our salvation seriously. God is so serious about sin, that his response is wrath. Scripture tells us from beginning to end that sinful people are only spared the wrath of God because God's grace is greater, deeper, higher, wider, fuller. When we don't take sin seriously, we also don't take grace seriously. Until we believe that, apart from the salvation of Christ Jesus, we are fully deserving of God's wrath, we don't know who we really are or our potential for sin.

This came to my attention this past year through three particular situations that I've been aware of that illustrate the dynamics of reducing 'sin' to behaviour and 'salvation' to a 'happy pill' blessing. One situation involved adultery, one involved an abortion, and one involved divorce. Two things were striking in how these Christians reflected on the mess they found themselves in when they came to talk to me. First was their summation that 'low self esteem' contributed to their sinful actions. All of them talked about how they got into these relationships to feel better about themselves. None of them ever thought it would 'lead to this'. And second was their absolute confidence summarised

nearly word-for-word as, 'But I know I'm saved and that Jesus has forgiven me.' All of them were bewildered by 'how this happened to me'.

I've come to believe that these people didn't suffer from self-esteem that was too low, but too high. They didn't 'know how this happened' because they didn't know who they were as sinners, as people with a sin nature. Their sinful behaviour just got more costly step by step, and was, albeit reluctantly, excused by a desire to 'feel better about myself' until the price got too high or until the evidence got too public. Sin didn't look so sinful in those decisive moments because, at the core, these Christians didn't believe they were capable of really being sin-full.

The real problem was thinking too highly of themselves. As I reflected on this, I asked myself, 'What if each of these people had taken their sin nature more seriously? What if they had really believed they had the capacity to do the worst in every situation?' Would they have run instead of succumbed? When we take our sin nature seriously, we can believe that we are capable of the very worst – and we must, because that is what is true about us.

We can look at horrible pictures of naked Iraqi prisoners at the end of a leash held by a person we consider 'disgusting!', but, if we don't think 'That could be me!' holding that leash, we don't know who we really are. And we don't know what salvation is.

Paul tells us not to think more highly of ourselves than we ought to think. John's admonition is 'If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.' If I do not know who I am as a person born with a sin nature, I cannot really know what it means to be a person born again because the wrath of God was poured out on Jesus, the Son and not on me. And not on you.

Who are we? We are sinners. We are people born with a sin-nature that makes all of us capable of the very worst and deserving objects of God's wrath. Who are we? We are the crowning work of creation's sixth day, imprinted with the very image of God, implanted with eternity in our hearts, and, by grace and in Christ, beloved objects of God's mercy.

Our problem is a deep ontological problem – a problem with our very being that must be made right again. This requires a Saviour who is not me. Not sinful. Not fallen, not lost, not a fraud. And, this requires a Saviour who is 'me'. A Saviour who is truly human, who 'sympathises with my weakness and tested in every way as I am, and ... yet without sin'.

This requires a Saviour, fully God and fully man, the Lord Jesus Christ.

This Saviour is the one that overcomes me, and makes me who I was always intended to be: a human being bearing in joyous freedom and perfect obedience God's own image – a herald, a signpost, an icon of the Creator, being brought to completion in Christ, being perfected day by day in Christ.

Who are we? We are awful sinners, saved by an awesome Saviour. We need to be sinners who don't pretend we aren't capable of the worst. We are sinners who must take seriously the need for armour, for protection, for the Name of Jesus, for praying prayers of deep repentance, honest confession, deep gratitude and sold-out praise. We are the worst of sinners in whom God has begun a good work. We are the least of saints being brought to perfection in the 'Day of Jesus Christ' – the day of days when all that is lost is found, all that is blind sees, all in us that limps along, jumps for joy!