

Selfism

By William MacDonald

In the pursuit of holiness there are few things more debilitating than occupation with self. Those who look inside for victory are looking in the wrong place; they invite disappointment, discouragement and defeat.

The world emphasizes man and his potential. In its pathetic desire for recognition, popularity and acceptance, the me-too church follows suit. It preaches secular humanism, faintly disguised in evangelical language. Religious publishers rush into print with a rash of new books on self-esteem. In a single visit to a Christian bookstore, I came across the following titles:

Love Yourself

The Art of Learning to Love Yourself

Self-Love, the Dynamite Force of Success

I'm OK, You're OK

Who Says I'm OK'?

A True View of You

Make Friends with Your Shadow

The Art of Understanding Yourself

Understanding Your Past, the Key to Your Future

My Beautiful Feeling

You Can Feel Good About Yourself

30 Days to a Less Stressful You

You're Someone Special

Do I have to Be Me? (Living With Yourself and Liking it)

Only one thin voice of protest appeared on the shelves. It was titled, Leave Yourself Alone.

A great deal of modern counseling turns the searchlight in on self. The patient is told to examine his upbringing (with emphasis on his parents' colossal failures), his thoughts, motives, fears, hang-ups and inhibitions (especially in the area of sex). As he talks out his problems in non-directive counseling, the answers appear - or so it is alleged.

"The Norwegian dramatist Ibsen tells the Story of Peter Gynt going to a mental hospital and surprisedly finding that no one in the place seemed crazy. They all talked so sensibly and discussed their plans with such precision and concern that he felt sure they must be sane. He spoke to the doctor about it. 'They're mad,' said the doctor. 'They talk very sensibly, I admit, but it is all about themselves. They are, in fact, most intelligently obsessed with self. It's self-- morning, noon and night. We can't get away from self here. We lug it along with us, even through our dreams. O yes, young sir, we talk sensibly, hut we're mad right enough.'

"The world is much like the hospital visited by Peter Gynt. It seems sane enough until we realize that it is possessed with itself. All it talks about are its feelings, its politics, its wars, its budgets, its money. The largest part of existence, God, is unmentioned." (1)

It is characteristic of people who suffer from mental, nervous or emotional disorders that self is the center and circumference of their lives. Counseling techniques that encourage them to engage in introspection serve only to intensify their misery. You've heard the proverb:

"Neurotics are people who build castles in the air; psychotics are those who move into them; and psychiatrists are the ones who collect the rent."

There are two classic Bible passages that deal with selfism and its remedy. The first is Psalm 77, which Bullinger has outlined as follows:

Occupation with self, vv.1-6

Its sure result: Misery, vv. 7-9

Occupation with God, vv. 10-12

Its sure result: Happiness, vv. 13-20

Someone else has captioned these four sections:

Sighing

Sinking

Singing

Soaring

In the first half of the Psalm Asaph is suffering from I trouble, or an overdose of vitamin I. The first personal pronouns (I, me, my) occur 22 times, whereas God is referred to only 13 times. The psalmist becomes so obsessed with self that he even questions the goodness, grace and mercy of the Most High.

In the second half, Asaph gets his eyes on the Lord. He mentions God (nouns and pronouns) 24 times, and makes only three personal references.

The second Bible passage is Romans 7:9-25. After over 40 uses of the personal pronouns, Paul groans, "O wretched man that I am!" He finds no victory in self. Rather he confidently affirms, "I know that in me (that is, in my Flesh) nothing good dwells." But at the end of the chapter, he turns away from self and finds victory in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Looking within for victory is like casting your anchor inside the boat; it guarantees spiritual drift.

Israel's king realized that he needed someone bigger than himself; he said, "From the end of the earth I will cry to You, when my heart is overwhelmed; lead me to the rock that is higher than I' (Psa.61:2). The Rock, of course, is God.

Self-occupation makes a person forget the blessings of the Lord, and ungrateful for them. It causes paralysis as far as effective service is concerned by reducing powers of concentration and the quality of work. It makes one callously insensitive to the needs of others.

The self-centered person is a slave to his own emotions and feelings. He is unattractive company as far as others are concerned. He wants to pour out his litany of woe to an endless number of counselors and friends, desiring an audience but spurning advice. He has a will of iron that resists change and refuses to accept God's will. He is like the people whom the Lord describes in Ezekiel 33:31,32:

“So they come to you as people do, they sit before you as My people, and they hear your words, but they do not do them; for with their mouth they show much love, but their hearts pursue their own gain. Indeed you are to them as a very lovely song of one who has a pleasant voice and can play well on an instrument: for they hear your words, but, they do not do them.”

So much for the pathology of me-ism. How can a person beat it?

First, he can turn from self-occupation to occupation with Christ (2 Cor. 3:18). It is by gazing on Him that we become transformed into His likeness. A thousand good versions of self are not worth one version of Christ, or, put another way, a sanctified self is a poor substitute for a glorified Christ. He can pray continually:

O to be saved from myself, dear Lord.
O to be lost in Thee.
O that it may be no more I
But Christ who lives in me.

He should remember the true formula: Occupation with self brings distress. Occupation with others brings discouragement. Occupation with Christ brings delight.

But someone may object that a certain amount of self-examination is necessary, and is even called for in the Bible. Granted, but, then he should follow McCheyne's rule: "For every look you take at yourself, take ten looks at Christ." As an old hymn says, "How sweet away from self to flee, and shelter in the Savior.

A second thing a person can do is take a biblically balanced view of himself. On the one hand he realizes that he is saved by the grace of God, forgiven, justified and made fit for heaven. He stands before God in all the acceptability of God's beloved Son. He is complete in Christ, an heir of God and a joint heir with Jesus Christ. He is a unique creation of God and has a distinct role to fulfill in life. He is of great value to God and this makes him desire to be all that he can be for Jesus.

On the other hand he acknowledges that in and of himself he is nothing (2 Cor. 12:11; Gal. 6:3) and that in his flesh dwells no good thing. He doesn't look for good in himself, and is never disappointed when he doesn't find it there.

A third suggestion. The self-centered person should lose himself in a life of service for others. Those who find fulfillment are those who are so absorbed in helping others that they have no time to be thinking about themselves. Fulfillment comes from self-denial rather than self-occupation. This is what Jesus meant when He said, "He who loves his life will lose it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life" (John 12:25).

He doesn't waste time wishing that he was someone else. In spite of physical appearance, handicaps or limited abilities, he accepts himself as God has accepted him and says, "By the grace of God I am what I am" (1 Cor. 15:10a). If there are things in life that cannot be changed, he accepts them and thus finds peace. In the areas of life that are fixed by divine sovereignty, complaining is sin and wishing it was different is futile.

Finally he should avoid things that make him introspective - whether how-to books on self esteem, seminars on possibility thinking, or counseling that is self-directed instead of God-directed. What we want is to forget self and concentrate on the Lord, who is worthy.

1. *Traveling Light*, Eugene H. Peterson. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, pp. 69-71.