

“Nurturing Yourself & The Self Others Have”

Ephesians 6:4; Colossians 3:21

January 27th, 2002 – Maryvale Drive Presbyterian Church, Philip Siddons

The boy’s parents showed little regard for their son through the years. They seldom spent time with him and insisted that he not call them at work. By the time he was in high school his guidance counselor said that he didn’t know the meaning of love. He had a high I.Q. but failed all his subjects so he enlisted in the Marines. You see, he wanted to be a man and thought the Marines made you into one.

But as he went into the service his problems went with him. He didn’t make it in high school and he didn’t make it in the service either. He fought back and after getting into trouble, he was discharged.

There he was, ... friendless, no talent, no skill and an overwhelming sense of worthlessness. And no matter where he went, his problems went with him.

He got married but like all other relationships before, that one deteriorated. His wife humiliated him in front of friends and he, in time, became so depressed that one day he fell to his knees sobbing. Later that day he walked out of the house appearing to be a changed person.

He went to the garage, took a rifle that was hidden there and from a window on the third floor of a building, just after twelve noon on November 22nd 1963, he shot his rifle twice and killed John Kennedy. Lee Harvey Oswald, a man who had so low a view of himself that out of desperation and mental anguish he took the only thing he knew how to use and lashed out at society.



Now that man’s problems were no excuse for what he did but as psychologists have put together case records of disturbed people through the years, they have found that feelings of inferiority turn to grief which later turn to anger. It’s not unusual today – in every neighborhood, in every church, in every school – that **there are people who are bitterly disappointed with who they are**. It seems to be universally accepted by those who study human behavior that what we

think of ourselves determines not only how accurately we perceive everything around us but also every action we take.

Unfortunately the media surrounds us with a world supposedly filled with glamorous, successful and attractive people who appear to have “made it” and are happy. And people sometimes go to their mirrors and see only discouragement. This may be why, in the teen years, there is often so much hostility – because of uncontrollable feelings of inferiority and inadequacy that isn’t expressed.

Many teens feel deeply that they don’t have any true value in this adult world but they’re not going to sit around the dinner table and say, “Mom, dad, ... you know, lately I’ve been feeling very inferior and worthless.” They’re not going to say this and yet they’re going to feel it intensely. They won’t necessarily become criminals but their self-concept will stay with them for the rest of their lives. It will affect everything they do and every human relationship they have.

Counselors say television and movies cause us to feel inadequate. For one, we’re living in a culture that makes physical appearance more important than who a person is – image is everything. Also, think of your childhood stories that emphasized the tensions of not being beautiful enough or having to compete with others who are beautiful. The Ugly duckling, Sleeping Beauty, Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer, Dumbo the Elephant, Snow White (who was pursued by the Queen who asked the mirror who was the fairest creature of them all), ... and of course there was Cinderella and her supposedly ugly sisters.

Our children carry around perfectly formed Barbie Dolls or muscular GI Joe dolls and watch the movies and television shows which have perfectly formed actresses and actors who have no pores. And we wonder why their peers make fun of them if they have crooked teeth or are a little overweight or have distinct features. Not everyone becomes a cheer leader, a movie star, a

homecoming queen or Miss America. And the premium that our society has put on physical attractiveness has caused plastic surgeons to be the most wealthy medical specialists in America.

Women and men spend more each year on cosmetics than our entire country spends on its national defense – billions. And as people realize that they don't compete with the minority of movie stars and as people grow up without a sense of being good at something, deep rooted and long lasting feelings of inadequacy take root. How good do you feel about yourself?

Where do people get their concept of self initially? Obviously from our home life. And there has been talk in recent years about treating our children and grandchildren with the same courtesy, dignity and diplomacy as we adults would our best friends.



The late syndicated writer and humorist, Erma Bambeck, once commented in this way. She said, "When I heard that advice, I told myself--I've always treated my children that way" . . . but later that night, I thought about it. Do I really talk to my best friends like I talked to my children? Just suppose our good friends Fred and Eleanor came to dinner one night and I talked to them as I do with my children.

"Well it's about time you two got here! What have you two been doing? Dawdling?"

Leave those shoes outside, Fred. You've got mud on them – and shut the door! Were you born in a barn?

"So Eleanor, how have you been? I've been meaning to have you over for such a long time.

Fred! Take it easy on the chip dip or you'll ruin your dinner. I didn't work over a hot stove all day long to have you nibble like some bird. "Heard from any of the gang lately? Got a card from the Martins. Yes, they're in Lauderdale again – they go every year to the same spot.

Fred, what's the matter with you? You're fidgeting. Of course you have to go, ... it's down the hall, first door on the left, ... and I don't want to see a towel in the middle of the floor when you're finished.

Did you wash your face before you came, Eleanor? I see a dark spot around you mouth, ... but I guess it's a shadow."



Counselors have written at length on how parents and grandparents can be more affective with children and foster (in them) a better self-esteem. As Christian adults we should be particularly sensitive to these suggestions because the Bible basically advises us to be more loving and compassionate in our relationships. As Ephesians six says, "Parents don't drive your kids to resentment."

Knowing that our children's self-concept is largely in place by age six or seven, what are some things for which to watch?



❶ Watch for **parental insensitivity**. What we say in front of our children is what they hear us saying about them and is what they remember about themselves.

How many times have you heard parents talking about their toddler like this, "I wish my little Billy was potty trained like yours." Or, ... "Honestly, she irritates me so much that I could just pound her." And we think our children have no idea that we are talking about them as they stand two feet away from us. Parental insensitivity causes many children to think poorly of themselves.



❷ Another factor that supposedly contributes to low self-esteem is **the pressure of time and physical weariness on parents**. Parents who work all day, in or outside of the home, find time spent with their children is when they are physically and emotionally exhausted. Even though we value our children higher than our material possessions and schedules, we often find ourselves shoving them off to our lowest times – ending up not putting much of ourselves into their lives.

Children, then, perceive that they are not as important as other things in our lives. How many times do we give our children toys or set them in

front of the television just to get them out of our hair?



③ **Guilt** is another factor. As parents, we're fearful of our own inconsistencies and often wonder if we are doing all we should be doing. We find ourselves sometimes being overbearing, impatient and other times we're letting things go just because we can't cope anymore. We become ineffective.

Once, when I was spending an extended amount of time with our then toddler daughter (years ago), I was feeling very impatient and a little guilty for not having more energy and willingness to be creative with her. So while out in the front yard, taking the trash can out to the street, I wanted to maintain communication with her so I gently said (like Mr. Rogers might say), "Daddy is taking the trash can out." And I turned and saw that I had left Deidre in the house and was talking to our Irish Setter with her tongue casually hanging out of her mouth, smiling at me with its confused sort of look that only Irish setters can give.



④ **Rivalry for love** affects children's self-esteems. Brothers and sisters coming along affect children and as all parents of more than one child know, there is a definite effect on the elder child as the second one arrives.

So there are a thousand things that affect one's self-esteem but how we feel emotionally affects our brains and our bodies. Most of us know by now that the medical field is aware that people with low concepts of themselves do poorly academically and socially and usually have more physical problems. What people think of themselves greatly affects their actions for as long as they live. So here are some suggestions for those of us who are parents to consider – they probably would be worth keeping in mind in all of our relationships.¹

¹ These are suggested by James Dobson in *Hide or Seek*. I personally have a great deal of difficulty with his sexist 'man is the head of the house' mentality but we can learn

① The first suggestion is to **involve our children in decision making in the household whenever possible**. To what extent do our children and grandchildren feel as if their opinions and feelings matter? Do we take the time to ask them what they think or do we just haul them through life from the dinner table to the car and finally to bed?

One friend of ours has two children and once a month he sets a day where either his eight year old daughter or his ten year old daughter makes most of the decisions in their house. The child decides what is to be cooked for dinner from the refrigerator, ... what rooms must be cleaned first and what things could be bought with the available money. I suspect that those children are going to grow into their teen years with a positive sense of self because they were treated as if they were good enough to become involved in the family process.

② Another thing parents can keep an eye on is how our **children criticize themselves**. Often people (adults and children) lapse into criticizing themselves – putting themselves down unfairly and judging themselves as unable to be good at anything. Sometimes this is done to solicit praise because they seldom receive it.

Some of you, who have been brought up in the Christian tradition, have been trained to turn compliments away. In our country people are taught that it is arrogant or conceited to accept a compliment. We see this particularly in the academy award presentations.

Why doesn't an actor or actress get up there and say, "Thank you for this honor. I've given my career and much of my life for acting and I've worked hard for this moment. Thank you for recognizing my work."

Instead they get up there and tell millions of people, "I didn't really deserve this. All the credit should go to my three producers, my writer, my

from people with whom we disagree. His writing about self-concepts has greatly influenced our awareness about raising our daughter through the years. For his contribution on this subject I am grateful.

director, the camera man, the studio janitor and my chauffeur.”

So one important task parents can do is help children make constructive and realistic criticism – not allowing them to go on putting themselves down. One team of psychologists made a study with tape recorders of the talk parents and their children have in the home. In over one hundred households they found that there was consistently five times the amount of criticism compared to the amount of positive talk. What would the tape recorders reveal around your household?

③ As parents we can also **help our kids learn to compensate for their inadequacies**. If your child can't play the piano, maybe you could invest in basketball lessons. For those who aren't doing well in school and don't have a high aptitude, maybe they could be encouraged to have their bug collections or pursue their interest in woodworking. The point is to encourage them to do *some* things well.

④ We also have the enormous task of **helping them distinguish real life from television**. I think we ought to watch television with them and watch the toys with which they play. We can point out that people in real life are not perfect or as glamorous and wealthy as they appear on television soaps.

⑤ We can **help our children express their feelings**. When our children are hurt by others and when they feel inadequate, we shouldn't just brush their feelings aside as if they don't exist or act as if they are foolish for feeling those things.

Instead we would be wise to sit down with them and tell them we have feelings such as those ourselves. Helping them express themselves establishes good avenues of communication so that later on, they'll talk to us (or someone else) when they're going through hard times. How free do you feel to talk to others when you're upset about something?

⑥ **Discipline** helps self-concepts. Those many of you who are or were teachers know that often school is the very first time in some lives where people are held accountable for their actions. Sometimes, for some children, school is

the first time anyone says there is punishment for wrong behavior. Children need to have their limits clearly defined for them because if they are not, they lack the structure which helps them evaluate themselves. But of course **there is a delicate balance between shaping a person's will and yet not breaking their spirit**.

⑦ Lastly, as parents, we have to **watch over-protecting our children – not permitting them to fail**. If we're not letting our children, from the earliest ages, make decisions on their own and letting them fail in some of their decisions – we're crippling them emotionally for life – inhibiting their maturing process. If we overprotect our children we can make them emotionally retarded.

So parenting is obviously an extremely complicated relationship but if we think that our child's self-concept is more important than anything, we'll more easily be able to find a balance. But the same thing is true in our adult relationships.

In all the marriage counseling publications, the one thing you see that stands out, more than any other, is the feeling of unworthiness people have as adults. People are frequently saying that their parents have or their spouse makes them feel totally worthless. They say there is a total lack of affection, a lack of caring, which makes them feel like they are not an equal person. And even though they feel these things deep within them, they never tell their partner because they feel that he or she is incapable of doing anything about it.

How people view themselves is usually the reason people are having trouble working through their problems. So as parents we would be wise to remember that for children, life is fragile and they need us to support their feelings of worth. As adults we would be wise to remember that for other adults, life is fragile and they need us to support their feelings of worth. But how complex it all is – there just isn't any easy answer or simple list of the right things to do.

As adults we ought to sit down with each other and ask ourselves – how far should we go with discipline in order not to break our children's

spirits and yet shape their wills? We need to ask questions like, “How can we gradually transfer our responsibility for our children’s lives over on to their own shoulders – gradually working ourselves out of a job?”

Ideally we should be gradually handing responsibility for their lives over to them so by the time they are in their late teens, they’re running their own lives. Have your parents done that to you? How about you with your children?



When it comes down to it, as complex as it all is, what is really being asked of us is an art – the art of helping our children, our spouse and our friends to live with a sense of worthiness. It is an art to help others discover they are worthwhile people before God. Jesus showed us this because that’s why God came to humanity – to teach people that there is nothing as important in life as relationships and how we feel about ourselves.

Our success in any relationship depends directly on how we see ourselves as worthy as well as how we make the other person feel about him or herself. And as we try to be more sensitive and caring, we will discover that God can use us to make a substantial difference in other peoples’ lives.

Imagine what would happen if in our nation’s businesses, every person in management began to treat those under them as if their self-concept was directly related to the quality of work they performed? There would be a revolution in the work place that would put our nation centuries ahead of every country in the world in terms of production and morale in the work place.



So what these scriptural passages and suggestions from counselors call us to do is not go home today and sit around and talk about how open and sensitive we all are. What we are called to do is work hard – very hard – on these complex things for the rest of our lives.

From my experiences in the business world and the church, I am absolutely convinced that you can’t fix a lot of things in life – but you sure

can make a difference in a lot of people’s lives by treating them like the loved and valuable people that they are – that you are. This is our calling in life – no matter where we work – to be present in people’s lives and simply do to others as we (ourselves) would like done to us. And if we do, we will be living with the most powerful thing in all of the universe at our fingertips – the power to heal people’s feelings of unworthiness. Because they will know we are Christians by our love. ☛

