



Finding Your Confidence, Identity, and Security In Christ

Presentation By:

Brad Hambrick, M.Div., Th.M.

Pastor of Counseling, The Summit Church



“Finding Your Confidence, Identity, and Security In Christ”

Table of Contents

Chapter 1. If Not Self-Esteem, Then What?	3
Chapter 2. A Portrait of Christ-Honoring Identity.....	11
Chapter 3. A Portrait of Christ-Honoring Purpose.....	21
Chapter 4. A Portrait of Christ-Honoring Confidence	30
Chapter 5. A Portrait of Christ-Honoring Security	39
Chapter 6. A Portrait of Christ-Honoring Wisdom	49

Appendices

A. “Who I Am in Christ” Bible Verses	61
B. Guilt, Shame, and Regret	63
C. Suffering, Self-Reliance, and Self-Esteem	64
D. Emotional Clarity Article	65
E. What Do I Do Now?	71

The video presentation of this seminar will be available at

www.bradhambrick.com/identity

Chapter One IF NOT SELF-ESTEEM, THEN WHAT?

self-value	self-worth	self-abasement	self-acceptance
self-criticism	self-defeating	self-idolatry	self-mastery
self-policing	self-understanding	self-deprecating	self-worship
self-denigration	self-validating	self-doubt	self-absorbed
self-expression	self-help	self-revealing	self-centered

These are just a sampling of the current **213** self-hyphenated (I guess that could be added to the list) words in the English language.

Not only are these words abundant in number, but they saturate the way we think about life. They influence the way we think about our purpose in life, the function of relationships, how we parent, what we believe the church is about, why we think Jesus came, and a myriad of other things. This is why it is imperative we understand what the Bible actually tells us to do with our *self*.

There are many places one could begin exploring the Bible on the subject of self: the implications of being made in the image of God, the fall and our sinful nature, the price Christ paid to redeem us, or our identity as children of God. This chapter will approach the subject by examining the New Testament passage that contains Jesus’ clearest, and possibly most misapplied, teaching on what we are to do with our *self*.

The questions we will strive to answer is, “Does low self-esteem cause our problems in life? Or, is low self-esteem by-product of our struggles? Does the pursuit of a higher self-esteem alleviate or exacerbate our struggles? Should we try to solve our problems by raising our self-esteem, or would that effort only distract us from more pertinent solutions?”

Self-Esteem: Goal or Method?

In order to answer this question well, we will have to define our terms. Often there is confusion in these kinds of conversations because people use the same word to mean many different things. We can get anything from bottled water to an ice cream sandwich from a “Coke” machine; not to mention that many people refer to Coca-Cola’s rival Pepsi as a “Coke.”

We should begin to realize that when a word means everything or anything, it quickly begins to mean nothing. This is a big part of the confusion that surrounds self-esteem. The concept has begun to explain everything, so that it becomes of very little practical value.

That is why we want to begin by determining whether self-esteem is a noun / goal (something to be pursued or attained) or a verb / method (a way of pursuing a desired result). Our conclusion will be that self-esteem is actually a verb that is commonly used as a noun. But in order to see this, it will be helpful to define several terms that are used synonymously with self-esteem.

1. **Confidence:** A positive expectation that circumstances will not be over-whelming or defeating.
2. **Identity:** A consistent sense of self that is not dependent upon circumstances or peer affirmation.
3. **Purpose:** A direction or life agenda that is motivating and gives meaning to the “smaller” decisions.

4. **Security:** A disposition of stability in the midst of uncertainty that allows for clarity of thought and intentionality of decisions.
5. **Wisdom:** The ability to make decisions according to preset, effective principles resulting in a productive and enjoyable life.

These five words are *goals* that can be pursued. They are matters of character, emotional fortitude, or skill. Self-esteem, however, is a *method* or *theory* of how to pursue confidence, identity, purpose, security, and wisdom. What, then, is self-esteem?

Self-Esteem: A belief system which proposes that by loving myself and appraising my own self-worth to be high I will obtain confidence, identity, purpose, security, and wisdom.

This seminar is contrasting two questions:

1. Do people lack confidence, identity, purpose, security, and wisdom because they don't love themselves enough?
2. Do they lack these things because their focus upon self has distracted them from the true source of confidence, identity, purpose, security, and wisdom?

What is the Biblical Foundation?

Jesus directly addresses the issue of how we are to relate to our “self.” In Mark 12:28-31 (see also Matthew 22:37-40) He summarizes all of Scripture and the purpose of man in two statements:

1. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength.
2. Love your neighbor as yourself.

Interestingly, Jesus even numbers His points, “On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.” There are only two commands, not three. Not only does Jesus number His points, He also prioritizes them, “*First*, love God.... *Second*, love others...”

Much Christian teaching from this passage says that Jesus is building a pyramid of priorities; that Jesus is establishing an order of operation for healthy living. They, however, reverse the order of Jesus' commands and add a third command. Making love for self a pre-requisite for loving others. The natural train of logic, although few go so far as to state it explicitly, is that we would need to love others before we could love God.

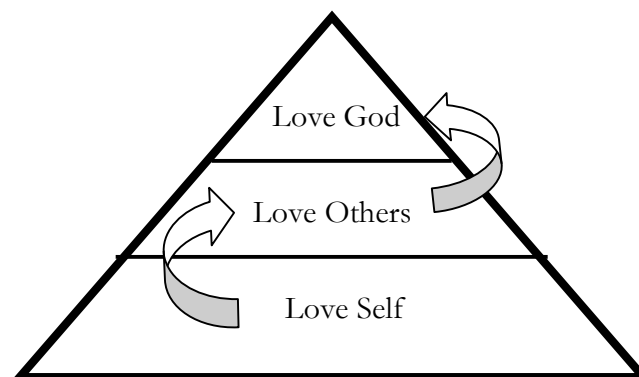


Figure 1: Loving Self as Foundational Love

This model is the natural overflow of the common secular teaching that we must love ourselves before we can love anyone else. Which would seem to be in contradiction to another clear Scriptural teaching, “We love because He first loved us (1 John 4:19).”

To place this in the appropriate cultural perspective, pause to consider how much biblical truth our culture agrees with. Do they tend to agree with a pro-life position on abortion, a traditional view of marriage, prayer in school, teaching intelligent design as a legitimate alternative to evolution, or the public posting of the Ten Commandments? Most do not. It seems odd, then, that the majority of secular experts and media outlets would fervently promote self-esteem, if it is a truly biblical concept.

This is not to give the impression that Christians should be against culture or science. Actually, an increasing number of clinical researchers are beginning to denounce the self-esteem movement. The Harvard Mental Health Letter (February 2004) correlates the teaching of self-esteem with an increase narcissism concluding, “The distinction between self-esteem and narcissism seems to disappear.” The article links the self-esteem movement with increasing unhealthy self-obsession in our culture.

Other research notes that criminals and socially immature segments of the population score very high on self-esteem inventories. These people whole-heartedly believe that they are good, right, worthy, able, and deserve to get their way. Erica Goode in the *New York Times* (October 1, 2002) cites research to indicate that, “D students think as highly of themselves as valedictorians, and serial rapists are no more likely to ooze with insecurities than doctors or bank managers.”

Dr. Michael Edelstein, a secular counselor of Rational Emotive Behavioral Therapy (a protégé of Albert Ellis), speaks satirically of our cultural obsession with the panacea of self-esteem:

Self-esteem is both the sacred cow and the golden calf of our culture. Nothing is esteemed higher than self-esteem, and no self-esteem can be too high. Nathaniel Branden, a leading exponent of self-esteem, raises the question: “Is it possible to have too much self-esteem?” and gives the resounding answer: “No, it is not, no more than it is possible to have too much physical health.”

Jill Elish reports on a 30 year longitudinal study conducted by Roy Baumeister (Florida State University), Jennifer Campbell (University of British Columbia), Joachim Krueger (Brown University), and Kathleen Vohs (University of Utah) which found that self-esteem was not the variable that correlated with life success or satisfaction.

After a “thorough review all the major studies on self-esteem” Baumeister concludes:

Once schools started self-esteem programs, I think they developed a momentum on their own, partly because the exercises, e.g. going around the room and letting everybody say what is special about himself or herself, feel good to all concerned (Elish, web).

Self-esteem was neither proven to increase school performance nor to reduce the likelihood of children smoking, drinking, taking drugs, or engaging in premarital sex.

While there are many psychologists who would differ with the Harvard Newsletter, Erica Goode, Dr. Edelstein, and this 30 year longitudinal study it is worth noting that the self-esteem theory is not an undisputed fact, even in secular circles. That being said, a question of at least equal importance for Christians is, “What does the Bible teach about self?”

What did Jesus mean when He said we are to love our neighbor *as ourselves*? The weight of other biblical texts, church history, and evangelical theology all indicate that Jesus meant, “We already love ourselves (whether we do so wisely is another question). What we need to learn is to focus the same amount of attention, interest, and concern that we already give ourselves on others.”

In Jesus' most basic description of discipleship He says, “If anyone would come after me, let him *deny himself* and take up his cross daily and follow me (Luke 9:23, *emphasis added*).” Discipleship is to die to self, not love one's self more. John Piper, in his definition of biblical counseling, reiterates this point,

Love is not possible where self-preoccupation holds sway in a person's life. So self-forgetfulness is a part of true mental health. This is not possible to create directly, but only as one is absorbed in something worthy and great. The aim is to be absorbed in God and anything else for God's sake.

Jesus set the agenda for what is to be pursued in life when He heard His disciples arguing about who would be the greatest, “But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all (Mark 10:43-44).” Jesus' statement is not in agreement with the idea that we must love ourselves before we love anyone else; instead He is counseling his disciples away from the question of their own significance.

Paul, in describing the false doctrines and evil practices that will emerge in the end times, clearly states that love of self will mark those dark days (II Timothy 3:1-2, *emphasis added*):

But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. For people will be *lovers of self*, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy....

It can be said, that by placing “lovers of self” first in the list, Paul is implicating that obsession with possessions, lack of gratitude, irreverence towards parents, and the other vices will emerge from advocating for a love of self as one's first priority.

John Calvin comments on this passage, “Only let my readers observe that self-love, which is put first, may be regarded as the source from which flow all the vices that follow afterwards (p. 238).” Modern New Testament scholar Gordon Fee (1988) concurs in his commentary on 2 Timothy, “[Paul's list] begins appropriately with *lovers of themselves* since from such misdirected love all other vices flow (p. 269-270).”

Paul goes to great lengths to permeate the church with the idea that life is not about us, we do not deserve God's love because of our worth, and that our primary focus is to esteem Christ.

“It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me (Galatians 2:20).”

“The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost (I Timothy 1:15).”

“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast (Ephesians 2:8-9).”

The danger of self-esteem is that it tries to persuade us that we are good enough, capable, and worthy. We need the gospel precisely because we are not good enough, incapable, or unworthy. Salvation does not give us a righteousness of our own that we can esteem. Salvation gives us Christ's righteousness that we might worship Him with reverent, grateful awe.

This moves us to the question, “If Jesus was not teaching self-esteem when He gave the Great Commandments, what was He teaching?” There should be no doubt that God wants us to have confidence, identity, purpose, security, and wisdom. Jesus was teaching us how to attain these things in the Great Commandments. But we need to examine more closely the wisdom behind the order in which Jesus places the commandments.

First and foremost, Jesus prioritizes our relationship with God. Without the redeeming presence of Christ in our lives we are utterly incapable of genuine love. This does not mean that all lost people are heartless savages, but that they are primarily motivated by what they perceive to be in their best interest. Lost people may believe kindness and benevolence to be the best way to achieve what they want and “to make the world a better place,” but this is a different motive than biblical love.

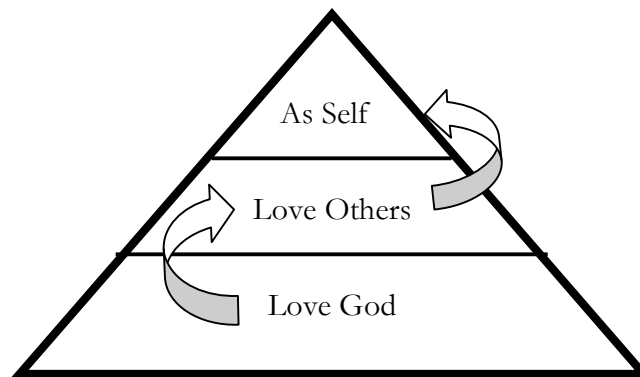


Figure 2: Loving God as Foundational Love

Our relationship with God is to be the all satisfying foundation for every other relationship. “His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence (2 Peter 1:3).” As John Piper (1996) states, “God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him (p. 50).” Augustine said it this way, “Our hearts are restless until they find rest in God.” To make our relationship to ourselves primary is to make *self* a God-substitute, a form of idolatry.

When our relationship with God is firmly established as the foundation of other relationships then we are prepared to truly love other people. We no longer “need” them to approve us, fill us, complete us, or sustain us, because God does those things. That frees us to love them instead of trying to satisfy ourselves with them.

This idea of “loving others instead of using them for our agenda” is precisely what Jesus meant when He said we are to love our neighbor as ourselves. In the same way that we naturally look out for our own good, we are to seek to be a blessing to others. This is the same logic Paul used in Ephesians 5:28, “In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself.”

Paul does not mean, “Husband, take care for yourself first and then, with what remains of your time and energy, care for your wife.” He rightly assumes (based on our self-centered tendencies) that husbands are already caring for their own bodies. Paul calls them to place that same energy and attention into caring for their wives. Why? Because when a husband cares for his wife with the same effort he puts into his own preferences, he will have a home marked by confidence, identity, purpose, security, and wisdom.

We can begin to see that the debate over self-esteem is a debate over human nature. Are people basically good and, therefore, only in need of affirmation, insight, education, and encouragement? Or, are people inherently sinful and, therefore, need to learn self-denial, repentance, humility, and selfless love?

How do we attain these five things?

It is not enough to merely debunk a defective theory without generating an effective alternative. So, if self-esteem is not the most effective and biblical method to attain confidence, identity, purpose, security, and wisdom, what is?

Our approach to creating an alternative will be to define more clearly and biblically the five things people are often pursuing from self-esteem. As this chapter concludes, we will provide a few reflection questions to assist you in evaluating where you stand in each of these areas. Then an entire chapter will be devoted to each subject to (1) help you assess your areas of needed growth, (2) provide a more complete description of each concept, and (3) give more practical tools for growth in each area.

Confidence

Confidence involves an assessment of three factors: (a) what needs to be accomplished, (b) the available resources or abilities, and (c) my assessment of what is at stake. If a basketball player needs to make a shot to win the game and believes he can do it, he is confident. If he doubts his ability and the game is important to him, he is not confident. If he doubts his ability, but is playing with his three-year-old son in the back yard, confidence is not an issue.

Biblical confidence is not the false belief that we can do everything or even anything we want. Some people who say that they want confidence are actually asking for “wish fulfillment” or the opportunity to switch lives with someone who has a different skill set.

We were created to be dependent upon God. Any confidence that does not reinforce our dependence upon God is sinful pride. Jerry Bridges (1994) says it this way, “Your worst days are never so bad that you are beyond the reach of God’s grace. And your best days are never so good that you are beyond the need of God’s grace (p. 18).”

It is good and right, in some circumstances, to lack confidence. This accounts for the “high self-esteem” of most criminals. They are confident when it is wrong to be confident. If you struggle with appropriate confidence, here is a series of questions to help you think about your circumstances biblically.

1. What does God require me to do in a given moment or relationship? Sometimes fear emerges from a lack of clarity. I feel timid because I do not know what is expected.
2. Am I or should I be capable of this? There are times that we lack confidence because we demand that God allow us to be good at something He has not called us to do. We also often need to realize there is nothing wrong with lacking a particular skill.
3. What is at stake? Our idolatries always betray us. If success at work, getting all A’s, or being popular become my ultimate life goal, I will lack confidence. When I deride myself for a secondary matter, the main problem is not my lack of confidence, but a lack of God-honoring purpose.

REFLECTION: When a pivotal moment of life comes, to whom/what do you instinctively turn for assurance?

Identity

Identity is that part of our sense of self that remains the same despite our circumstances. In the absence of a clear and satisfying sense of identity, we will change based upon the pressures of the moment in order to obtain what we want most in that moment. The result is a sense of fake-ness or feeling like a “sell out.”

The negative emotions of shame or regret are not due to a lack of self-love, but the by-product of making contradictory, over-committed, or against-your-conscience decisions. The solution is not a positive self-pep-talk, but gaining a sense of who God made you to be.

In order for this to happen, Christianity cannot merely be something that we believe (set of doctrines) or do (set of activities). Our faith must be a relationship that transforms our identity; like having a child changes the identity of a parent.

The Scriptures are full of identity statements (see Appendix A). Believers are children of God, ambassadors of Christ, salt and light, a royal priesthood, servants of the King, God’s craftsmanship created for good works, and the bride of Christ. The Bible gives us these concepts not to rev up our self-importance, but to remind us of who we are so that we would know how to live.

When temptations arise, the question is not, “Do I love myself enough to be good?” but, “Who am I?” If I view myself as “the awkward kid,” “just a pay check,” “a nobody,” “the preacher’s kid,” or any other incomplete identity, then it makes sense to wallow in pity or commit sin. If I remember who I am in Christ, then these defeating labels and the temptations that come with them show themselves as sources of destruction not hope.

REFLECTION: How do you introduce yourself to a new acquaintance? What are the most prevalent labels you use for yourself when you are down, anxious, or angry?

Purpose

Purpose is the unifying goal that gives meaning to all the smaller goals we have and individual decisions we make. A lack of purpose results in sporadic, directionless decision making and is often interpreted as a low self-esteem. Life does begin to feel “pointless,” however, the deficiency is not in self-approval but in direction.

The Westminster Confession makes the matter of purpose quite clear. It asks, “What is the chief end of man?” and answers, “To glorify God and enjoy Him forever.” This is the purpose for which we live. When we lose this purpose, then Cornelius Plantinga (1996) is right, “If we try to fill our hearts with anything besides the God of the universe, we find that we are overfed and under-nourished (p. 122-123).” Our effort, no matter how great, will not produce a satisfying productive result.

Do you have a personal purpose statement? Can you articulate in a few sentences the common denominator of the decisions you make and roles you fill? Can you put into words how you will evaluate whether your life has been “successful” in ten years? If not, this void makes sense why life seems disjointed. Finding answers to these questions and living in light of them will do you more good than reciting self-affirmation statements.

REFLECTION: How would you complete the sentence, “If only I could...”? When you get a free moment, what do you work on or where do your thoughts go?

Security

Security is a result of where you put your trust. Insecurity is generated when that which I deem trustworthy fails or begins to be doubted. Terrorism, moral failure of spiritual leaders, car accidents, and health trouble can all result in insecurity because they call into question things we usually deem dependable.

Security is something we can never muster in ourselves. We are sinners; meaning we will disappoint our good intentions. We are dying; meaning we have no earthly permanence. We are limited in knowledge; meaning we will make foolish choices and accept bad information. We socialize with other sinners; meaning trusted alliances will let us down. We cannot generate security.

Security must be sought in God. Only God is eternal, all knowing, and incapable of folly. Security is only found in God. We must trust God more than we fear our sin and folly. This is what allows us to acknowledge our weaknesses without becoming paralyzed by fear or shame in light of them. They are real, but God is larger.

REFLECTION: During your last crisis what did you do? How did you advise the last person who came to you in a crisis? Did God seem relevant at those moments?

Wisdom

Wisdom is the ability to make choices that result in a productive, satisfying, and God-honoring life. Low self-esteem often gets blamed for foolish choices, but the regret and shame of folly is different from self-abasement. Wisdom involves both having the information to make a good choice and the character to execute that choice.

“Biblical wisdom” is not the ability to recite (accurately pronouncing) all the names and places the book of Genesis. An example of wisdom is the ability to hear a dispute between friends, identify principles of biblical conflict resolution, and driving motivation of each person, and then lovingly guide them to resolution. This wisdom takes the confidence to speak up, an identity that is independent of your peers, purpose to see God glorified more than to sit in self-protective silence, and being secure enough to withstand possible rejection.

If my primary concern is loving myself, mediating a conflict is not “worth it.” The way of wisdom is too hard, risky, or costly. There are easier things that would give me a more immediate pleasure. A primary focus on self (i.e., believing I need to love myself before I can love anybody else) prevents us from having or enacting biblical wisdom.

For example, the wisdom principle of delayed gratification is based on self-denial not self-love. Self-love would say, “You deserve _____. Go ahead and get it. You need a reward now and you can pay for it later.” Self-denial says, “If God has not provided the means for you to have _____ you should not get it. It might be good to have later, but now is the time to thank God for what He has already blessed you with.”

REFLECTION: What have you done in the last month to increase your wisdom; both information and character?

Conclusion

This chapter is the introduction to a seminar designed to create a process for helping people understand how to pursue confidence identity, security, purpose, and wisdom in order to have a satisfying life as God intended. A chapter will be devoted to each of these subjects.

As a result of reading this chapter you should: (1) understand the need for an alternative to the self-esteem theory, (2) be able to distinguish the five good goals that people often confuse with self-esteem, and (3) begin developing a more accurate self-understanding based upon an brief overview the five goals of a healthy sense of self.

Chapter Two

A PORTRAIT OF CHRIST-HONORING IDENTITY

“I don’t even know who I am anymore.”

But Moses said to God, “*Who am I* that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?” (Exodus 3:11)

“We have seen the enemy and he is us.” (Pogo; comic strip)

“I am just a different person when they are around.”

Then King David went in and sat before the Lord and said, “*Who am I*, O Lord GOD, and *what is my house*, that you have brought me thus far?” (2 Samuel 7:18)

“I look in the mirror and I don’t know the person staring back at me.”

“O Lord, *what is man* that you regard him, or the son of man that you think of him?” (Psalm 144:3)

What do all these statements have in common? Among other possibilities, they are questions of identity. They raise the question of what gives me uniqueness, the right to act, or constancy in changing circumstances. Identification is an important part of life. If it were not, there would be no need for label makers, diagnostic systems, or personalized license plates.

Who am I? This three-word question has challenged history’s greatest philosophers. The challenge of this chapter, however, is not to answer a question that 2000 years’ worth of brilliant minds could not, but rather to determine what Christ has done in the life of a believer to provide a satisfying and sustaining sense of identity. When God makes a believer a new creation, how should that event—salvation—and its on-going ramifications—sanctification—change the believer’s self-perception and social interactions?

Defining “Biblical Identity”

Biblical Identity refers to the defining ideas, labels, and relational roles which make our actions or emotions seem right and natural. Identity, when healthy, remains constant even when circumstances and peer groups change. Identity should remain stable when no one is looking, everyone is looking, when you are with the love of your life, or an ardent enemy.

Identity is one of the defining marks of human motivation. We act out of who we think we are. Identity is one of the primary ways that the heart expresses what it loves most. Identity is a primary way that we make choices and judgments; often before we are conscious or intentional about either.

By identifying ourselves as a loser, a salesman, a good/bad parent, an athlete, a dunce, the guy who knows how to get things, or other label we implicitly make many choices. Those identity statements exclude some options and make others seem “obvious.” Changes in identity have a strong gravitational pull upon our behavior and the emotions.

A good way to begin to identify your sense of identity is to consider how you introduce yourself to strangers. What are the roles or stories you share about yourself? What do you want to know about other people? These questions reveal your instincts about how you define yourself and relate to people. Another question that can reveal one’s source of identity is, “How do you define success?”

- Health of key relationships
- Occupational accomplishment
- Educational advancement
- Sports allegiances

- Hobby involvement / skill
- Political stances
- Socio-economic status
- Appearance, attractiveness, attire, etc...

You may be wondering, does identity have this much influence? Think back to the last time you heard someone speak out against a popular position. The response was likely some form of, “Who do they think they are?” This question was often raised against Jesus, “And the scribes and the Pharisees began to question, saying, ‘Who is this who speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?’” (Luke 5:21, cf. Matthew 21:10, John 12:34).

It is common to trace from actions back to identity. But this is an assessment we usually only do in retrospect (after the action in question). What may feel new or awkward about this chapter is that we engaging the question pro-actively; seeking to intentionally forge a biblical sense of identity in order to promote a Christ-honoring life.

It is important to see how this definition of identity overlaps with security and purpose also covered in this seminar.

Security: A prerequisite for security is a clearly defined identity. If your understanding of who you are fluctuates, then having a stable sense of well-being will be compromised.

Purpose: A sense of identity goes a long way in defining one’s purpose. The sense of “ought” (purpose) that we take into many situations emerges from those labels and roles by which we define ourselves.

Sources of Biblical Identity

As we read through the Bible we find many different identity statements given to, even expected of, a believer. These roles are meant to increasingly define a Christian after his/her conversion. Unfortunately, as we read the Bible these statements do not come with parenthetical readings (identity clause). Each biblical author’s expectation is that becoming a Christian has changed who his reader is, and as a result, how the reader should think, live, feel, and relate differently.

In the pages that follow we are going to examine eight different identity statements that are used to refer to Christians within the Bible. These statements are not meant to be exhaustive; the Bible has many other titles for believers (Appendix A provides a more thorough list with biblical references). These statements are merely meant to be representative.

As you read, the hope is that you will not only gain a sense of how salvation transforms your identity (II Cor 5:17), but that you will begin to notice the other identity statements in Scripture and have a framework with which to appreciate their significance and application.

Child of God: Familial Component to Identity

“But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.” John 1:12

“See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are.” I John 3:1

These passages speak of the fatherly role God takes towards those He redeems. When I think of this title I can hear my father warning me, “Hambrick men don’t do things like that.” His warning was not based on consequences; trying to verbally create a frightening enough outcome to dissuade me from an unwise choice. His warning was based upon our family name—identity.

Reputation is often something we only appreciate when it is lost. When we are saved we become a new person (Ephesians 4:20-24), literally a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17). Strangely, this new person has a history, habits, patterns of thinking, values, and commitments. With that baggage, however, comes a new name. This is why adoption is such an accurate depiction of salvation (Romans 8:15, 23). In spite of our sins, God chooses us and begins the work of transforming us into the likeness of His Son, Jesus Christ.

An apt illustration of this is the parable of the prodigal son. In Luke 15:22 there is an often overlooked detail, “But the father said to his servants, ‘Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and *put a ring on his hand*, and shoes on his feet (*emphasis added*).’” This ring is the equivalent of putting the prodigal’s name on the family checking account. It allowed the prodigal to do business on behalf of the family. He was invited back as a full member of the family.

This is both an overwhelming grace and an intimidating responsibility. Our identity is that of an adopted child of God. We are members of the family, with the awesome task of contributing to our Father’s kingdom. “Christian people act in keeping with the family name,” God the Father would caution.

If we remember who we are, this will have a powerful impact on the choices we make and how we interact with others. As the members of the “Bride of Christ” (another familial identity statement) we should take the third commandment with greater honor and severity, “You shall not *take the name of the Lord your God* in vain, for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain (Exodus 20:7).”

The challenge with this piece of identity is that those who would benefit from it most usually try to apply it in reverse. We think of our difficult / absent family and use that as our starting point for understanding God. God wants us to start with him and discover what He intended family to be. This protects us from assuming the things that “weren’t that bad” were “what God intended;” an important part of having a healthy identity and learning about healthy relationships.

For a sample of using this category of familial identity, read I Thessalonians 2. Observe how Paul uses the categories of brother, father, mother, and children to describe his relationships with the members of this church.

In Christ: Cultural Component to Identity

“So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.” Romans 6:11

*“He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus,
whom God made our wisdom and our righteousness and sanctification and redemption.” I Corinthians 1:30*

*“There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female,
for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” Galatians 3:28*

Most of us know what it is like to be *in* trouble, *in* hot water, *in* over our head, or *in* a pickle. So why is it so difficult to conceptualize what it means to be *in Christ*? The phrase is used eighty seven times in the New Testament and that number does not include similar references with the pronoun “in Him.”

“In Christ” refers to our culture as believers. Culture involves language, customs, ideals, heritage, and other things that make an environment feel comfortable. For better or worse, culture is how we determine “us” from “them.” It is the idea captured in Acts 17:28, “In him we live and move and have our being.”

“In Christ” carries the connotation associated national, ethnic, racial, or regional origin. We tend to be comfortable with people “like us” who are “from where we’re from.” It is thought: these are *my people*. Believers share a common story, experience, commitments, and values. Upon meeting someone you want to know if they are “like you.” To be in Christ means that the presence or absence of the Holy Spirit in the life of other people is a key way of distinguishing people.

However, this aspect of identity comes with an element of risk. If we are going to capitalize on the blessing it offers, we must take the vulnerable step of making ourselves known to new people. The benefit of culture is that (in theory) it gives us a safe place to share our lives. When God gives us a new people “in Christ” we experience that (in practice) as we take the risk (i.e., express faith) of living out the “one another” commands of the New Testament.

There not only risk, but also great security in this aspect of biblical identity. There is no more stable place to be than in Christ. Stability should not to be confused with safety and ease. In Christ we can rest assured that His expectations will not change (security), and that by His grace we will be enabled to complete any task God calls us to (confidence).

Theologian Wayne Grudem (1994) draws the following implication for what it means to be in Christ, “To remember it destroys our pride, gives us a constant feeling of deep dependence on Christ, and gives us great confidence, not in self, but in Christ working in us (p. 845).”

Slaves of Righteousness: Volitional Component to Identity

*“Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness?
But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness.” Romans 6:16-18*

We are all slaves. We will serve whatever our hearts desire most. If you have an adverse reaction to the word slave, then chances are you do not understand human nature. Obedience is never optional. It is only a matter of who or what you will obey. Those who pledge to live a life of complete autonomy and independence are merely slaves to their own desires.

You might be a rock 'n' roll addict prancing on the stage,
You might have drugs at your command, women in a cage,
You may be a business man or some high degree thief,
They may call you Doctor or they may call you Chief

You may be a preacher with your spiritual pride,
You may be a city councilman taking bribes on the side,
You may be workin' in a barbershop, you may know how to cut hair,
You may be somebody's mistress, may be somebody's heir

But you're gonna have to serve somebody, yes indeed
You're gonna have to serve somebody,
Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord
But you're gonna have to serve somebody.

-- Bob Dylan, song “You Gotta Serve Somebody”

The Greek term for slave used in Romans 6 is *doulos*. It referred to a bondservant, an individual who once was a slave by coercion. They were owned, but after six years, in that culture, they earned their freedom. If, after those six years, the slave loved his master and wanted to continue to work for him, then he could choose to become a bondservant. There was a ceremony in which the slave pledged his devotion to his master and the master pledged to care and provide for the slave (Exodus 21:1-6).

This is the image behind “slaves of righteousness.” We were once slaves to the law; imprisoned by its lofty and meticulous requirements. At salvation we fall in love with (instead of fearing) the Law Giver; we pledge our devotion to Him. We are still slaves, but we love our Master, and, therefore, our service becomes freedom. By obeying God we are doing the very things our heart would long to do. We so love God that we joyfully take His will as our own. We realize His desires for us are trustworthy, while our own desires (if at odds with His) lead us into destruction (Prov. 14:12).

Biblical identity removes the anxiety of moral decision making. I am a slave of righteousness. I have willfully forfeited my right to make immoral decisions (this is not to imply perfectionism). Even when I believe the immoral decision would make me happier, create greater peace, or provide some other benefit, that is not “who I am.” I have come to trust my Master’s plan for pursuing happiness more than my own.

The Temple of God: Worship Component to Identity

“Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.” 1 Corinthians 6:19-20

In the same way you were created to breathe, so you are continually breathing; you were created to worship, therefore you are perpetually worshipping. You are pursuing what you believe to be most valuable, worthy, precious, and great. We do what we do to get what we want most and to serve who / what we love most. Human motivation is worship.

In the Old Testament, the temple was the site of worship. It was the place where God’s people gathered knowing they would be in God’s presence and, therefore, be in a position to worship. The temple was considered holy ground, and there were many regulations protecting its sanctity.

In 1 Corinthians 6 Paul is showing us that God is present in believers and that our perpetual worship is now perpetually expressed in the residence of God. This is who we are. We are walking temples and traveling holy places. No longer do ceremonial regulations and decorations get the attention. Instead, those God made in His image are mobile celebrations of and invitation to His redemption.

Being the temple of God causes us to think differently about our life and God’s expectations. God’s regulations in our lives are the equivalent of us choosing the paint colors and furniture arrangement in our homes. God is not imposing as an “outsider” but making things suitable for Himself as a resident of our lives.

This is a continuation of being a slave of righteousness. Our purpose for keeping God’s law changed. Obedience is now a way of showing hospitality to the honored guest (the Holy Spirit) of our souls. In the same manner that a historic house is treated differently because of a famous former resident, we treat our lives differently because of the sacred guest who is constantly in residence within us.

The Body of Christ: Corporate Component of Identity

“Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.” 1 Corinthians 12:27

I am a we. This is bad grammar, but good theology. I am a part of a corporate body that more completely defines who I am than I can by myself. The body metaphor exemplifies this corporate idea. What is an ear without the rest of the body; without the brain to register what the ear hears, or the eyes to identify and locate the one speaking?

Many of the ideals of Western civilization are rooted in the doctrine of individualism. Alexis De Tocqueville—author of one of the most influential appraisals of democracy in America—said:

Individualism, at first, only saps the virtues of public life; but, in the long run, it attacks and destroys all others, and is at length absorbed in downright selfishness. Selfishness is a vice as old as the world... individualism is of democratic origin (as quoted in Welch, 1997).

This is not an attack on democracy (I love the freedoms and voice that comes with being an American citizen), but a call to differentiate right doctrine from governing philosophy.

Consider how many modern proverbs emphasize *I* over *we*.

- Be all you can be.
- Look out for number one.
- Only the strong survive.

- You have to love yourself before you can love anyone else.
- Only you can decide what is right for you.

Genesis 2:18 says, “Then the Lord God said, ‘It is not good that the man should be alone.’” The question to ask is: what is bad about isolation? Genesis 2 must be a part of answering the question of personal identity or we would reinforce as “good” what God said was “not good.”

God’s people are called to reflect the image of a God who exists as Trinity (unified plurality) by recognizing our identity cannot be rightly understood outside of relationship. As believers, we are a people redeemed to collectively reflect the character and power of Christ in a manner that we cannot as individuals.

Here we find one of the sharpest distinctions from self-esteem. It is not about us; our reputation, our value, or our glory. We are to be about Christ—His reputation, His value, and His glory—because we have become part of His body. Like a brushstroke is a masterful painting, the glory we possess is because of the Artist and larger work of which we’re a part.

Biblical identity realizes that we, and everyone else, are inadequate as the center of our affections. As fallen, fickle people the aftertaste of seeking satisfaction in ourselves turns sour. Apart from God and His great work of redemption, whatever we would use to define ourselves is too temporary to provide emotional and relational stability. Biblical identity has longevity in its satisfaction because it is rooted in something much larger than our individual finite lives and desires.

Fools for Christ’s Sake: Humility Component of Identity

“For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, like men sentenced to death, because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels, and to men. We are fools for Christ’s sake, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honor, but we in disrepute. To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are poorly dressed and buffeted and homeless, and we labor, working with our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure.” (1 Corinthians 4:9-12)

Don’t we all want to be impressive? In some way—physical attractiveness, witty sense of humor, a brilliant mind, widespread influence, dominant strength, financial extravagance—we want to be exceptional. We want to be known by our most impressive quality, or we wish we could find an attribute in ourselves others would find impressive.

The term fool is the antithesis of being impressive. Yet that is Paul’s term, along with weak, disrepute, reviled, and persecuted (see also the Beatitudes in Matthew 5:3-11). Our identity, as followers of Christ, cannot be rooted in performance and reputation. Focusing on reputation will lead us away from the way of Christ and to a focus on self. These focal points will not call us to turn the other cheek, love our enemies, keep our sacrifices private, and pray or fast to only be heard and seen by God (Matthew 5:38-6:18).

Biblical identity cannot be selfishly protected and survive. Trying to protect our identity from the foolishness of the Gospel erodes its very foundation. In Luke 9:24 Jesus says, “For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it.” 1 Corinthians 1:27-31 makes this point clearer:

But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, whom God made our wisdom and our righteousness and sanctification and redemption. Therefore, as it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.”

The Gospel begins with our admission that we are incompetent for life. We do not have what it takes. We desperately need the grace, mercy, and wisdom of God. This does not change after salvation. Believers remain God-dependent. Spiritual maturity is not gradually decreasing of our need for God. To the contrary, spiritual maturity is the ever increasing understanding of how to access God’s wisdom and resources in the details of our dependence.

This piece of our identity brings humility yet prevents humiliation. Humiliation requires pride. If I readily admit my need for help, I am not ashamed when it comes. When I try to deny my need for help, I am embarrassed to receive it. Shame is often a function of misplaced identity.

Self-esteem would tell us to establish our identity by affirming our merit, ability, and worth. Biblical identity would call us to humbly recognize our depravity and not to blush as we confidently approach the throne of grace (Hebrews 4:16) or rely upon the body of Christ to supplement our weakness.

Ambassadors & A Letter from Christ: Relational Component of Identity

“Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us.” 2 Corinthians 5:20

“And you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.” 2 Corinthians 3:3

Identity, particularly in the midst of relationships, involves an agenda. One example of this is “the rescuer.” Rescuers involve themselves with people who need their help. Rescuers become uncomfortable in relationships where things are “normal,” because they no longer have a role or function in the relationship.

The identity statements of ambassador and a letter from Christ provide believers with an identity in the midst of relationships. Our goal is to communicate God’s agenda. We have been assigned the office of representative or messenger of God to the people around us. We have a message written on our lives.

This does not require “nothing but spiritual talk” with every person you meet. An ambassador builds authentic relationships with his/her constituency. To reduce our ambassador role to perpetually reciting the plan of salvation and Ten Commandments is to be reductionistic. 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 provides an example of our call as ambassadors:

For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.

Paul got to know the people with whom he interacted. He knew their heritage, way of life, and values in order to more skillfully convey the message his Lord wanted them to hear.

This piece of biblical identity gives us a new set of questions for measuring success in our relationships. We now ask, “Have I established myself as a trustworthy person?” instead of, “Does this person like me?” We ask, “Have I demonstrated God’s personal love for this individual?” rather than “What can this person do for me?” We ask, “Can I articulate how the gospel would make a difference in their life (either in salvation or continued spiritual growth)?” as opposed to, “How does this person make me feel?”

Salt of the Earth & Light of the World: Vocational Component of Identity

“You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people’s feet. You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.” Matthew 5:13-16

If ambassador is for the relational part of life, then salt and light are for the vocational part of life (i.e., work, education, politics, etc...). Our vocation provides us with a platform for influence that goes beyond the relatively smaller number of people with whom we could have ambassador-influence. Through work we shape culture and policies; the impact of these functions are often broader (although not deeper) than our direct relational network.

Being salt and light calls us to continually look for opportunities to use our occupation for redemptive influence. We will never perfectly establish God’s kingdom on earth, because God has ordained that this will occur upon Christ’s return. We desire God’s kingdom be increasingly real, tangible, apparent, understood, appreciated, and desired. This is a key element of the Lord’s Prayer, “Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven (Matthew 6:10).”

Our occupation is not merely where we earn money to pay the bills and give to God’s work. Our occupation is where we express dominion over a niche of the earth (Gen. 1:28) to expand God’s influence there. Striving for this is a part of the believer’s identity. We are to be purifiers of our culture, workplace, school, home, world, and social settings.

This is not to be a coerced action that we do like the youth group who adopted a mile of highway, and then reluctantly goes out once a year fervently praying that none of their friends pass by. This is what we do because it is who we are. We love the ways of God. Our lives seem most at ease when God’s ways are implemented around us (this attitude reinforces what it means to be “in Christ”). Our hearts cry out with David’s:

The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes; the fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever; the rules of the Lord are true, and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb. Moreover, by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward. (Psalm 19:7-11)

CONCLUSION

Please permit—or at least excuse—a bit of elementary humor. When is a door not a door? When it is ajar. Get it? Similarly, when is a thief not a thief? It is not just when he is dormant from his thievery. The thief may only be sleeping, he may not have a pressing need, the opportunity may be wrong, or he may be invested in some other pursuit. Lack of activity does not change one’s identity.

Ephesians 4:28 says, “Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need.” A thief is no longer a thief when he is willing to put the needs of others before his wants. His identity is no longer wrapped up in being blessed, but, rather, in being a blessing. That is the intent of this chapter: that you understand and embrace a portrait of a Christ-honoring identity to such an extent that you change from the inside out; from identity to choices.

Who are you? I hope I not merely muddied the water to a difficult question. You should have more categories to think about this question than you did nine pages ago. What does being a Christian change about who you are? At this point, you should realize that it changes everything; not in a sweeping, generic way, but in specific ways in each area of your personhood.

Your physical being remains the same. Your life experiences are not rewritten. Your skill set is not radically shuffled. Initially, your network of relationships is not altered. Yet at the same time, your purpose in relationships and the way that you establish them begins to change. Your skills and abilities take on a different meaning because they are seen as blessings from God through which you are to bless others. The events of your life are interpreted by a different grid. You realize you are not your own, you were bought with a price (1 Corinthians 6:19-20).

Checklist for A Portrait of Christ-Honoring Identity

Place a check in the blank for each item you for which you regularly exhibit this attitude, behavior, or character trait. If you struggle to be able to give a fair self-assessment of an item, ask people who know you well.

The items left unmarked should become your agenda items for developing a Christ-honoring identity. These should help you identify the times and places in which you would grow in a Christ-honoring identity. Consider this a scavenger hunt in your spiritual maturity.

Give thanks to God for the items you were able to check. Pray for God to grow you in the areas you could not, while also inviting friends to encourage you and hold you accountable in those areas.

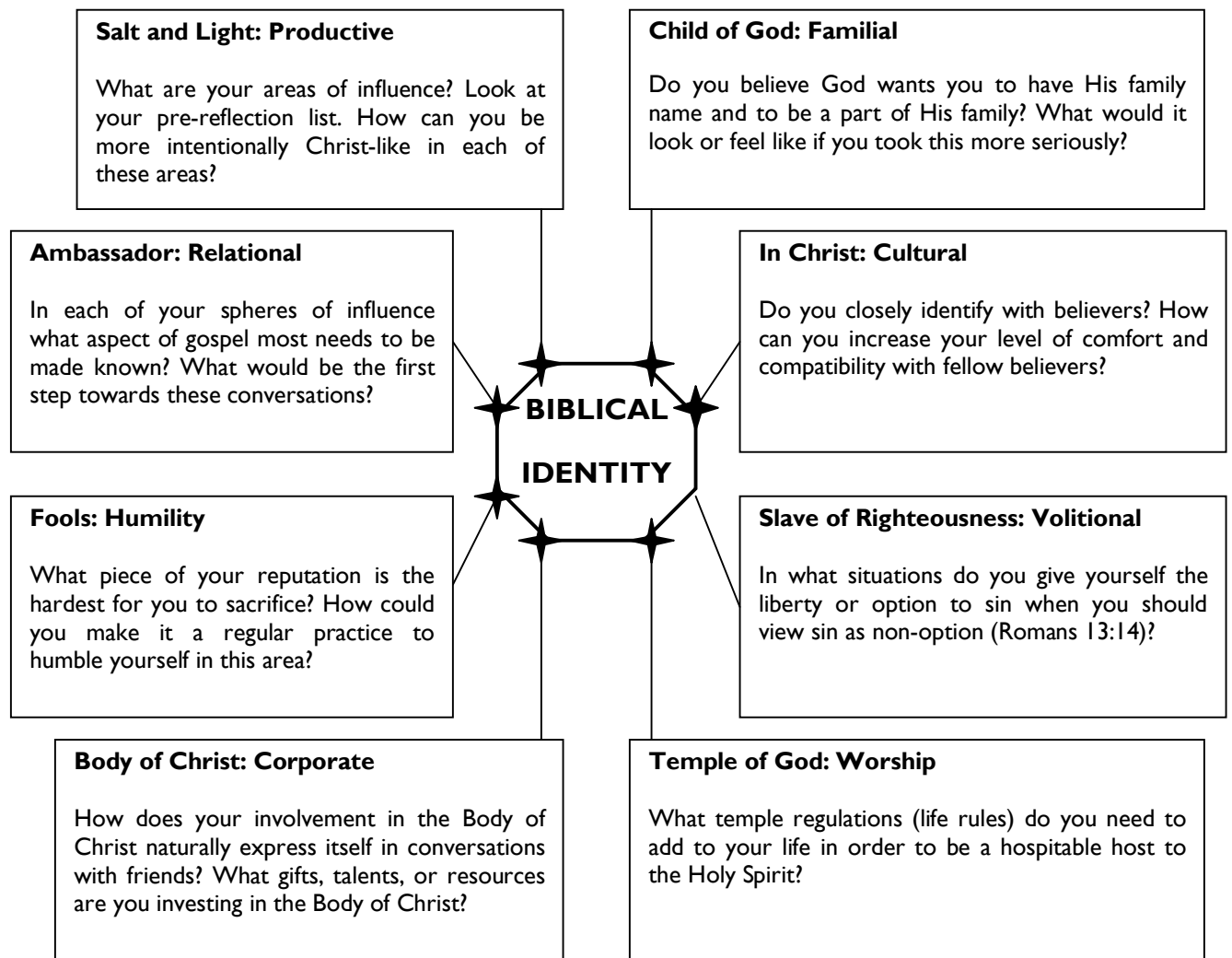
- I can be embarrassed without that experience seeming like a threat to me.
- I am willing to obey / participate in a task or opportunity even when I feel inadequate.
- My values and actions do not change based on the people I am around.
- Instances of failure do not dominate my thought life.
- Changing jobs, social roles, or schools would not unduly change my self-perception.
- I can be cordial to and enjoy people of other political parties, faith systems, or sports allegiances.
- I have friends at various socio-economic levels and cultural backgrounds.
- I resist being nervous around people who I perceive to be more attractive than I am.
- I resist being nervous around people who I perceive to be smarter than I am.
- I can respond to an instance of rejection without it dominating my thought life and emotions.
- I am the same person at work, school, home, and church.
- I resist doing things simply for the approval of others.
- I do not have to be complemented in order to stay motivated and work hard.
- I can meet and engage new people without experiencing significant levels of anxiety.
- When I am not around people, I resist feeling lost and discontent.
- I can encourage myself with biblical categories of identity when I am distressed.
- I can show interest in and learn about people’s jobs and passions even if they’re different from my own.
- I naturally ask people about their religious beliefs as I get to know them.
- When I introduce myself I am not “ranking” my life against the other person’s to see if I measure up.
- I am able to resist the temptation towards pride when I do something well.
- I am able to engage my job or social responsibilities without those roles defining me.
- Being a part of a family and church influence my sense of identity, emotions, and choices in a healthy way.

Biblical Identity refers to the defining ideas, labels, and relational roles which make our actions or emotions seem right and rational. Identity, when healthy, remains constant even when circumstances and peer groups change. Identity does not change when no one is looking, when everyone is looking, when you are with the love of your life, or when you are with an ardent enemy.

Reflective Questions

Pre-Reflection Exercise: List all of the “I am” statements you make about yourself. For example, “I am a husband, father, counselor, country boy, etc...” If needed, start by listing the major areas of involvement in your life (i.e., home, work, church, recreation, upbringing, etc...).

On a separate sheet of paper answer the following questions. The questions are intended to walk you back through the key concepts of this chapter while causing you to focus upon your own effort to live out of a biblical identity.



Chapter Three

A PORTRAIT OF CHRIST-HONORING PURPOSE

“You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, ‘I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him.’ The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom’s voice. Therefore this joy of mine is now complete. He must increase, but I must decrease.” John the Baptist John 8:28-30

“So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.” 1 Corinthians 10:31

It was May 21, 1527. The years surrounding this event mark the “continental divide” of Christian history. The church was rediscovering what it meant to be a Christian. Major figures in church history were doing the things for which we now remember them: Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Huldreich Zwingli. In the midst of these major figures was a small group known as the Anabaptists. They sided with neither the Reformers nor the Catholic Church. On this day, one of these men was facing execution for his faith. The indictment read:

Michael Sattler shall be committed to the executioner. The latter shall take him to the square and there first cut out his tongue, and then forge him fast to a wagon and there with glowing tongs twice tear pieces from his body, and then on the way to the site of execution give times more as above and then burn his body to powder as an arch-heretic (McDow & Reid, 1997, p. 160).

As this gruesome plan unfolded, one sympathetic observer recorded:

When the ropes on his hands had burned through, he raised the forefingers of both hands, thereby giving the signal he had agreed on before with his fellow believers to indicate that such a dying was bearable and that he remained in the faith (McDow & Reid, 1997, p. 161).

While there are many questions that could be raised about the brutality this event executed in the name of God, the question relevant for this chapter would be: What enables a man, in the midst of such unimaginable suffering, to maintain his focus on God’s glory and the edification of God’s people?

Our answer, in a word, will be “purpose.” Michael Sattler had one resounding goal—to spend his life for Christ. Whether his life was spent over the 30 years of pastoring or a few hours, he wanted it to be used for God’s purpose.

The intent of this chapter is not to promote martyrdom or extremism as Christian ideals. Rather, the goal is to communicate how God’s presence in the life of an individual provides a stable and satisfying sense of purpose across the full breadth of human experience: intense suffering, treasured pleasures, and the monotony of everyday life.

Defining “Biblical Purpose”

Biblical Purpose is an over-arching objective in life that brings cohesion and direction to the apparent disconnectedness of life. Purpose is what allows an individual to measure progress and have a sense of accomplishment. Purpose defines *why* you do things (i.e., big picture), more than *what* you do (i.e., little tasks).

We must realize the same action can stem from multiple purposes. For example, how many different purposes are there for why a young boy would help an old lady across the street? A short list includes: sincere compassion; to earn a Boy Scout badge; she is his grandmother and he will get a guilt trip if he lets her cross alone; he works on commission at the business across the street and hopes to make a sale; or she is the grandmother of the girl he wants to date and he hopes she will put in a good word for him.

Because the same *what* (action) can emerge from many *whys* (purposes), focusing only upon what we should be doing can easily truncate the Christian faith to an unsatisfying set of duties. Only when the actions of faith are practiced in a love for God (worship being our “ultimate purpose”) and in keeping with our created design (the key to discovering our “particular purpose”) will our acts of obedience fill the nagging void in our heart.

In America, life carries many relatively predictable elements: many years of education, working even more years to support oneself and possibly a family, the challenges of starting a career, an intense time of reassessment at mid-life, and adjusting to a slower pace as one ages. Without some grander purpose, life can become so predictable or seemingly pointless that it promotes depression or disillusionment (Ecclesiastes 1:2-11).

It is important to note that this definition of purpose overlaps with the concepts of identity and wisdom also found in this series on Christ-honoring alternatives to self-esteem.

Identity: Knowing who you are provides a foundation for understanding why you’re here. The details of your unique purpose in God’s kingdom are dependent upon knowing understanding the implications of your identity in Christ.

Wisdom: Wisdom is the implementation or “living out” of purpose. The most eloquently stated purpose, centered upon the godliest cause without wisdom is like the finest luxury car with bad tires and a fourteen year old behind the wheel on a rainy day navigating a winding road.

Creating vs. Sustaining

There are many excellent books, seminars, and sermons on purpose. Chances are you have read or heard more than one. This chapter does not seek to add something new to these excellent materials; instead, it strives to instruct you on how to skillfully implement your purpose—to know God and enjoy Him forever—in the experiences of life that are most prone to distract or divert us from our purpose.

If you struggle to identify your sense of purpose, skip to the reflection exercise on the final page of this chapter. It is designed to walk you through formulating a personal purpose statement. You will examine how God has designed you (e.g., talents, gifts, attributes, gender, nationality, residence, etc...) and equipped you (e.g., experiences, relationships, work/school setting, etc...) to specifically *know Him and enjoy Him forever*.

When the Going Gets Tough...

Five parts of life often cause people to digress from their God-given purpose.

1. The repetitive, monotonous, enthusiasm-draining cycle of life that we will call *the mundane*.
2. The physically, mentally, and spiritually demanding parts of life which do not replenish what they drain from our souls which we will call *the difficult*.
3. The pervasive anxiety of a self-perpetuating to do list, unending number of “should’s,” and ever-teasing “like-to’s” that we will call *busyness*.
4. The real or anticipated moments when the constellation of wrong people, wrong time, and wrong response line up to cause our complexion to turn crimson red that we will call *the embarrassing*.
5. The times when every morsel of my effort, intelligence, blood, sweat, and tears are utterly insufficient that is devastatingly known as *failure*.

These five struggles tempt us to quit, give up, run away, hide, or in some other way depart from the purpose for which we were created. The rest of this chapter seeks to demonstrate how dying to self, as opposed to focusing on self, equips us to navigate these difficult terrains in a way that is both personally satisfying and God-honoring.

The Mundane: *David the Shepherd*

In many ways, heroic sacrifice is easier than mundane sacrifice even when the former is more costly. It is easier for a secret service agent to risk his life to save the President, than it is for someone to care for an unresponsive loved one who needs to be fed, bathed, and changed. The latter task is hard, disheartening, repetitious, unnoticed, isolating, and depressing.

While the wording may be a bit cumbersome, the following quote by Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1996) from *Meditations on the Cross* ties this theme of maintaining purpose in the midst of mundane, unnoticed life with the example of Christ:

It is infinitely easier to suffer in obedience to a human order than in the freedom of one's own, personal, responsible deed. It is infinitely easier to suffer in company than alone. It is infinitely easier to suffer publicly and with honor than out of the public eye and in disgrace. It is infinitely easier to suffer through the engagement of one's physical being than through the Spirit. Christ suffered in freedom, alone, out of the public eye and in disgrace, in body and soul, and likewise subsequently many Christians along with him (p. 27).

The number of tasks that fit this description are numerous: getting an education, maintaining a home, caring for an elderly parent, keeping a budget, performing a job that is repetitious, or even religious practices that have become ritualized. Consider David in this context; not the powerful, warrior-king David, but the anointed shepherd boy in waiting. Even before David was the anointed shepherd boy, he was just *shepherd boy*—day after day of tending stupid sheep.

David had a harp, a sling shot, and a heart for God. For years he had no grand mission beyond green grass, fresh water, cool shade, and stay awake. Yet these days were not wasted. David became excellent with his sling shot and used it to slay Goliath (1 Samuel 17). David mastered the harp and played it to tame King Saul's madness (1 Samuel 16). David cultivated a heart for God that protected most of his rule from the corrupting influence of power.

The most impressive part of the David as shepherd boy is that he worked so hard not knowing he would be king. Had David known he was preparing to inaugurate the Messianic line, his preparation would be expected. As it was, his situation was eerily like ours. He was stuck doing life and it stunk (quite literally, as anyone who has been around sheep knows).

Often boredom can be misinterpreted as low self-esteem. “I am not enjoying life; therefore, I must not love myself enough.” Boredom is not a problem of self-assessment, but one of purpose mired down in day-to-day life.

When purpose gets lost in the mundane, we ought to evaluate whether (a) we have grown accustomed to excitement and an expectation of perpetual entertainment, or (b) whether the *what* of life (i.e., particular actions) has lost its connection to the *why* of our life (i.e., personal purpose).

The first requires us to grow in the maturity of contentment and resist the temptation to a sense of entitlement. The second requires us to become prayerfully intentional in areas of our life where we've allowed ourselves to become mindless. For the majority of people most of life will entail these two battles. The idea of purpose is most often more glorious than the experience of living it out.

Steps to Overcome: Purpose is difficult to sustain when life is mundane. Here are several truths and application steps to consider in order to assist you in maintaining a sense of purpose.

1. Remember God does not waste experiences. In your daily devotions, study the life of Moses (Exodus 2-20; Deuteronomy 31-34) and make notes of how God used the seemingly disruptive details in his life in the same way He did in David's life.
2. Examine your talents, passions, and opportunities. Pick one and set aside time each week to cultivate it. Psalm 37:4 says, “Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart.” The battle of the mundane is often caused by not taking time to savor and develop the good gifts of God.
3. List your struggles, sufferings, and disappointments. Consider the people who share these experiences. Pray that God would give you an opportunity in light of these difficulties to reach out to someone on this list.
4. Reflect on the virtues of perseverance and endurance. Keep track of how God is growing these in your life. Make it a daily practice to thank Him for one way He is shaping your character.

The Difficult: *Jeremiah*

Purpose does not equal success. Unfortunately, having a clearly defined, unifying agenda for decision-making does not guarantee that every, or even most, endeavors will reach their desired end. Jeremiah is an example of a God-fearing man, with a God-given purpose who by most definitions of success was a failure. Israel did not respond to his preaching. Jeremiah

so frequently cried out to God in frustration over the ineffectiveness of his ministry that he is commonly known as the “weeping prophet.”

In Jeremiah’s case ineffectiveness was not a reason to change directions. The lack of responsiveness was not God “closing a door.” It was God leaving His people without excuse. God was giving a living commentary on the hardness of the human heart (Jeremiah 17:9-10). God called Jeremiah to fail in order to advance His agenda for salvation history. Jeremiah’s message (1:9-10) was one of difficulty:

Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth. And the Lord said to me, "Behold, I have put my words in your mouth. See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant."

Difficulty, as Jeremiah demonstrates, is a time to reflect on one’s life, “Correct me, O Lord, but in justice; not in your anger, lest you bring me to nothing (10:24).” Jeremiah faced difficulty with a humble heart acknowledging that he may have acted outside of God’s will. But God did not respond to Jeremiah’s prayer with conviction. All difficulty is not divine punishment. If this were true, Paul could not say:

More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit (Romans 5:3-5).

Christ-honoring purpose must be able to endure difficulty or else it merely wishful thinking rooted in a “prosperity gospel.” If we believe that a Christ-honoring purpose will make us immune to difficulty, then we will either feel like God is a liar or we are a failure. Suffering is real and Satan knows it is an effective tool to discourage God’s people.

Difficulty should not be misinterpreted as low self-esteem. The despair associated with a prolonged struggle is a matter of fatigue and ebbing hope. In these times we are called to acknowledge our insufficiency in order to rely more fully on God (II Corinthians 2:15-17). The arduous effort of difficult times ought not to cause us to look within to our own resources, but to God and His sufficiency.

Steps to Overcome: Difficulty has no universal cause. We cannot carte blanche attribute it to personal sin, the activity of Satan, God’s refining process, or the general effects of the Fall (it may be any of these, but it is not always exclusively just one of these). In the effort to maintain purpose in the midst of difficulty consider the following.

1. Examine your actions and motives for sin. Self-examination is one, but not the only, response to difficulty. Make sure that your purpose has not become tarnished by a self-serving agenda or taken over your identity.
2. Enlist fellow believers to pray with you, encourage you, weep with you, and to exhort you to persevere. Suffering is not an individual sport. Let the church be the church to you at this time. Isolation magnifies the logistical and emotional challenge of prolonged difficulty.
3. Take time for Sabbath rest. Difficulty can be exhausting physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. Purpose is balanced, not consuming. If we are not taking time to restore our minds and bodies, it may be that purpose has mutated into obsession.
4. Read through the Psalms that reflect upon difficulties. Journal your experiences like the Psalmist so you will have a record of God’s faithfulness.

Busyness: *The Tower of Babel*

People without purpose can be, and often are, busy. This is not as obvious as one might think. It is easy to accept the false notion that those who lack purpose are wandering aimlessly through life. This is sometimes true. But it is just as frequent that people without purpose are running through life gasping for air and on the brink of burn out.

A major obstacle to purpose is busyness. One might think, “I have too much to do to select what is most important, to analyze my task list, and weed out tertiary matters.” A frequent example is the person who says, “I’m too busy to pray. I know it’s important; that I should do it, but when?”

For an example of how busyness, or an intense focus, can be an obstacle to Christ-honoring purpose consider the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9). These people had a clear objective—build a tower. Their objective was God-related—their tower was to reach into the heavens. Yet their busyness and focus was the very thing that brought them under God’s judgment.

Purpose is what filters the good from the best. There are nearly an infinite number of good tasks to be accomplished. There is an equally large number of people within the Body of Christ to whom those tasks are to be disseminated. Christ-honoring purpose is discerning the objective of my life in light of how God has uniquely gifted and positioned me to serve in ways or places that others cannot or will not.

At the tower of Babel there was a competing kingdom which perpetuated their busyness. It was the kingdom of reputation. They wanted to build the tower to “make a name for ourselves (Genesis 11:4).” A key element of developing a Christ-honoring purpose is to increasingly reduce the level of self-interest that motivates our behavior. As John the Baptist said, “He [Jesus] must increase, but I must decrease (John 8:30).”

Self-interest may not be what motivates your over-flowing day planner, perhaps it is people-pleasing. Possibly it is some good, but secondary cause that drives you to squeeze thirty-six hours into a day. It is important to identify the motive that fuels our busyness so that our efforts at time management do merely make us more efficient at serving our idols.

Steps to Overcome: Busyness is a difficult trap to escape from. It seems every moment you spend planning your escape is a moment you spend further solidifying your ensnarement. Steps in overcoming busyness are by necessity very logistical in nature. The protocol below does not include the wise use of a time management device (e.g., day planner), although these can be helpful.

1. Realize you only get a 168 hour week; that is seven twenty-four hour days. Given your roles in life, how would God ideally divide those 168 hours? God has not called you to do more than will fit into those hours.
2. Make a list of the things that do consume your 168 hour week. To save time, keep a piece of paper or small notebook with you and take brief notes as you do life.
3. Compare your two lists. Mark those things that can be eliminated immediately, in six weeks, in three months, and in six months. Develop an exit strategy for these things. Involve at least one trusted, Christian friend in this decision making process. Expect these cuts to be both painful and liberating.
4. Pray through the matter until you can realize that you should not feel guilty for relinquishing responsibilities that do not fit your God-given purpose. Guilt-motivation is not the fuel God made us to run on and is an energy source with many unhealthy emissions.

The Embarrassing: *Philemon*

Pride is often the dark side of purpose. Once purpose is found, it is easy to think “I’ve arrived” or at least “I’m on my way.” Living according to the purpose for which God designed us can lead to a level of ease and productivity that we are tempted to believe that we can become self-sufficient.

Onesimus—the escaped slave who was saved under the preaching of Paul—had finally arrived. He had become a personal assistant to the greatest missionary-evangelist of all time. For once in his life he was doing something significant that did not bring shame or guilt. He was contributing to a cause higher than forced labor or self-interest.

Now he had to return, repent, and accept the responsibility for his actions. I can only imagine the rationalization that must have run through Onesimus’ mind, “It is more productive for God’s kingdom for me to help Paul than to pay for my sin. After all, I wasn’t even a believer when I escaped. Philemon is a leader in his church. He should be happy I’m saved. He’d

probably rather I help Paul. This is just a waste of time. Philemon should be honored that one of his former servants is an assistant to the Apostle to the Gentiles.”

Productivity does not trump duty. Productivity outside of Christian integrity is counter-productive. Therefore, Paul sent Onesimus back to make things right with Philemon. This demotion and requirement of confession—Onesimus was not only a fugitive, but also a thief (v 18)—had to be embarrassing. Onesimus’ purpose, to honor God in all areas of his life, required him to be humble enough to confess his crime.

Humility and selflessness are essential components of a Christ-honoring purpose. Purpose navigates us not only through the dark night of our soul, but also the red-tinge of our cheeks. Christ-honoring purpose takes us through embarrassment to character; instead of taking us around embarrassment to compromise.

A sentimental self-love often allows us to avoid those things that are embarrassing at the expense of our character. A Christ-honoring sense of purpose leads us to evaluate whether our embarrassment is a necessary part of Godly sorrow (II Corinthians 7:10-11), a result of over-valuing the opinion of others, the fruit of over-estimating our own importance, or an unwillingness to acknowledge weakness. If any of these are true, then Christ-honoring purpose faces embarrassment rather than choosing convenience.

Steps to Overcome: Reputation often tempts us to abandon purpose. We become self-protecting instead of staying the course of self-denial (Luke 9:23-24). Here are several truths and application steps to assist you in maintaining a sense of purpose when facing embarrassment.

1. In the midst of successful times, never lose sight of your dependence on God. We have purpose only by the grace of God. How we respond to success and to what we attribute our success profoundly influences the way we respond to embarrassment.
2. Make it a spiritual discipline to do things outside of your comfort zone. Not just to broaden your horizons, but also to prepare you for times of admitting weakness.
3. Remember to examine your heart when you are embarrassed. Our emotions reveal aspects of our heart that often otherwise go unnoticed. Seize the opportunity of embarrassment to allow God to spotlight misplaced priorities of our heart.
4. Meditate on what it means to consider everything loss for the pleasure of knowing Christ (Philippians 3:8).

Failure: *Peter’s Denial of Christ*

“At this point why not throw in the towel? Haven’t I done enough damage already? I’m tired of being the Most Valuable Player for *the other team*. I’ll make more progress when I quit walking in the wrong direction.” These are the types of thoughts that haunt the person who is staring failure in the face. This is the mindset that makes purpose and failure seem antithetical.

Yet, if we are ever going to live out our purpose, we must do so in the face of failure. Again, we are sinful, we battle a flesh nature, and full redemption does not occur until Christ’s return. As sinful people, we will fail. We will have to admit our mistakes, over-sights, errors, and sin. These truths make it inevitable that any purpose which lasts must face failure.

On the subject of purpose in the face of failure, the apostle Peter provides a vivid example. Peter, the outspoken disciple, the one who said he would die before he allowed Christ to be crucified, is the one who denied even knowing Jesus three times to a mere servant girl.

Before judging Peter too harshly, however, it should be counted to his credit that only he and John risked following Jesus to His trial. The other disciples fled fearing for their lives after Gethsemane. Peter’s loyalty to Christ—a purpose statement—led him to go farther than 87.5% of Jesus’ most intimate disciples. Therefore, it should be noted that failure does not necessitate a lack of purpose, an insufficient purpose, or a lack of intimacy with Christ. Moral failure does mean a competing purpose has grown too strong in our hearts.

One of the temptations that accompanies failure is to immediately question our salvation or deeply ponder why we sinned. We sin because we are sinners. This means we innately—as a result of the fall—become distracted from our ultimate purpose—to know and enjoy God—by lesser purposes (e.g., work, comfort, knowledge, pleasure etc...).

Peter did fail. He momentarily chose the purpose of self-protection over the purpose of honoring Christ. He could not have saved Christ’s life even if he were faithful. Theologically, God would not have allowed it. Logistically, he did not hold enough political clout with the Sanhedrin or the Roman officials. From this we see that purpose is not always about results. Peter failed not because he could have saved the day and did not, but because he surrendered his identity as a Christ-follower for self-preservation.

It is dangerous to attribute our purpose derailing after failure to a lack of self-love. It makes our sin primarily against ourselves, not God. We seek to love ourselves more than to overcome our failures. Self-love then becomes the primary purpose for which we live and loving God becomes one of the reasons we use to feel good about ourselves.

Steps to Overcome: The pivotal question for this chapter is: how did Peter regain his purpose? How did Peter resist the temptation to give up and go back to being a fisherman? Here are several truths and application steps to consider assisting you in maintaining a sense of purpose in the face of failure.

1. Admit your failure to everyone affected by your sin. Peter’s repentance and restoration were in front of the disciples. Purpose requires courage and selflessness. Peter did not raise the excuse that ten of the disciples scattered like scared field mice. He answered Jesus question “Do you love me more than these?” directly, honestly, with vulnerability, and publicly.
2. Accept responsibility for your failure and make appropriate restitution. When Peter wanted to know of the consequences other disciples would face (Luke 21:20-22), Jesus returned Peter’s focus to his responsibilities and need for restoration.
3. Remember who God called you to be. Peter was still the one who uttered the confession upon which God would build his church (Matthew 16:18). He was to be the leader of the apostles and a key figure in organizing this awkward new entity known as the church. His restoration was difficult, but because he embraced it with repentance and humility, his purpose did not change. Failure is not fatal in light of God’s grace.
4. Realize that while any particular failure is not inevitable, failure is. This truth has to do with expectation. Never should a believer expect to sin in a given situation (I Corinthians 10:13), but neither should a believer expect to live without sin (I John 1:8-10). Failure does not disrupt our sense of purpose as much when we have a right understanding of who we are.

Conclusion

The main challenge of living out a Christ-honoring purpose is not writing a two sentence purpose statement. Actually, the other elements of this seminar are more complex. Challenge arises from sustaining our purpose. Thousands of trees have given their lives for the paper on which a multitude of unfulfilled purpose statements were written.

Often the assailants that destroy purpose are not catastrophic. Catastrophes call us to action. They awaken our senses and refocus our priorities. We would gear up for a direct attack from the enemy. The most effective assassins of purpose are boredom, repetition, a hectic schedule, shame, and regret.

As you have read this chapter, you have been given twenty points of application to overcome these stealthy perpetrators. The battle begins now. Will you identify the most relevant application points to enact? If not, one of these enemies will sabotage the good intentions that are just now beginning to sprout in your imagination.

Checklist for A Portrait of Christ-Honoring Purpose

Place a check in the blank for each item you for which you regularly exhibit this attitude, behavior, or character trait. If you struggle to be able to give a fair self-assessment of an item, ask people who know you well.

In the parenthesis, rank the five areas of this chapter according the level of disruption they contribute to your struggle to live out your Christ-honoring purpose (10 being most disruption; 1 being the least).

The Mundane ()

- _____ I am able to stay focused when life is repetitious.
- _____ I can identify how the seemingly insignificant details of my life contribute to my purpose.
- _____ My disposition is pleasant regardless of the time of year or season of my work.

Busyness ()

- _____ I can articulate my priorities and live them out.
- _____ Anxiety due to an over-whelming number of tasks rarely disrupts my life.
- _____ I am willing to say “no” to good things which are a bad fit for my life.

The Difficult ()

- _____ I can face challenges in one area of my life without disruption to other areas.
- _____ I am willing to ask for help from others.
- _____ I rarely quit a task or project before it is complete.

The Embarrassing ()

- _____ I am willing to admit I made a mistake.
- _____ I can be successful without focusing the attention on myself.
- _____ I am able to acknowledge my own short-comings with grace and appropriate humor.

Failure ()

- _____ I rarely beat myself up with guilt and shame after I fail.
- _____ I accept responsibility for my failure and avoid blame-shifting.
- _____ I understand and take comfort in the fact that failure is not final in light of God’s grace.

Biblical Purpose is an over-arching goal or agenda for life that brings consistency and direction to the apparent disconnectedness of life. Purpose is what allows an individual to measure progress and have a sense of accomplishment. Purpose relates to *why* you do things, more than *what* you do.

*** The items left unmarked should become your agenda items for developing Christ-honoring purpose.

Reflective Questions

On a separate sheet of paper answer the following questions. The questions are intended to walk you through the process of making your general purpose statement man—to know God and enjoy Him forever—into a personal purpose statement.

1. Make a list of each of the following:

- a. Things I enjoy doing
- b. Talents and abilities God has blessed me with
- c. Unique or difficult life experiences
- d. People or groups with whom I interact, have influence, or for which I have a special compassion
- e. Needs for ministering within my church and community

2. Rewrite the following segment of the Westminster Catechism in your own words.

QUESTION: What is the chief end of man?

ANSWER: The chief end of man is to know God and enjoy Him forever.

3. Do you expect God to try to hide His purpose for you or make it more complex than you can understand? What part of you wants to answer yes to this question?

“What is God’s will for my life?” is not the best question to ask. I think the right question is simply, “What is God’s will?” Once I know God’s will, then I can adjust my life to Him and His purposes.... The focus needs to be on God and His purposes, not my life!... God doesn’t usually give you a one-time assignment and leave you there forever. Yes, you may be placed in one job at one place for a long time; but God’s assignments come to you on a daily basis.... God is far more interested in a love relationship with you than He is in what you can do for Him. His desire is for you to love Him (p. 18).” Excerpts from *Experiencing God* by Henry Blackaby & Claude King (1994)

4. Write a purpose statement using your answers from the first three questions.

5. What interferes with you consistently fulfilling this purpose? Keep this in mind as you read, review, or reflect on the chapter.

Chapter Four

A PORTRAIT OF CHRIST-HONORING CONFIDENCE

Nathan sits staring at the phone. With sweaty palms, he has already dialed the first six digits of her number eleven times. Each time he hangs up, goes to the mirror, and rehearses his introductory remarks. He knows she asked her friends to ask his friends to ask him to call her, but still it seems so “risky.” If only he had the nerve to call and ask her out.

Emily has the resume and qualifications to secure a much better job than the one she is currently in. Yet every time she reviews a new position she begins to imagine the more qualified people who must be applying for this job, becomes intimidated, and decides to wait for something that is a “better fit.”

Jerry has never struggled with a lack of confidence a day in his life. Actually, his lack of appropriate inhibition has gotten him into trouble on more than one occasion. Risks are no big deal. He enjoys the thrill. Jerry assumes that if something goes awry he is smart enough, articulate enough, athletic enough, or well-connected enough to get himself out of it.

Nathan, Emily, and Jerry’s struggles appear different: social awkwardness, professional reticence, and flamboyant pride. They vary in ages, gender, and have different roles in life. Yet each needs to understand biblical confidence. In each case an excessive focus on self (either in deprecation or aggrandizement) contributes to a dysfunctional approach to life. Their solution to distorted confidence will involve a shift in focus from self to Christ.

Defining “Biblical Confidence”

Biblical confidence is the demeanor that exhibits a positive expectation that God will enable us to accomplish any good work He has calls for us to do. This demeanor results in an increasingly shorter period of hesitation and level of anxiety when attempting a task; and a greater degree of peace and fulfillment while planning, carrying out, and evaluating a task. After the task is complete, biblical confidence reduces the degree of pressure to repeat or exceed the accomplishment and the temptation to pride.

This chapter focuses on how to develop this demeanor in a Christ-centered fashion. Your goal in reading the rest of the chapter is to identify beliefs, fears, values, expectations, and interpretations of life which prevent you from experiencing biblical confidence. Questions are provided at the end of the chapter to assist you in reflecting on the material and gaining personal insight into your struggle with confidence.

This definition of confidence overlaps with other components in this series on Christ-honoring alternatives to self-esteem.

Purpose: Confidence requires knowing the *good works God calls for you to do*. This is an issue of purpose. Biblical confidence requires understanding your purpose. For the time being, your sense of purpose may be very broad; to know God and enjoy him forever.” Whatever specifics God adds to your purpose will emerge from this foundation.

Wisdom: Decreasing the delay and anxiety in acting requires not only the willingness to act, but also the wisdom to know how to act. Ill-advised, blind faith (“God will catch me if I fall”) is not biblical confidence. Confidence is only a virtue when it is rooted in understanding. Confidence without wisdom is emboldened foolishness.

Three Pieces of Confidence

Confidence, as with many virtues, is not a thing that can be attained directly. The more we try to *be* confident, the more we miss the mark. Either the increased effort causes us to fixate on our lack of confidence, or our determination to “not back down” over-rides good judgment.

Confidence is the by-product of three things: (1) having one’s faith placed in a trustworthy object, (2) evaluating one’s abilities and gifting accurately and by the right standard, and (3) contentment with the way God made you. If our object of faith is reliable, if our assessment of our abilities is correct, and we are content, we will have biblical confidence.

PIECE ONE: FAITH

According to Hebrews 11:1, “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” If the object of one’s faith (i.e., “things hoped for”) determines the level of one’s confidence (i.e., “assurance”), then it stands to reason that a lack of confidence sometimes reveals a faulty object of faith.

What is it that I believe God has done for me? What do I expect Him to do through me? If my beliefs regarding either of the “things hoped for” questions are wrong, then my life will be marked by either disappointment or intimidation rather than biblical confidence.

High school football provides a good illustration of the various relationships that can exist between faith and confidence. Entering the stadium each Friday evening the fans of each school have a varying degrees of confidence. Confidence can be misplaced. Appropriate confidence does not ensure victory. New uniforms, a good coach, and enthusiastic cheerleaders can produce high morale, while not necessarily warranting confidence.

“Object of faith,” as it is used in this chapter, refers to the thing(s) we expect to provide stability to life. God and the gospel should be the foundational and pervasive object of our faith. Yet due to our sinful nature and fickle hearts we often turn to various other inadequate objects of faith as the foundation for our confidence.

- Abilities, Talents
- Popularity, Connections
- Accomplishment, Prestige
- Power, Influence
- Education, Wisdom, Savvy
- Relationships, Affection, Affirmation

As objects of faith these items make promises they can never consistently fulfill; hence the painful and confusing rise and fall of our confidence when we rely upon them. It is not wrong to be talented, popular, accomplished, influential, educated, or well-connected. It is not wrong to want or pursue these things. However, it is wrong—even idolatrous—to look for these items to support our confidence.

Should Confidence Be Constant?

The short answer is “No.” Confidence will not be unwavering, nor should it. For this reason, it is important to accurately assess whether you should have confidence in a particular situation. A lack of confidence may be a mark of maturity even in situations that are not sinful. It is sometimes wise to be cautious when engaging in a God-honoring activity. While it would obviously be wrong to be confident that one could get away with robbing a bank, we often miss the sinfulness of lacking humility in a virtuous area of strength.

Much of the fuel for the self-esteem movement is that people tend to evaluate all of life based on one area of performance. If I get nervous in social situations, I am an inadequate person. If I struggle to recall information at school or work, I am not as good as everyone else.

The high school equivalent would be to believe that I must be as popular as the home-coming queen, athletic as the varsity captain, as smart as the valedictorian, as funny as the class clown, and as pretty as the captain of the cheerleading squad. My standard of measure varies according to the “best available” example of whatever I am concerned about—this is pride.

Biblical confidence requires being comfortable admitting weakness (Hebrews 4:16) and vulnerability in order for confidence not to mutate into pride. This is a necessary if we are ever going to be able to genuinely “rejoice with those who rejoice (Rom 12:15).” Otherwise other people’s joy becomes our unbeatable standard.

Identifying areas in which you lack confidence is not the same thing as listing your deficiencies. It is an exercise in taking a sober assessment of yourself to determine how you can glorify and enjoy God *beginning now*. This is what Paul calls us to do in Romans 12:3, “For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you *not to think of himself more highly than he ought*

to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.” A confidence that does not readily acknowledge areas of weakness with a peaceful heart is masked insecurity.

Confidence: Virtue or Vice?

Confidence is not always a virtue. Confidence is never an excuse to fail to display humility. Our cultural fixation on self-sufficiency leads us to want to say, “Yes, confidence is always a good and right response.”

Psalm 49:13 says, “This is the path of those who have *foolish confidence*; yet after them people approve of their boasts.” Sometimes confidence is foolishness. My name is Brad Hambrick and I am aesthetically challenged. If I rearrange my office or have a suggestion for how to decorate the house (both of which are rare), I proceed with caution (i.e., fear and trepidation) not confidence.

Other times confidence is irreverent and wrong. People sometimes use confidence as a means to justify a lack of brokenness over sin, lack of respect for authority, or lack of caution in decision making. Consider that the rise in self-esteem theory has correlated with the decrease in respect for authority and a reduced use of sin-language to describe human behavior. Cornelius Plantinga, Jr. (1996) notes this trend:

“Haven’t we all noticed that people who prefer not to judge or confess sin will nonetheless concede that some objectionable act was stupid, tragic, shortsighted, mistaken, unfortunate, miscalculated, erring, regrettable, out of line... a ‘lapse in judgment,’ or ‘inappropriate behavior’ (p. 114)?”

When we make self-love primary, admission of wrong becomes too costly and our vocabulary for side-stepping responsibility becomes quite sophisticated and elaborate. Sin’s innate desire to hide (Genesis 3:8), makes us master defense attorneys.

Confidence, however, is often appropriate. In the movie *Chariots of Fire*, Eric Lidell (an Olympic caliber sprinter who has a heart to do missions in China) says, “God made me fast, and when I run I feel His pleasure.” This is God-centered, humble confidence. When we are biblically confident, it should fit this mold—recognition of God’s gifting and pleasure in displaying God’s creative design. Consider the following passages (*emphasis added*):

Proverbs 3:26, “For the Lord *will be your confidence*, and will keep your foot from being caught;”

Proverbs 14:26, “*In the fear of the Lord* one has strong confidence, and his children will have a refuge;” and

2 Corinthians 3:4, “Such is the confidence that we have *through Christ* toward God.”

Confidence as Cover Up

Fear of failure is often a disguise for a refusal to admit one’s need for help. This is where the label of self-esteem can distract us from considering the motive for our inhibitions. Are we willing to say, “If God has not prepared me for this task, then I will fail and that is good because it is God’s will?”

Biblical confidence will always be realistic. If you do not regularly say the words, “I was wrong” without excuse or explanation, this is solid evidence that you lack biblical confidence. Equally, if you wallow in pity after acknowledging your sin, then you err on the other side of confidence. Confidence can be found at the intersection of truth and grace (John 1:14): truth that is honest about my own failures and grace that allows me to be honest without lingering in shame.

Pride is a powerful motivator. When the appearance of competence becomes a demand of our soul—when it becomes the measure of our worth—then our problem is not a lack of self-love, but an excess of it. We love ourselves too much to place our reputation in the hands of God. Failure is not as problematic when I accept God’s sovereignty over my abilities.

God-Exalting Confidence

Biblical confidence will result in having more to say about God than about ourselves. James 1:17 says, “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.” Everything that thrills our soul and satisfies our heart (particularly those areas of life in which we are rightly confident) is an invitation to draw our attention to the goodness, wisdom, power, and grace of God.

Unless we overtly acknowledge and appreciate God’s gracious enabling in every good thing that we do, we rob God of the glory due Him. Neglect of this praise reveals that the object of faith for our confidence has transitioned from God to our self.

The abilities in which we have confidence are not our own. They are God’s and we steward them. It is usually the case (because of the decaying effects of age) that the matters in which we are confident are only ours for a short period of time. When we treat them as our possession we hoard and protect them in a way that causes us to live in fear.

A holy pursuit of confidence can never make God peripheral to our effort. Isaiah 64:6 says, “All our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment.” Therefore every good work we do is rooted in God’s gracious enabling. Gratitude and praise must be an intricate part of biblical confidence.

PIECE TWO: ABILITY & GIFTING

The Bible recognizes the fact that people have different abilities. Some people might infer from this that God is not fair. This is only true, if by “fair” they require that God gift everyone the same. God is not the parent who buys a bag of candy and gives each child ten pieces (two red, two yellow, two orange, two blue, and two purple). I Corinthians 12:4-7 says:

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

God distributes gifts and abilities for His purposes and His glory. God is not required to give an answer or explanation for how He chooses to do so. It is good because He has done it, not because we approve or understand His rationale.

Submitting to the Lordship of Christ requires that we learn to see the beauty and wisdom in God’s agenda for how He distributes abilities (those we enjoy and those we do not). Failing to be enthused about how God has gifted us is to sinfully call God into question and will erode a key element of biblical confidence. A constant battle for believers is to not fall more in love with God’s gifts than with God.

Personal Inventory

Biblical confidence requires an accurate self-assessment. Scripture gives lists of spiritual gifts, noble character traits, and vices to provide us with the categories necessary to ascertain our strengths and weaknesses. II Corinthians 13:5 says that we are to “examine ourselves.” Part of this examination would include the gifts and abilities that God has entrusted to you.

Taking a personal inventory should do more than accentuate the positive. Some of God’s greatest achievements in and through our lives will be because of aspects we view negatively but confidently surrender to Him.

The grand question of life is not: what do *I* want to be? This question centers on me and makes my desires the directional compass of life. My pleasure becomes the measure of life’s goodness. We begin to think, “Only if I am happy, has God been good.” The meaning of good changes with each new thing we think will make us happy or bring fulfillment.

By contrast, the grand question of life is: how can I bring glory to God by doing the good works *God* has gifted and called me to do? Here God is at the center of my life. Joy is not tied to the fickleness of my preferences, aspirations, or expectations. Confidence is rooted in the consistency of God’s wisdom and design.

Stewarding Abilities and Gifts

Whether we are talking about spiritual gifts and or natural abilities we have a responsibility to refine our God-given skills. The level of your gifting, great or small, is no excuse for laziness in cultivating what God has entrusted to you. We have a moral responsibility to worship God by maximizing the abilities He has given.

Take a moment to read the parable of the talents from Matthew 25:14-30.

"For it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted to them his property. To one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. He who had received the five talents went at once and traded with them, and he made five talents more. So also he who had the two talents made two talents more. But he who had received the one talent went and dug in the ground and hid his master's money. Now after a long time the master of those servants came and settled accounts with them. And he who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five talents more, saying, 'Master, you delivered to me five talents; here I have made five talents more.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.' And he also who had the two talents came forward, saying, 'Master, you delivered to me two talents; here I have made two talents more.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.' He also who had received the one talent came forward, saying, 'Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you scattered no seed, so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.' But his master answered him, 'You wicked and slothful servant! You knew that I reap where I have not sowed and gather where I scattered no seed? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and at my coming I should have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him and give it to him who has the ten talents. For to everyone who has will more be given, and he will have an abundance. But from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. And cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'"

It is important to note that God rewards all faithfulness equally. This is true regardless of the type or magnitude of the abilities God has entrusted to us. We must also realize that God provides faithful stewards with greater opportunities, and punishes those who refuse to use what He has entrusted to them.

Low self-esteem can often be a form of grumbling and envy. In our heart we cry, “If I can’t have/be [blank], then I just won’t try. I’ll give up.” We sulk and muse because God did not give us the ability we desired most. We resent those who have the ability we desire and beat ourselves up for not having it. The issue in such cases is contentment and cultivation of the gifts God has provided, not a low self-esteem.

Right Soldier, Wrong Weapon

Some people try to please God, but their effort seems forced, awkward, or unfruitful. This can occur when we are not focused on utilizing the gifts God has given us. If we are not cultivating the abilities God has given us, then it stands to reason that we are either operating outside the scope of God’s gifting or we are being lazy.

At times this can be a difficult distinction to make, because we all have to operate outside our strengths. For example, the student who struggles in math cannot say that this challenge indicates that Algebra “is not God’s will for their life.” The student needs to persevere in studying math as a matter of respect for those in authority over them and a general stewardship of life.

The question for this chapter, however, is not whether or not to study, but how the struggle in math should affect one’s confidence. It is important to return to our definition of confidence. Biblical confidence is limited to those things God wills that we do.

Our mathematically-challenged student can rest in the fact that their mathematical abilities (or lack thereof) were ordained by God, and that God will not ask them to do anything that requires more of them than they are capable (1 Cor. 10:13). Again, this is not an excuse to avoid difficult tasks, but an encouragement that the lack of particular ability will not prevent us from achieving God’s will—which should be our ultimate satisfaction and fulfillment.

With this in mind, struggle can be separated from confidence. Struggle is used by God to shape our character (Rom 5:3-5). Focusing on our level of self-affection distracts us from the question of what God is doing in our life. This distraction largely guarantees we will not fully appreciate the good thing God works from times of challenge (Rom 8:28).

One fruit of losing a self-focus, is that the success of others will have a decreasing impact upon your confidence. Accomplishing God’s will is not a competitive sport. One person’s pleasing God does not “raise the bar” for every other Christian. In actuality, the opposite is true. One believer’s faithfulness provides an example to follow and creates a climate in which God’s kingdom has more momentum.

PIECE THREE: CONTENTMENT

Few nice words are more foreign to an American mindset than contentment. Quite frankly, we don't get contentment. Everything in our culture, and sometimes in the church, tells us to want more, do more, go further, work harder, get more, etc... Yet in Philippians 4:11-12, Paul says, “I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need.”

Confidence must be rooted in contentment, which may be defined as the restful and active enjoyment of performing the tasks God has called me to do. Contentment is the stabilizing factor in the demeanor of confidence. Contentment prevents our confidence from mutating into selfish ambition or arrogance. Contentment muzzles confidence that might otherwise grow out of control.

“Innocent” Daydreams of Grandeur

Few things disrupt life with a stealth-like quietness more than an undisciplined thought life. It is easy to see how this would work with sins like lust, jealousy, or greed where fantasies are overtly evil or manipulative. But with contentment the fantasies often seem nobler. The thought, “If only I had [blank], then I would [blank]... for God's glory (of course),” becomes the Trojan horse of discontentment.

Discontented daydreaming about an ability God has not blessed you with is wrong for several reasons. First, it is a form of passive rebellion against God's wisdom in creation. Second, the wasted time leads to sins of omission. Third, we begin to feel justified in our anger at God. The cumulative effect destroys contentment and thereby takes confidence with it.

The line between discontented daydreaming and aspiration can be thin. Praying for God to change a situation is good. Grumbling to yourself and others is bad. Working to attain a new skill or refine an existing one is good. Dreaming of “making it” without putting forth effort is bad.

Self-esteem theory distracts us from seeing the activity of our heart. We begin to feel like the victim who has not been given what we were due, or we work backward from what we have achieved to determine what we are worth. All the while, we forget or get distracted from using the gifts God has graciously bestowed upon us.

Like Moses in Exodus 4 we complain and become discouraged about our short-comings (a speech impediment for Moses) not recognizing a host of factors (being adopted into Pharaoh's family so that Moses could actually get a direct hearing with someone so powerful) by which God has been preparing us for the task He calls us to. When the focus is on God, we begin to rejoice that He receives more glory as He works through our inadequacy.

Contentment Doesn't Come in Green

We live in a competitive society. The language of comparison dominates advertising, politics, social interactions, and often the church. Our measure of quality is phrased in the terms of “bigger—better—best.” You do not have to be a competitive person to have caught the contagious mentality it spawns. Even if you do not strive to be the best, you can succumb to a lack of confidence because you believe you are not “as good as” (comparative language) someone else.

Competition and stewardship are significantly different mindsets. Competition cringes at the success of others because it raises the bar for me. Stewardship rejoices at the success of others because it brings glory to God and provides an example for me to learn from.

There will be no shortage of crowns in heaven for those who hear the sweet words of Christ, “Well done my good and faithful servant.” When you read Matthew 25 realize that God's evaluation of you has nothing to do with the performance of others. When we become jealous of the abilities of others it reveals that our life is being ruled by an agenda that is at odds with God's wisdom in creating the world as He did.

Sola Deo Gloria! (For God’s Glory Alone!)

Biblical confidence involves joy. It is good and right to take satisfaction in bringing glory to God by competently using the gifts and abilities He has given you. John Piper (1996) summarizes this principle, “God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him (p. 50).” Work without satisfaction decays confidence. Confidence becomes irrelevant in the absence of joy; cynicism takes over. We begin to believe: it no longer matters if I am good at what I do, because life stinks.

The issue here is joy rooted in contentment with God, not self-esteem. Boredom, monotony, and apathy result in not caring about life. This is true whether I like myself or not. To focus on whether I value myself enough is to distract from the larger issues. Do I take joy in what God has gifted me to do? Am I floundering unaware of God’s plan? Am I resentful or dissatisfied with God’s plan?

Joy is commanded in Scripture (Phil. 4:4). Joy is a fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22). To not take joy in what God has called and gifted me to do reveals a wrongly prioritized motive in my life. As John Piper (1995) says, “Sin is what you do when your heart is not satisfied with God (p. 9).” Biblical confidence will result in the greatest joy as we delight in the fulfillment of what God created us to do.

Conclusion

A lack of confidence either calls into question God’s ability to enable you to do those good works He has prepared for you to do, or your desire to do them. Therefore, it is theologically and morally wrong for a believer to lack confidence. But take heart, the gospel is all about God working redemptively in the things we do wrong.

You may have read this chapter and thought, “This is fine for spiritual stuff, but I want *real* confidence.” That perspective reveals a false separation of life: real life versus spiritual stuff. If that is the case you need to consider what you are seeking in life. You may have read this chapter thinking you were seeking confidence, when in fact you were after autonomy from God.

However, if that is not your attitude, complete the checklist on the next page. It is designed to give you areas of specific application for a balanced and robust biblical confidence. As you evaluate the items on this checklist you should see a portrait of humble, God-centered, contented, stable, joyful confidence emerging.

Checklist for A Portrait of Christ-Honoring Confidence

Place a check in the blank for each item you for which you regularly exhibit this attitude, behavior, or character trait. If you struggle to be able to give a fair self-assessment of an item, ask people who know you well.

The items left unmarked should become your agenda items for developing Christ-honoring confidence. These should help you identify the times and places in which you would grow in a Christ-honoring confidence. Consider this a scavenger hunt in your spiritual maturity.

Give thanks to God for the items you were able to check. Pray for God to grow you in the areas you could not, while also inviting friends to encourage you and hold you accountable in those areas.

- I acknowledge my weaknesses and limitations without beating myself up.
- I am able to respond to mistakes and failures with repentance and hope, because of the gospel.
- I am able to ask for assistance when needed, and will admit that it is needed.
- It seems natural to give God the credit for the good fruit of my labors.
- People rarely tell me I am arrogant, harsh, or over-bearing.
- I am generally relaxed, recognizing God accomplishes His purposes through my normal obedience.
- I recognize that self-sufficiency is a sinful demand to be autonomous from God.
- I take great pleasure in doing things God has gifted me to do.
- Failure is not terminal for my emotional stability.
- I recognize God has not called me to be able to do everything.
- I respect, honor, and submit to those in authority over me.
- I rejoice in the success and maturation of those around me.
- My daydreaming does not center around the phrase, “If only I could / had [blank].”
- I spend regular time refining my talents for God’s glory.
- I enjoy the hard work of maximizing the talents and opportunities God has given me.
- I am a content person.
- I could not feel justified in being angry with God about the way He chose to gift me.
- I do not get jealous of the gifts, abilities, appearance, or position of others.
- My thinking is not dominated by comparison language.
- I enjoy life and the things that I do.

Biblical confidence is the demeanor that exhibits a positive expectation that God will enable us to accomplish any good work He has calls for us to do. This demeanor results in an increasingly shorter period of hesitation and level of anxiety when attempting a task, and a greater degree of peace and fulfillment while planning, carrying out, and evaluating a task. After the task is complete, biblical confidence reduces the degree of pressure to repeat or exceed the accomplishment and the temptation to pride.

*** The items left unmarked should become your agenda items for developing Christ-honoring confidence.

Reflective Questions

On a separate sheet of paper answer the following questions. The questions are intended to walk you back through the key concepts of this chapter while causing you to focus upon your own effort to manifest biblical confidence.

For time's sake, it may be best to answer these questions in three stages: questions 1-3, questions 4-7, and questions 8-10.

1. Make a list of the situations in your life where you lack confidence. Start by developing a few major headings and then cite specific examples under each heading. What themes or repeated situations/tasks emerge from your list?
2. Is confidence the appropriate response to these situations? In the margin beside your list question one write “yes,” “no,” or “not sure” beside each item. Make the items that you are uncertain about a matter of prayer, reflection, and Bible study. Ask a couple of mature Christian friends or mentors about each.
3. Is your lack of confidence a cover up or unwillingness to admit weakness? Place an asterisk (*) beside any item on your list where you think a lack of confidence could be a means of not being transparent about your weaknesses.
4. What abilities, skills, talents, gifts, resources, and personality traits has God blessed you with? Make a list of the things that you do well or strengths that you possess. Again, you may want to use headings and then provide specific examples of each.
5. Do you exhibit a confidence which ignores the gracious enabling of God? Does making this list seem prideful to you? Can you cite specific examples of when you overtly thanked God for the way He created you? How have you used each item from your list to contribute to God's kingdom?
6. Are you being a good steward of the abilities that God has blessed you with? If you struggled to answer question five, this question will need extra attention. For each item in your answer to question four write two things: (a) a method of sharpening or enhancing this blessing, and (b) a method for using this blessing for God's glory.
7. Are you trying to live outside the scope of the abilities God blessed you with? If there is stark contrast between your list for questions one and four, then your answer to this question is probably yes. If this is the case the chapter “A Portrait of Christ-Honoring Purpose” will be important for you to read.
8. What do you daydream about? Do your thoughts naturally drift towards using your current abilities or towards what you could do if you were gifted differently? Review the bulleted points on page 31. What is the desire that motivates you to live outside the scope of God's gifting?
9. Do you get jealous of those who are more capable than you are? Of whom are you jealous? Of what gifts or abilities are you envious?
10. Are you able to praise God at the end of a task and take satisfaction in your work? How frequently? How do you, or should you, express this praise and satisfaction?

Chapter Five

A PORTRAIT OF CHRIST-HONORING SECURITY

Matthew 11:28-30

*“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.
Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart,
and you will find rest for your souls.
For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”*

Have you ever noticed how insecurity takes some of the most common, innocent, and pervasive components of our life and transforms them into relational weapons or instruments of emotional self-mutilation? That might sound like a flamboyantly worded melodrama unless you have lived with insecurity.

Questions, silence, clarifications, pauses, compliments (of you or others), words of gratitude, and any other aspect of the fabric of relationships get filtered through the lens of suspicion and self-doubt – “What did they mean by that? Are they upset? Why did they choose that word? Why did they say nothing? Did I say too much?”

- Questions begin to mean that you don’t think I know the answer.
- Silence always infers that you are upset with me or I have offended you.
- Compliments send the message that I am this way today, but you only noticed because usually I am not.
- Gratitude means I usually overlook these kinds of details or that I am awkward enough that you were just looking for something to be able to say in conversation with me.

Nothing can just be what it is. Everything has a deeper meaning. If only I were normal, popular, intelligent, or something; then people would not have to play this game with me. But I am not, so I get stuck in this game and I hate it. But that is who I am and I’m sorry... O-KAY! Sorry, I didn’t mean to go off on a tangent. I just get worked up sometimes. I know that’s weird. I hate that it made reading this chapter awkward for you. I will try not to do it again. But if you don’t want to continue reading, I completely understand. I probably wouldn’t either. But I have said too much already. I’m sorry.

Do you ever think like that? Does an unreturned phone call or e-mail get you spinning with scenarios of relational turmoil? Do innocent questions (if you believe there are such things) sometimes hit you with the force of an insult? How many times do you replay and consider the possible reactions to a comment in small group or a joke with friends? For what kind of events, challenges, opportunities, or roles do you write yourself off out of fear?

Hopefully we can begin to see that insecurity (or the fear of man as it is more commonly referred to in Scripture) is something we all struggle with to some degree. It goes by many names in our culture: peer pressure, codependency, social anxiety, timidity, being “sweet,” people-pleasing, etc... The goal of this chapter is to walk you through the three big pieces of insecurity, so that you can target and reduce the pieces that most influences your life most.

Defining “Biblical Security”

Biblical security is a disposition of stability that allows for a patient and an increasingly accurate interpretation of personal performance, interpersonal interactions, and circumstances in the midst of situations that are as yet uncertain, incomplete, challenging, or negative. Biblical security acknowledges that failure, criticism, and personal sin will occur; however, it does not allow the legitimate guilt, disappointment, or embarrassment of these events to create instability or dash hope.

It is important to note that this definition of security overlaps with the concepts of identity and confidence also found in this series on a Christ-honoring alternative to self-esteem.

Identity: For a person marred by sin (which is all of us) to have a sense of security, their identity must be rooted in something larger and better than themselves. This identity must be maintained in light of personal failures without minimizing those failures in order to be healthy and allow for personal growth.

Confidence: A healthy sense of security will not demand a sense of confidence about every activity. If it did, then security would be too performance-driven to be realistic. A healthy sense of security allows an individual to face challenges about which he/she is not confident without the uncertainty dissolving their nerve to give their best and prevents episodes of failure from causing emotional crashes.

Three Big Questions of Security

There are three key questions that insecurity distorts.

1. What is the standard or criteria of “good” that is expected?
2. How good is good enough?
3. In whose eyes must we be good?

In the mind of the person who struggles with insecurity the questions echoes like this, “Am I good enough for [name, group, achievement, etc...]? Am I pretty enough to have a boyfriend? Am I smart enough to get into the school of my choice? Am I worthy enough to be treated with honor? Am I funny enough to be cool? Am I bold and strong enough to be a man? Am I wise and consistent enough to be a good parent? Is my house clean enough to have company over? Am I interesting enough to have friends? Am I wealthy enough to be included? Am I insightful enough to be a teacher? Am I respected enough to be a leader?”

These three words dominant many of our lives: good, enough, and audience. They shape our emotions, decisions, relationships, what we say, what we hear, what we wear, self-perception, what we perceive to be risk, and our willingness to take those risks.

Our goal in this chapter is to define these three concepts (to answer these three questions) in a manner that helps us understand our emotions and reactions, is faithful with Scripture, teaches us to treasure the gospel, and provides us with the emotional-relational stability to patiently and accurately respond to the breadth of life’s challenges and blessings.

What Does It Mean To Be Good?

For the moment let’s forgo the theological answers (we will come to those) and just examine the question emotionally. In life we experience emotion before we consider theology. However, if we do our job well in this chapter, we will see that theology and experience are two sides of the same coin.

Ask yourself, “What is the particular ‘good’ that I am measuring myself against when I feel insecure?”

- Appearance
- Popularity
- Wealth
- Power/Influence
- Charisma
- Acceptance by a Key Person or Group
- Humor
- Intelligence
- Family History
- Holiness/Moral Standard
- Bible Knowledge
- Athleticism
- Clear, Firm Convictions

These are common ways by which we measure “good.” Insecurity usually means that one or more of these items is very important to me and I do not believe have/do it. Because of this “fatal flaw,” I consider myself to be inadequate. I may or may not measure everyone else by that single trait (my insecurity may or may not mingle with being judgmental), but I weigh my worth by that single attribute.

One problem with this is that I become a single variable person. My logic is comparable to saying that because a lemon, a scalpel, and a rock are not sweet like an apple that they are not good. In this example “sweetness” becomes the single variable of goodness by which all objects are measured. The result is that sour, sharp, and hard become irrelevant, valueless attributes. We may not condemn them (or we may), but they are not explored and utilized with joy and peace.

There are two common quick rebuttals to this point. First, one might say, “But this variable(s) is important to me. Why shouldn’t I be able to emphasize it?” This is where we must return to theology. We are saying that insecurity is rooted in our definition of good. Original sin was found in Adam and Eve wanting to define good and evil for themselves (Gen 2:9; 3:5); which extends both to the content of “good” (morals) and the emphasis of “good” (priorities).

Our mental-emotional-relational health is directly tied to our agreement with God as to what is “good” both in content and emphasis. Sincerity in emphasis cannot be mistaken for accuracy or health. In our culture we too often mistake sincerity for holiness and genuineness for righteousness.

When we demand (through pride or self-degradation) to define “good” for ourselves, we usurp the role of God as Creator, Designer (purpose), and Author of our lives. When we attempt to take the pen of history from the hand of our Father, insecurity is the best result we can hope for. The other alternatives are much more self-destructive. God is the potter. We are the clay (Jeremiah 18). Security is found in allowing the Potter to define the “good” for each of His pots.

Second, one might say, “But this is the way our culture thinks. What’s wrong with just being realistic?” Honestly, this point is often true. Our culture does seek to define good by certain variables: beauty, pleasure, and wealth. Our “tolerant” culture measures people constantly, especially if they fall short of “majority” preferences.

Here again we face the problem of the pen. Who is writing history? The modern proverb says, “Winners write history.” When we allow culture to define “good” (what is worth pursuing and makes one valuable), we are saying that culture is the ultimate winner and, thereby, gets the privilege of defining our history. When we allow the fulfillment of God’s design to define “good” we are proclaiming God the final Victor who will ultimately write history and whose values will prevail (Psalm 9:7-10).

A second problem is that insecurity limits God’s potential activity to my perceived strengths. The whole point of redemption is that God can work in and through our weaknesses (2 Corinthians 12:9). We have a tendency to get hung up on what we have to offer God. Even if (in our eyes) our life amounts to a mere five loaves and two fishes (i.e., a Hebrew Happy Meal) compared to a 5,000 hungry people’s worth of life challenges, that is fine. God will get more glory and our faith in Him will grow stronger as He proves Himself faithful.

Let us just be God’s. When we are God’s, that is “good.” Nothing more is needed. Nothing more could be added. Whatever I am or am not, is God’s. It is God who made me. It is God I serve. It is God’s opinion that will endure. It is God’s world in which I live and move and have my being (Acts 17:28). Therefore, if I am God’s, that is the essence of “good.” Freedom! Security! Hope! Relief!

A final problem is that introspection produces paralysis. For the moment, let’s draw a distinction between introspection and fruit-inspection. Introspection refers to the process of self-examination by which we are looking for those attributes that make us acceptable to someone else. Fruit-inspection will refer to the process of self-examination by which we are seeking to find evidences of God’s grace active in our lives (2 Corinthians 13:5).

A challenge for both forms of self-examination is that we are “in process,” incomplete, and inconsistent (this leads into the next major question heading). When engaging in introspection I can second guess and pick apart any attribute someone might find appealing. I know me more completely than anyone else does. I know my every fear, quirk, bad thought, off moment, bombed joke, oversight, and incomplete task. This level of personal awareness offset any complement someone might offer. After all, “they really don’t know me.”

Even success in introspection only results in a building sense of pressure to “keep it up” or “raise the bar” to remain acceptable. The status quo is never good enough. Today’s success is tomorrow’s expectation. The satisfaction I get from the initial achievement will never be experienced on the same level again (to the insecure, achievement in their area of “good” is like a drug to an addict—the high always has to get higher to be as satisfying).

This brings us back to fruit-inspection. Fruit-inspection realizes that the “good” of my security is not me but the byproduct of God’s Spirit in my life (Galatians 5:19-26). I am broken and flawed. Once I place my faith in Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection as the solution for my brokenness, I am not instantly restored (Hebrews 10:14). The restoration is promised by God to be completed (assurance of salvation) but occurs slowly over the course of my life (progressive sanctification).

This realization brings great peace (security) as I examine my life. When I find an admirable attribute in my life, there is no pressure to keep it up. I must only continue to rely on God and trust in Him. Like the young child learning to swim by kicking his feet while in the instructors arms, when the child begins to feel movement he can rest in the fact that he does not have to keep kicking in order to keep from drowning. In that case, the sense of movement creates the joy and motivation to keep kicking in order to learn to swim.

There need not be a fear of failure in fruit-inspection if the attribute is incomplete or inconsistent. That is the process by which God works. For the Christian, every moment of life is not a pass-fail test before the Judge of the entire universe. God is our Father. He delights in the process of our growing in the same way a parent rejoices in the staggering steps of a toddler. He knows the reason for which each child was created and for what purpose He will redeem each spill. The main thing is that His child is striving to be made more into the likeness of His image.

How Good Is Enough?

Good is a commodity to be measured. This is why we have the words better and best. Insecurity does not necessarily say I am not good, more specifically it says I am not “good enough.” You may find something admirable in me, but that doesn’t make me special. I want to be special. I want to stand out in a way that makes me unique in all the world (or at least my school, neighborhood, workplace, or family).

Have you ever noticed that celebrities are usually not happier than “common folks”? The rates of divorce, addiction, self-destructive behaviors, and suicide are higher amongst the elite. Why? There is at least one reason that pertains to the subject of this chapter. People were not made to be the center of attention and marveled at. We were made to reflect the Image of One who is awe-inspiring.

When you have an outstanding talent in one area, the rest of life cannot measure up. After composing a symphony, winning the Super Bowl, solving world hunger, making a million dollars, writing a best seller, winning the pageant, or some other pinnacle experience, day to day life is a letdown. This is why so many people never get over high school. They can stand out in that smaller controlled environment. They then spend the rest of their life trying to live up to those four years. If we are not careful “special” can become a particularly alluring and ensnaring trap.

This is where some people begin to despair. They begin to think, “I knew it. I’m not special.” It is as if “bad” is the opposite of “special.” I would like to propose that contentment is the opposite of special. Security involves a stable sense of satisfaction based upon an accurate self-perception. God made me for a purpose (creation). I am broken (sin). God gloriously restored me (salvation). Life is hard (suffering). God is developing me into the person to fulfill the good works He picked out for me to do (sanctification). I am okay with that (security).

In order to help us grow in Christ-honoring security, it is helpful to identify some of the common ways we emotionally say, “I am not okay with that.”

1. *Competing*: This is insecurity that is aggravated by the success of others. It might also be called jealousy or coveting. This is not to say that all competition is rooted in sin; just competition that is motivated to validate self in order to overcome insecurity. An evidence of Christ-honoring security is the ability to rejoice in the success of others.

Can someone tell a story and you not have to tell a bigger one? Can someone get a gadget and you not get a newer, nicer one? Can someone offer an insight and you not offer a better, deeper one?

Competition implies that what really matters is a limited resource. When we define good in the unhealthy ways, then it makes sense to compete. Good becomes something that is limited or can be upstaged. Only when we define good as the character of Christ and contributing to God’s kingdom is good a liberating pursuit. With that criteria everyone can hear “Well done” (Matt 25:14-30), there is no limit on God’s approval for faithfulness.

2. *Perfectionism*: This is insecurity that is unable to embrace God’s response to our failures. For perfectionists their identity is rooted in their performance. Success is expected (sometimes rooted in pride; other times in duty). When success is the expected status quo, then success no longer produces satisfaction. Failure becomes the only thing that can create significant emotional movement. Everything else is “just expected.”

The perfectionist views God's grace as a backup plan for when “all else fails.” They treat God's grace (not just forgiveness, but also sustaining grace) as an emergency fund, something they never want to have to touch. The key for security in the life of a perfectionist is to learn that God's grace is needed as much in our success as for our failure. It is God's grace that sustains us moment by moment. God's grace is not just a precious, special-occasion perfume we put on to eliminate the odor of our sin. God's grace is the daily deodorant that changes and gives life to our sin-perspiring hearts.

3. *Perpetual Flaw-Finding (Self-Degradation)*: This is insecurity that defiantly resists encouragement in order to protect itself from disappointment or hurt. Sometimes insecurity is where we are most comfortable. To be less than insecure would be to hope for something good and that runs the risk of disappointment (Proverbs 13:12). As long as I talk myself down and refuse to believe anything positive, I cannot be disappointed. In this case, I fear disappointment more than I desire hope.

For the perpetual flaw-finder “goodness” is a myth. The question of “good enough” is as ludicrous as trying to find the unicorn with the longest horn. If every good aspect of my character and activity is partially flawed, then security is a myth and teaching someone how to become secure is a bunch of positive thinking lies. But this is assuming a world without a redemptive God. True security must de-center off of self and re-center on God.

4. *Fatalism*: This is insecurity rooted in an overt belief that I am bad to a degree that redemption cannot penetrate. If flaw-finding finds holes in every piece of Swiss cheese, then fatalism is both lactose intolerant (allergic to dairy products) and vegan (refuses to eat any product derived from animals). Flaw-finders play Eeyore to the conversation of security; fatalists give the silent treatment. Honestly, if you have fatalist tendencies I would be surprised if you are still reading this chapter.

It takes great courage to believe something exists when you have not experienced it. This is the first struggle of many who struggle with insecurity. They have been so berated and abused (by themselves and possibly by others) that it was easier to deny that security exists. Heroic faith is required to entertain the question we have been discussing for five pages now. A spectrum of emotions erupt by even asking the question: embarrassment that I don't know, anger that I don't have it, fear/shame that its absence is my fault, and longing that the possibility exists. This courage cannot come from within, but only from above. Pray for the courage to believe. Pray, “I believe, Lord, help my unbelief (Mark 9:24).”

In Whose Eyes Must I Be Good?

Now we'll begin to engage the question of our “life audience.” Whose applause, affirmation, or approval makes our effort “worth it”? Conversely, whose absence of whose applause, affirmation, or approval makes everyone else's praise irrelevant?

For some who struggle with insecurity the problem is neither a certain definition of good nor a particular standard of goodness. Instead, their insecurity is about the response (or perceived response) of one individual, group, or social ideal.

This forces us to return to the nagging desire to be special. The problem is that by definition the vast majority of people are ordinary, common, and average. If they were not, then the word “special” would have no meaning. Yet in our deep longing to be good enough we strive to attain what is statistically improbable.

So what do we do? We reduce the size of our audience. We begin to live life for one person, one group, or one institution for which we believe we can stand. We define ourselves by this person, group, or institution. Our security is placed in their hands and measured by their words. We are the gymnast; they are the judge.

As we seek to examine this aspect of insecurity let's examine five audiences our insecurity can live for.

1. *One Special Person*: This person could be a mother, father, husband, wife, boyfriend, girlfriend, best friend, teacher, coach, pastor, boss, peer, or just about anyone else. Once you identify who this god-like person is in your life, you can begin to ask yourself some important questions.

- What does this person represent to me?
- What would their approval do for me?
- What expression would I most like for their approval to take?
- When did their approval become so important (time or event)?
- Is there anyone similar to them (role) whose approval I value less?
- What has been my response when I have gotten approval from this person?
- Whose love and encouragement have I discounted or rejected in pursuit of this person’s approval?
- How have I organized my life or certain social situations to gain this person’s approval?

These questions (which can also be asked of the following groups) should help you see more clearly the impact of this person on your life. Often the pursuit of something can blind us to the sacrifices or compromises we make in that pursuit. Like a gambler, all we see is the prize not the cost.

As you answer these questions, hopefully you will begin to see the roles you have bestowed upon this person: Judge (one with the final say), Savior (the one who can make everything OK), Peace-Giver (Prince of Peace), Security-Giver (Rock or Refuge), or Shepherd (desired companion in difficult times). This recognition should do more than create a sense of guilt (for the idolatry of deifying an individual) or embarrassment (from putting the impossible request into words).

The desired outcome is to chart a path to freedom. When we realize that we are “looking for love (more specifically, security) in all the wrong places,” we can begin to identify the right place.

“But is it wrong to expect people to treat me nice and want to be encouraged? Is it wrong to want to be loved and noticed? Are you saying I am so wretched that I should enjoy being ignored or considered second rate?” These are the common rebuttals. Among other things, they confuse security with special-ness and morality with love.

Security is not about standing out as much as it is about stability. If we confuse these two things, we are not being honest with ourselves about what we’re striving to obtain. Standing up to being sinned against is not about self-worth; it is about legality, decency, and truth. If we confuse these two things, then we are beginning to “grade” how people should be treated based upon their social standing – very dangerous.

These rebuttals do merit a more thorough consideration. I believe the words of C.S. Lewis (1966) in *Letters* gives good perspective:

“When I have learnt to love God better than my earthly dearest, I shall love my earthly dearest better than I do now. In so far as I learn to love my earthly dearest at the expense of God and instead of God, I shall be moving towards the state in which I shall not love my earthly dearest at all. *When first things are put first, second things are not suppressed but increased* (p. 248, emphasis added).”

The point being made here is that when secondary sources of security are relied upon as the primary foundation of our security, they inevitably collapse. When we root our security in the only sure primary source of security (the Blessor) then the secondary sources of security (the blessings) are increased in effectiveness not decreased.

2. *A Group/Class of People*: When the source of our identity becomes plural, how we measure security becomes ambiguous. When I want the approval of a friend instead of a team, it is usually clearer when and how I am to succeed. However, with a group (unless they are kind enough to give achievable, objective entrance standards and they honor each achiever with equal attention, celebration, and reward) things can be less clear.

Within a group usually only the elite are acknowledged. This creates a dilemma for those seeking security from a group. Either I can identify with a “lower” group in which I am more likely to be elite, or I identify with the “higher” group and face the prospects of failure with perpetual competition with my peers. In the lower group I feel shame. In the higher group I feel fear. Both shame and fear are enemies of security.

It is a Catch-22 you cannot win when you play the game of seeking security through a group or class of people. The goal of this chapter is not to teach you how to win the impossible game, but to encourage you to opt out of the empty pursuit. When you hear your heart say, “If only I could..., then I would feel secure” and the blank is filled with being part of a certain organization or achieving a certain status, know you are hearing a lie.

3. *A Social Ideal:* Women have to be thin. Men have to be tall. Everyone should be smart. It is always good to be funny. Men hunt and fish. Women talk on the phone using lots of words. Guys like sports, grunting, and scratching themselves. Good moms have spotless houses, serve balanced meals, and never get tired. Leaders do not take time off work. People who live in our neighborhood drive nicer cars than I do. When you say “I don’t know” that means you’re stupid. Feel free to add your favorite to the list and take a moment to have a private rant. [Pause] Feel better?

Lasting security must be rooted in wisdom not idyllic or stereotyped expectations. Expectation changes by person, social setting, geographic region, and generation. The kind of security advocated for in this chapter emerges when we prayerfully and biblically assess our top priorities and season of life, then wisely do what we realistically can. God only requires of me what can be done in a 168 hour week! God understands the differences that exist if you have no kids, toddlers, teens, a blended family, empty nest, ailing parents, or health limitations. God is the one who gave us our intellectual capacity, physical strength, health, social connections, and family history. We are only called to be stewards not competitors.

The question is not “am I measuring up to a social ideal?” The question is “am I living wisely given my current circumstances?” If the answer is yes, I should have a growing sense of security. It may be that my sin or the sin of those around me means that I am righteously dissatisfied with my current circumstances. Security and satisfaction are different things. Satisfaction is an assessment of whether things are currently as God intended. Security is resting in where we are in God’s process of change. We can be both dissatisfied (believing God wants things to change and acting accordingly) and secure (trusting God in the timing and process of that change).

4. *My Own:* Sometimes it just boils down to the fact that I am not satisfied with me. If the issue is identity confusion or personal dislike, then please read the chapters on purpose or identity. But if the issue is perfectionism then we must consider ambition run amuck.

For better or worse we know ourselves more completely (not always better) than anyone else. I know my every failure and fear. I am with me 24/7/365. I am talking to myself constantly and that talk is building a story. That story shapes and defines everything I know about me. I only see the glimpses of other people’s lives as they chose to present themselves, and I only hear their well-censored thoughts in conversation.

Rather than extending this discussion further, we should return to the question “what does it mean to be good?” How we define good is the entrance to the trap of personally-critical insecurity. If you find yourself struggling with an insecurity rooted in your own criticalness, return to the first section (What is Good?) of this chapter.

5. *God’s:* I do not understand why God would tolerate me. I read Scripture, hear the commands, agree with the truth, and fear because I come up so short. Maybe God loves me, but He will be much more excited to allow others into heaven than me. God loves me because He has to. He made promises and cannot go against His Word, but does He really like me? Is He for me?

This type of insecurity draws us back to the questions, “what is good enough?” The enough aspect is where we begin to debate God’s standard. If you find yourself wrestling with an insecurity rooted in doubting your ability to please God, return to the middle section of this chapter and read that material again. Remember God accepts you on the basis of Christ’s righteousness (given to you as a gift) not your own.

Conclusion

Feel better yet? Maybe not. Hopefully you do have some insights that help you see how you could try so hard for so long without seeing progress you desire. The goal now is to make application of what you have learned without growing impatient (a hard task).

- Review the chapter and highlight the sentences or sections that spoke most directly to your struggle with insecurity.
- On the back of each page explain what you should do or think differently in light of what you highlighted.
- Share what you have highlighted and written with a trusted, mature Christian friend who can encourage you and hold you accountable.
- Consider your upcoming week/month. Identify the points where you foresee that opportunity to make application of what you have learned.
- Pray that God will give you the awareness and grace in your moment of struggle to live more securely in light of what you have learned.

The final two pages are meant to provide you with additional exercises to make application of this chapter.

Checklist for A Portrait of Christ-Honoring Security

Place a check in the blank for each item you for which you regularly exhibit this attitude, behavior, or character trait. If you struggle to be able to give a fair self-assessment of an item, ask people who know you well.

The items left unmarked should become your agenda items for developing Christ-honoring security. These should help you identify the times and places in which you would grow in a Christ-honoring security. Consider this a scavenger hunt in your spiritual maturity.

Give thanks to God for the items you were able to check. Pray for God to grow you in the areas you could not, while also inviting friends to encourage you and hold you accountable in those areas.

- I rarely re-interpret compliments to imply something negative about myself.
- I do not instinctively assume something is wrong when there is silence or a pause.
- I evaluate my life with balance instead of according only one variable.
- I am able to see others succeed without feeling insecure or pressured to measure up.
- I am willing to engage in tasks outside my areas of strength without fear.
- I know my strengths and can enjoy blessing others who are strong in those areas of gifting.
- I am willing to accept how God made me and seek to serve Him as I am.
- I am able to do well at something without creating a mounting sense of expectation.
- I am able to enjoy life without having to be special or stand out.
- I am able to be content with the rate of my spiritual growth.
- I am aware of and rest in my daily need for the grace of God.
- I am able to accept a compliment or word of encouragement without awkwardness.
- I enjoy being the person God created me to be.
- I do not rely on one person for my sense of well-being, peace, and joy.
- I do not rely on being a part of a certain group for my sense of well-being, peace, and joy.
- I am able to accept forgiveness for my sins and mistakes.
- I resist defining myself by one significant sin or mistake.
- I resist the urge to replay a sin or mistake multiple times in my mind.
- I resist the urge to limit my social circle in order to be less known.
- I am reasonable in my expectations of myself.
- I do not accept the expectations of others as my own moral standard.
- I am free to share any part of my story with someone if it is for their benefit.

Biblical security is a disposition of stability that allows for a patient and an increasingly accurate interpretation of personal performance, interpersonal interactions, and circumstances in the midst of situations that are as yet uncertain, incomplete, challenging, or negative. Biblical security acknowledges that failure, criticism, and personal sin will occur, however, it does not allow the legitimate guilt, disappointment, or embarrassment of these events to create instability or dash hope. Biblical security defines “good (the righteousness of Christ) enough (the sufficient cross of Christ) for who (life for the glory of God)?” in biblical terms and rests in that reality personally and socially.

*** The items left unmarked are your agenda items for developing Christ-honoring security.

Reflection Section

If you have a tendency to measure whether you have had a good day by a single criteria, write that criteria below.

I have had a good day if _____

Often we are insecure because we have not defined success in a balanced, functional way. We make life a single-variable, pass-fail test. Prayerfully think through a “good day” in light of all of your life roles. Five general criteria of a “good day” are already provided. The remaining five can be tailored to the unique features of your life.

Your goal is not to ace the test daily. Your goals are to (1) bring a balanced evaluation to each day; (2) grow in effectively living out your priorities; (3) become more intentional in praying over your areas of needed growth; (4) praise God for your areas of strength or growth; and (5) **be secure** in God’s promise to grow you into the person He created you to be.

1. *Enjoy Bible study, prayer, personal examination, or seeing God’s majesty in nature.*

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

2. *Find practical ways to love and serve my spouse, kids, parents, friends, or co-workers.*

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

3. *Rest and eat in a way that is a good steward of the body God has given me.*

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

4. *Engage my mind in an activity that is enjoyable, educational, or stimulating.*

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

5. *Engage my body in an activity that is enjoyable, cardiovascular, or strengthening.*

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

6. _____

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

7. _____

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

8. _____

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

9. _____

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

10. _____

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

At the end of each day or week, take time to score your performance on each item. Answer the following question, “How well does my intuitive-emotional sense of security match up to a balanced appraisal of my day or week?”

Chapter Six

A PORTRAIT OF CHRIST-HONORING WISDOM

Stupid. Gullible. Naïve. Short-sighted. Impulsive. Impressionable. People-pleasing. Foolish. Timid. Double-minded. Inconsistent. Undependable. These are the labels that are often used (by themselves and by others) for those who lack wisdom.

“I never seem to do anything right... I regret so many of the decisions I’ve made... I don’t trust myself to know what to do in difficult situations... It feels like everyone else got a copy of the ‘unwritten rule book of life’ except me... Hindsight is a synonym for shame in my world...” these are the thoughts of those who dislike or mistrust themselves due to a lack of wisdom.

Wisdom may be the least intuitive synonym for self-esteem in this series. Confidence, identity, security, and purpose are more obvious things people want when they say they have a low self-esteem. However, for many people, it is a series of unwise choices that cause their low self-appraisal. They will not feel better until they choose more wisely; nor, in many cases, should they. To feel good about chronic bad choices would be a worse condition.

This chapter is intentionally last. In order for it to be anything more than a series of proverbs (generic wisdom principles) it must come at the end of discovering one’s identity in Christ and purpose in life. In order for it to have any lasting impact it must come as an extension of possessing the confidence to face failure and the security to endure rejection.

The reality is that we do not tend to make bad choices because of a lack of information. Sure, we may buy a car with a bad track record because we failed to consult Consumer’s Report or Car Fax, but the kind of lifestyle, relational, and impulsive decisions that most frequently damage our self-perception are related to our character more than the need for additional research.

There are many whose experience of low self-esteem is actually regret, guilt, or shame from the inconsistent application of wisdom in their daily choices and relationships. The solution, therefore, is not rehearsing self-affirmation statements, but beginning to organize their life around the values and principles of Scripture. As this is done, the encouragement that is produced will be more sustainable and real than the artificial boost of motivational statements without actual change or needed growth.

For example, when depression is rooted in poor decision making or inadequate skills, offering encouragement without addressing wisdom and life skills two things happen: (a) there is a short-term boost in morale from the pleasant statements, but (b) there is an intensification of long-term despair as life reinforces negative messages more intensely than the positive words can counter. This parallels what it is like to try to correct low self-esteem without equipping someone to live in biblical wisdom.

Defining “Biblical Wisdom”

Biblical Wisdom refers to the principled pursuit of pleasure, not to fill a void, but to fulfill a calling. Wisdom requires fearing (seeking the approval of) God more than fearing (seeking the approval of) man. The restraint of wisdom does not diminish the intensity of pleasure, but prolongs the time frame in which pleasure can be savored and the freedom of conscience with which pleasure can be remembered.

Wisdom cannot be reduced to a set of principles or propositions because it is an expression of God’s character in the midst of relationships. Wisdom is a virtue that allows all other blessings to remain good rather than spoiling into burdens.

Wisdom does not belong to academia and does not require a high IQ. Brilliance is, in many ways, capable of more folly than ignorance. Wisdom, in its essence, is simple. It is often because solutions are less complex than our problems that we dismiss wisdom. No one wants to hear that finances boil down to spending less than you make or dieting is only burning more calories than you consume. But we’re glad to get into a complex pyramid scheme or fad diet.

Wisdom requires things like patience, self-control, listening well, and contentment. The absence of these virtues will destroy whatever can be created or obtained through the strategic implementation of massive quantities of knowledge.

Wisdom is not against action, passion, speaking, and ambition. But wisdom is willing to forego these without feeling cheated and does not consider them “higher virtues” than their alternatives.

“There are three classes of men—lovers of wisdom, lovers of honor, lovers of gain.” – Plato

Wisdom allows the “risks” we take in *confidence* to fulfill our *purpose* to be “acts of faith” instead of blind folly. Wisdom allows us to adapt to the preferences and culture of others without surrendering our *identity*. Wisdom allows our sense of *security* to withstand the criticism or misunderstanding of others without us giving way to being calloused or closed-minded.

In this chapter we will examine three obstacles to biblical wisdom and their remedy.

1. Impulse Control – the rushed pleasure obstacle
 - Remedy: Delayed Gratification
2. Fear of Rejection – the social pressure obstacle
 - Remedy: Wise Vulnerability
3. Fear of Failure – the guaranteed outcome obstacle
 - Remedy: Reasonable Risk

As you walk through these sections you should be able to do three things: (a) assess the character struggles that impede your implementation of biblical wisdom; (b) learn the most pertinent skills or principles of biblical wisdom for your life; and (c) identify the situations when the implementation of these skills or principles is most important. As you grow in these areas, the negative self-assessments rooted in unwise decision making should dissipate.

Parameter I: Delayed Gratification

Let’s start with a very basic question, “What is it that causes people to make the largest number of unwise decisions? What distracts people from implementing the wisdom they already know and believe?” One answer, that at least deserves to be in the top three, is impulse control – we do not want to wait for pleasure.

- Going into debt because we do not want to wait until we can afford something.
- Being willing to restrain the expression of anger until more information is gathered.
- Eating when you know you’re not hungry and you will feel guilty about it later.
- Buying something you do not need and cannot afford simply for the emotional boost.
- Numbing yourself with television or internet when you know something needs to be done.
- Acting without considering the consequences of that action.
- Allowing a romantic relationship to develop too quickly (emotionally or physically) because it feels good.
- Not being able to “cut your losses” in a bad investment or relationship.
- Obsessing about things being perfect resulting in an inability to enjoy the moment.
- Unwillingness to focus on the “best thing” out of commitment to a “good thing.”

In most of these situations if we simply paused to asked the question, “Is this wise?” we would see that the answer is “no.” The problem is either (a) we are so rushed by our impulse for pleasure that we fail to ask the question, or (b) we want something more than wisdom so we prefer not to ask the question.

The first part of wisdom is wanting wisdom more than wealth, honor, revenge, or its other alternatives. We will not accidentally get wisdom. The gravity of our sinful hearts and fallen world pull us towards folly. We have to see wisdom as being more valuable than the blessing wisdom can garner or we’ll trade the chicken for eggs and the cow for milk.

Consider this conversation between God and Solomon in II Chronicles 1:7-12.

⁷ That night God appeared to Solomon and said to him, “Ask for whatever you want me to give you.”

⁸ Solomon answered God, “You have shown great kindness to David my father and have made me king in his place. ⁹ Now, LORD God, let your promise to my father David be confirmed, for you have made me king over a people who are as numerous as the dust of the earth. ¹⁰ Give me wisdom and knowledge, that I may lead this people, for who is able to govern this great people of yours?”

¹¹ God said to Solomon, “Since this is your heart’s desire and you have not asked for wealth, possessions or honor, nor for the death of your enemies, and since you have not asked for a long life but for wisdom and knowledge to govern my people over whom I have made you king, ¹² therefore wisdom and knowledge will be given you. And I will also give you wealth, possessions and honor, such as no king who was before you ever had and none after you will have.”

Without this kind of character we may amass a great deal of education, but we will lack wisdom. However much we are driven by something other than wisdom we will experience insecurity or pride that clouds a healthy sense of self. In order to pursue wisdom with this kind of impulse control, an individual needs to be competent at emotional regulation.

Emotional Regulation

We will either manage our emotions by the way we manage our life or we will respond to life on the basis of our emotions. This does not mean that we have direct control over how we feel. Neither does it mean that we can administrate our life into a state of perpetual bliss. But we can, and should, seek to manage our time, budget our money, prioritize our interest, and conduct our relationships in such a way that we are not having to “cheat” in order to bear up under our “normal life.”

So the first part of emotions regulation requires answering these kinds of questions; which you should have already considered in previous chapters.

- Do you have realistic expectations for your time?
- Do you get good amounts of sleep, exercise, and have a healthy diet?
- Do you have a budget that allows you to make good use of your money?
- Do you know your personal strengths and seek to live out of how God gifted you?
- Are you willing to admit and live within your limits even when friends want more from you?

Life management is “step one” of emotional regulation. No latter step will be more effective than step one is stable. We must put ourselves into a position not to have to consistently manipulate life for it to be stable. When caffeine, limited sleep, perpetual recreation distractions, working overtime, half-truths, and dump truck conversations become necessary or normal, emotions will over-power impulse control to the detriment of wisdom and a satisfying self-appraisal.

After wise life management, understanding the role of emotions is vital to emotional regulation. There are two opposing extremes when it comes to emotions. Some view emotions as the relatively insignificant “caboose on the train of life;” believing if you think the right things your emotions will necessarily follow and be pleasant. Others view emotional expression as the key mark of life’s highest virtue – authenticity; believing to stifle emotion or act contrary to your feelings is the lowest sin – hypocrisy.

Emotions are neither the caboose nor the head. Actually, no single metaphor will capture the role of emotions in the life of a wise, healthy individual.

- Emotions motivate –pleasant (passion) and unpleasant emotions can fuel perseverance in difficult actions.
- Emotions bond –shared emotional experiences have a unique way of cementing friendships.
- Emotions enhance –emotions are often the “color commentary” on the black and white events of life.
- Emotions warn –often we can feel “something is just not right” before we can articulate why.
- Emotions memorialize –memories are often made vivid and lasting by the emotions that attach to them.
- Emotions express –there are some things that are not articulated best through words (Rom. 8:26).

People who live wisely will allow emotions to play each of these roles in their life. Emotions will be used as assets for the activities and relationships; not as hazards or liabilities which must be “guarded closely” because they’re “dangerous.” However, we must be equally clear about what emotions should not do.

- Emotions should not decide – “going with your gut” is not a wise short-cut in important decisions.
- Emotions should not adjudicate – “feeling good” about something does not make it moral.
- Emotions should not confirm – “feeling good” about an outcome does not necessarily mean it was wise.
- Emotions should not be absolutely trusted – our emotions fluctuate based upon a large number of variables and, therefore, we cannot rely on our emotions like we do a thermometer or scale.
- Emotions should not be used to change life – artificially manipulating our emotions does not change our life circumstances.

A person who relies on emotions for roles for which emotions are not well-suited will become like the person who relies on knowledge for things for which knowledge is not well-suited. Both become one-sided people who have a hard time relating to the world and people around them. Unless they see their error, they retreat further into their preference and become increasingly imbalanced.

As you manage your life well and use emotions for their intended purposes, the result is that you will be able to (a) master impulse control with (b) a lifestyle of delayed gratification that (c) still allows you to enjoy the moment.

It is vital that these three pieces come together. We have discussed the first; now let’s examine what it means to live in a lifestyle of delayed gratification. In its simplest form living a delayed gratification lifestyle means expecting to work before receiving the reward of your labor.

What do all impulse control problems have in common? They expect the benefit before the sacrifice. We distract ourselves with the goodness of the outcome and forget to consider whether we have earned it. In modern self-esteem language we change the language to whether we “deserve it.” Saying “No” is said to be evidence of a low self-esteem. However, we neglect that foolish things (i.e., debt, pre-marital sex, intoxication, obesity, approval from dare-devil activities, etc...) are not things to be “deserved.”

When we try to enjoy the benefits of life without first making the sacrifices they require, life becomes short bursts of joy within a life of drudgery. Most of life is spent “paying for” (financially, emotionally, consequentially) our pleasures. We feel punished for enjoying life.

However, when we commit to the sacrifice before enjoying life’s pleasures, life is filled with anticipation interspersed with reward. For those with a strong work ethic (part of the character of wisdom), anticipation is its own pleasure. Kids enjoy making their Christmas list; not just opening presents. Good athletes enjoy practice, film study, and working out; not just game day and victories.

Admittedly, anticipation is often a weaker pleasure than the reward itself. But, even the weaker pleasure of anticipation makes for a more enjoyable life than the drudgery of “paying off” already consumed pleasures. As you live out this principle, the overall enjoyment level of your life and self-respect you gain will provide a satisfaction that no amount of mere positive thinking could ever rival.

But we must be careful that “delayed gratification” does not mean “non-gratification.” For some people, a fear of being ruled by impulse results in an aversion to pleasure. Wisdom’s “delay” in gratification does not mean “do not open until Heaven;” as if God sent us earthly pleasure packages labeled “do not open until Christmas.”

Impulse control does not just involve the capacity to restrain a desire, but also the freedom to release and savor it. If the latter is not present, then you will be a burden on those who “do life” with you and you will have a tendency to look down on others as “weak” or “unspiritual” who cannot live “up to” your emotionally stunted life.

Consider the example of a family vacation. The person with low impulse control will want to go into debt to prematurely take the vacation the family “deserves.” While on the trip they will try not to think about the consequences of their spending. After they return home, the joy of the trip will be soured by monthly payments with interest that reduce day-to-day pleasures the family could enjoy. Even in this good activity their sense of self is damaged with the awareness they are living a lie.

The person with excessive impulse control will save for the trip, but have a hard time enjoying it. The proverbial “rainy day” for which he/she should be saving will hang like a cloud over their sunny days at the beach. Their emotional restriction will diminish the bonding effect emotions should have on this kind of trip. Again, even in this good activity, their sense of self is damaged because “being good” didn’t “work” and they feel cheated.

For those who have balanced impulse control (relatively speaking), they will both save for the trip and release themselves to the trip. Memories will be made without the tarnish of guilt over pleasure or fear of paying for them later. This is the only way for a good activity, like a family vacation, to contribute to a healthy and satisfying sense of self. The positive experience builds the motivation to begin anticipating (i.e., working towards) the next pleasure with an expectation it will be both personally enjoyable and relationally bonding.

**Parameter 2:
Wise Vulnerability**

For many people it is not the driving force of pleasure that impedes their wise decision making, but the controlling fear of rejection. It is not what they want that obstructs wisdom in their life, but what they don’t want. One of the main problems with this mentality is that living for what you don’t want has all the power of negative emotions, but none of the benefits of pleasant ones.

Many of us spend a great deal of time-energy hiding our weaknesses and failures. This has several side effects.

- Our focus remains intently on the things we are least fond of in ourselves.
- Our time is siphoned away from things from things that would be productive and satisfying.
- The most tangible expressions of God’s grace in our life are declared “off limits” for ministry.
- We feel less known by those who love us, which renders their encouragement less impactful.
- We feel fake and live in fear of being “found out” when others discover what we’re hiding.
- Our weaknesses take on a greater emotional significance than they would have if they were known.

The cumulative effect of hiding is an increasingly unhealthy and unsatisfying sense of self. We begin to realize we are not living authentic enough lives for the gospel to provide tangible relief in our day-to-day lives; not because of its lack of power, but because we refuse to apply the treatment. We are like the child with a “boo-boo” on his arm who will not uncover it to allow care to be provided.

Take a moment and write out your answers to the following reflection questions.

How many “heroes” in the Bible had profound weaknesses or failures that are key parts of their story?

How many of your friends are more real and approachable because of their weaknesses or failures?

How could we ever fulfill the command of II Corinthians 1:3-5 if our weaknesses or failures remain “off limits”?

““And what is this valley called?” “We call it now simply the Wisdom’s valley; but the oldest maps mark it as the Valley of Humiliation (p. 125).” C.S. Lewis in *The Pilgrims Regress*

What did you learn about making an impact for God and the level of disclosure in his ambassadors (II Corinthians 5:20)? Hopefully you could begin to see that wise vulnerability begins with a greater concern for God’s glory and the benefit of others than it does for our reputation.

For many the word “vulnerable” is a negative word; meaning “allowing the possibility of being hurt.” If this is what vulnerability means to you, it will be hard to ever view it as “wise.” So here is a fuller definition:

Vulnerable: a state of being made possible by the security and identity found in the gospel so that every event and emotion of one’s life is “on the table” when it is useful to glorify God by encouraging a fellow believer, enabling others to care for you, or sharing the gospel with an unbeliever.

Notice that vulnerability is not a synonym for voyeurism. Being vulnerable does not mean sharing everything with everyone. You can be both vulnerable and emotionally modest. The parallel of emotions and clothing can be helpful. The person who is pre-occupied with modesty is as controlled by their body as the person who dresses provocatively. Freedom is found in knowing what is situationally-appropriate to share/reveal.

It is not a virtue to be modest in intimate moments with one’s spouse. Freedom is the virtue in that moment. Similarly, it is not a virtue to play life “close to the vest” in moments when God wants to use parts of his work in your life to impact others or further his work in you. Wise vulnerability is both the ability to be emotionally-modest to in developing relationships or unsafe relationships and the ability to be emotionally-free to honor the closeness of safe friendships.

So the question becomes, “How much of my life is it wise to share in a given situation?” The answer to this question is dependent upon the nature of the relationship and the reason for sharing. The short answer is – share the amount that allows you to be known enough to earn the trust to provide care or be known enough to receive care.

One of the reasons people, not just Christians, often feel so alone in their struggles is because of the silence of their co-strugglers. Like the awkward moment after a teacher asks a hard question, silence breeds more silence.

This may be as innocent as acknowledging a quirky sense of humor you find embarrassing or a struggle to manage time. You might have an ongoing struggle with depression, anxiety, or processing a traumatic event. You may need to gain control of your temper to engage more with your children. You are not alone, but if you keep these things hidden several things happen: (a) you feel a greater sense of shame, (b) the struggle gets worse, and (c) you enable others to live in silence.

But the question becomes, “How do we share information like this in a way that is healthy for us and beneficial for those we want to serve by sharing our story?” Consider the following points.

- Start with those with whom you already have trust. If vulnerability is unnatural for you, start where it is safest. Close friends, a spouse, or pastor are people with whom “being more honest than usual” is wise. Your goal is to be more known, so that the truth of Scripture and encouragement of friends can touch areas of your life which have been, to this point, “off limits.”
- Share enough to build trust and continue the conversation. We are talking here about conversations with friends, not counseling. In most cases you’ll be sharing your experience of moments: “This makes me uncomfortable...It’s hard for me to take complements, but I appreciate your encouragement... I usually don’t tell people, but in moments like this I feel self-conscious.” We usually fear telling the whole narrative – “It all started when I was nine years old...” – so we avoid the daily opportunities to make ourselves known.
- Your story should not overpower their story. Unhealthy friendships tend to develop when there is an imbalance in the level of disclosure or dependence between the two people. “Over-disclosure” is not usually about what is shared, but the pace at which it is shared. When you are more known than you know the person you are talking to you are either in a professionalized-friendship (trying to get the quality of counseling assistance with the convenience of a friendship) or in an unhealthy, imbalanced friendship (where one or both people will begin to feel drained by the friendship).
- Understand the benefits that do and do not come from wise vulnerability. Vulnerability makes our burden lighter because it is known; the removed weight is shame and secrecy. However, vulnerability does not remove the weight altogether or transfer it to our friend. If this is our expectation from vulnerability, then we are creating codependency not friendship.

- Understand the risk of the information you’re disclosing. Wise vulnerability is not blind faith that anything you share will be kept confidential. As you decide what you are willing to share, weigh the definite cost of carrying that information alone against the potential cost of that information being shared with someone else.
- Be clear about how private you consider the information you’re sharing. If the information you’re sharing is something you desire to remain confidential, be clear with the person with whom you share. Assuming the other individual will perceive the information to be as private as you intend it to be, makes the probability of you feeling betrayed much higher. If you are unsure how private the information should be kept, ask the trusted friend what they think. This will give you a gauge of how much your sense of shame is magnifying your desire for privacy.
- Consider the implications for other people who are part of what you’re sharing. If making yourself more known also makes others more known, this should be considered in how much you share and who you share it with. For instance, sharing about how a parent’s unfaithfulness affected you, if that unfaithfulness is unknown to others, could impact both your mother and father. In these instances, seeking guidance from a pastor or counselor, who frequently handle confidential information, is advised.

With these parameters in mind, it is advised that you settle what is “on the table” now. Otherwise, in a moment when sharing is possible, you will feel pressure to decide in the moment. This pressure will increase the likelihood that you will either not disclose or over-disclose.

Consider the following questions to help you think through wise vulnerability?

- Is it my tendency to under-disclose or over-disclose?
- What are my weaknesses or quirks for which I feel ashamed or embarrassed?
- What are the experiences of suffering which I keep secret and make me feel less known?
- What are the sinful or destructive choices I’ve made which make me feel less lovable?
- Who are the trusted people in my life with whom it would be wise for me to be more vulnerable?
- How much of the “off limits” portion of my life am I currently willing to make available if beneficial to influence others for God? Do not answer “all of it” simply because it is the right answer. Rushing yourself to where you ought to be out of guilt usually results in you not staying there long. Grow in wise vulnerability at a pace that is sustainable so that it becomes a lifestyle instead of a reaction to reading this material.

Answering these questions gives you freedom from self-monitoring (“Am I going to disclose part of my life and, if so, how much?”) during conversation when disclosure would be beneficial. This freedom from self-monitoring frees you to be other-minded in those conversations, which has two benefits: (a) your fear or insecurity do not bias you to read the situation as more “dangerous” than it is, and (b) your increased attention to the moment allows your words to fit that moment better.

In the end, we want to get to the point where we long for ministry more than we fear rejection. Like every other Christian virtue this will have to become increasingly true of us. The first step in wise vulnerability is being able to admit that this desire is not completely present without beating yourself up. Admitting weakness and sin without self-abasement is a freedom that only the gospel gives because of our acceptance in Christ and recognition that changes happen over a life time.

Parameter 3: Reasonable Risk

People fearing failure is like birds fearing flying or penguins fearing ice. It is not that we were made to fail, but that we were made to learn from our failures. This is what allowed the Wright brothers to invent manned-flight and Thaddeus Sobieski Constantine Lowe to invent the ice machine. Every great thing a human being has ever achieved was the by-product of failure.

The fear of failure is rooted in the human tendency to root our identity in an activity; we tend to turn verbs into nouns. If we run (verb), we call ourselves a runner (noun). If we enjoy studying (verb), we are called a nerd (noun). If we fail (verb), we consider ourselves a failure (noun).

One problem with this logic is that verbs are temporal and nouns are permanent. Runners are not always running; even Forrest Gump took time to talk to Jenny. Nerds are not always studying. No one fails constantly. If you want to argue with me, realize by reading this chapter you're proving you're taking a wise step.

Another problem with the fear of failure is that it fails to see our responsibility to steward, not master, our experiences. God does not call us to be sovereign – in complete control and mastery of all things. That is his job. God does call us to be a steward of the possessions, events, and challenges of our lives – striving to use them for his glory and, thereby, our enjoyment or the benefit of others.

When our expectations for ourselves (to master every moment) exceed God's expectations of us (to steward each moment) the possibility of failure can become overwhelming. Initially we are given to the excesses of pride as we try to do what we believe is expected. Then we are given to despair as both life and God seem to be against us.

The ultimate problem with the fear of failure is that it does not appropriately fear passivity or God.

Some people view passivity as the alternative to failure; believing, “If I do nothing, then I cannot do it badly. It is better not to try than to try and fail.” This mentality was what God rebuked in Jesus' parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14-30, especially verses 24-30). Fear of failure reveals a lack of faith in God to either (a) enable us to do what he has called us to do, or (b) redeem the mess of our failure in a way that is still better than our passivity.

Other people view performance as the way to be independent of God. They treat grace as if were an emergency savings account they never want to have to tap into. They fear failure because it would reveal their need for God. God to them is more like a mean uncle than a loving father. You might ask him for help, but only if you were in a desperate situation. This fear of God is void of a recognition of God's goodness and desire for a personal relationship in the midst of life's successes and failures.

But these critiques of the logical and theological fallacies incumbent to a fear failure fail to answer the practical question, “How do I assess what is a reasonable risk of faith?” Without an answer to this question the concepts of faith and folly begin to overlap. Then people attempt great but foolish things for God, and when those attempts fail assume God doesn't love them, God isn't real, or they're a failure. Any of these beliefs damage a healthy Christian identity.

Here are guidelines to help you think through decisions where the fear of failure inhibits your thinking process.

- **Know yourself** – Are you naturally a risk taker or risk averse? Do you usually perceive challenges as opportunities or obstacles? Is this something you really want (possible positive bias) or don't want (possible negative bias) to do? Too often we only try to “read the moment” and fail to take into account how our own biases and preferences shape our assessment of the information we gather.
- **Be known by others** – Objectivity and wisdom are hard to achieve in isolation. The steps you took to overcome the fear of rejection (wise vulnerability) are vital to assessing reasonable risk. Seeking the guidance and perspective of those who know you well is an important part of any faith-step.
- **Manage the basics well** – The opportunity to make good “big decisions” is built upon a history of making good “little decisions.” That was Jesus' point in Luke 16:10, “One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much, and one who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much.” Managing your time, money, and relationships well provides you the clarity and stability to think clearly about risk decisions.
- **Know what's at stake** – Often we perceive situations to be more dangerous than they really are. Too often when we fear failure, the only thing that is really at stake is our reputation. If our moral reputation is at stake, then it's an obedience question and not a faith question. If it's only our performance reputation, then we need to set our pride aside to assess the issue more objectively.
- **Remain humble** – The degree to which we value our pride will distort how we weigh any decision. When we are humble, it reduces pressure always do well. We must realize the humble person is more free than the prideful person. A large part of overcoming the fear of failure is learning to value humility more than achievement.

“Do not imagine that if you meet a really humble man he will be what most people call ‘humble’ nowadays: he will not be a sort of greasy, smarmy person, who is always telling you that, of course, he is nobody. Probably all you will think about him is that he seemed a cheerful, intelligent chap who took a real interest in what you said to him. If you do dislike him it will be because you feel a little envious of anyone who seems to enjoy life so easily. He will not be thinking about humility: he will not be thinking about himself at all (p. 128).” *Mere Christianity* by C.S. Lewis

- **Study and pray** – If you have honored the prior guidelines well, you will have a well-worded question to take to God in prayer and the Bible for study. You should be reading your Bible and praying throughout the process, but too often we practice these disciplines with our questions too biased by our fears. These earlier steps allow God to change the question, before we ask him to answer it.
- **Choose boldly and act decisively** – When the time for decision comes and you’ve given as much attention as time allows to the steps above, God calls you to choose. Do not allow your hesitancy or timidity to be the reason that your decision fails; no self-sabotage. After the decision is made, faith looks like a whole-hearted commitment to the success.

“Sometimes God grants us abundant time to decide, sometimes only a split second. But the season of decision making is under God’s control, and so when it comes, it comes by his plan (p. 239).” James Petty in *Step by Step*

- **Assess and learn** – By God’s grace failure is not fatal. Undoubtedly there will be something you would do differently in most situations; even if you are thrilled with the outcome. Choosing boldly is no reason to live blindly. Faith as “reasonable risk” involves real risk and a faulty decision maker. For these reasons, it is always wise to assess and learn from the decisions we make.
- **Additional resource** – If your struggle with wise decision making requires more attention than these bullet points, then consider the seminar “Creating a Gospel-Centered Marriage: Decision Making” (www.bradhambrick.com/gcmdecisionmaking). Even if you are not married, chapters 2 and 3 outline how to think about God’s will and the process of making wise personal decisions.

Conclusion

Too often impulse control, fear of rejection, and fear of failure are mistaken for low self-esteem; as if “loving yourself more” would provide the clarity to make wiser decisions in the contexts where these struggles arise. Hopefully, you have seen in this chapter that these struggles are real, but that they do not have their origin in a deficient self-appraisal.

Knowing how to make wise decisions and having the strength of character to execute that knowledge in the face of these struggles is the key to a healthy sense of self. A more positive self-outlook without a more effective approach to life results in an ineffective form of denial.

Wisdom is required in order for identity, purpose, confidence, or security to be lasting. Without the content of this chapter, the sincere application of the first four chapters would likely result in a being performance-driven life (rooted in a fear of rejection) which would lead to exhaustion (exacerbating a fear of failure). We need wisdom to regulate even our good impulses.

As you complete the final exercises at the close of this chapter, use this material to cement the changes you’ve been making throughout this material. Wisdom should not be the last item on a list of things you’re checking off, but the framework that holds all the other changes in place, so that they remain the blessing God intended them to be.

Checklist for A Portrait of Christ-Honoring Wisdom

Place a check in the blank for each item you for which you regularly exhibit this attitude, behavior, or character trait. If you struggle to be able to give a fair self-assessment of an item, ask people who know you well.

The items left unmarked should become your agenda items for developing Christ-honoring wisdom. These should help you identify the times and places in which you would grow in a Christ-honoring wisdom. Consider this a scavenger hunt in your spiritual maturity.

Give thanks to God for the items you were able to check. Pray for God to grow you in the areas you could not, while also inviting friends to encourage you and hold you accountable in those areas.

Impulse Control // Delayed Gratification

- I have a plan for my money (i.e., budget) that wisely regulates my pleasure and necessity spending.
- In moments of upset, I can resist allowing my emotions to damage relationships or give into despair.
- I avoid eating for comfort, but can enjoy eating as a part of good self-care and social interaction.
- I use my preferred modes of entertainment to be restorative and not as a way to escape / avoid life.
- I consider the consequences of my actions and have a track record of assessing well what they will be.

Fear of Rejection // Wise Vulnerability

- I can acknowledge my weaknesses and failures to myself without allowing them to define who I am.
- I can acknowledge my weaknesses and failures to God without a sense of condemnation.
- I can acknowledge my weaknesses and failures in a way that allows others to assist or encourage me.
- I am able to receive love and compliments without looking for a reason to deflect them.
- I am able to wisely regulate how much information I share when I disclose personal experiences.

Fear of Failure // Reasonable Risk

- I am aware of my level of risk aversion or enjoyment and use this to weigh the wisdom of my “instincts.”
- I have a track record of accurately assessing what is at stake in a given decision or challenge.
- I remain patient when gathering information and obtain important information when possible.
- I enact decisions with the confidence necessary to give them a reasonable opportunity to succeed.
- I am able to learn from my mistakes without getting defensive or wallowing in the failure.

Biblical Wisdom refers to the principled pursuit of pleasure, not to fill a void, but to fulfill a calling. Wisdom requires fearing (seeking the approval of) God more than fearing (seeking the approval of) man. The restraint of wisdom does not diminish the intensity of pleasure, but prolongs the time frame in which pleasure can be savored and the freedom of conscience with which it can be remembered.

*** The items left unmarked should become your agenda items for developing Christ-honoring purpose.

Approach to Individual Decision Making

Step One: Live with Your “Yes” on the Table for God

- Do you believe your sin and folly require both the gospel and God’s continual guidance for a satisfying life?
- Do you believe that honoring God in your decision making is the only way to lasting joy?
- Do you believe that God is good and, therefore, can be trusted to guide your life?

Step Two: Identify What You’re Stewarding for God

- Make a prioritized list of your (a) relationships, (b) responsibilities, (c) talents, and (d) passions.
- What areas on your list are in transition or when do you anticipate the next transition in each area?

Step Three: Manage the Basics with Excellence

- Do you have a family budget that each of you understand, honor, and consider as you make decisions?
- Do you have common expectations for your time that protects your family and guides your decision making?
- Do you anticipate future decisions and transitions in light of these two basic life resources?

Step Four: Watch for Challenges and Opportunities

- | | |
|--|---|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Daily Opportunities 2. Daily Temptations | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. Transitional Opportunities 4. Transitional Challenges |
|--|---|
- Do you have “normal” that mentally frees you to look for daily opportunities to obey God’s positive commands?
 - What daily temptations most commonly make following God’s will seem complicated or unrealistic?
 - What are your the next anticipated transitions? What opportunities and challenges will they bring?

Step Five: Pursue the Necessary Information and Counsel

- | | |
|---|---|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Those Who Know You 2. Those Who Know Your Situation | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. Those Whose Character You Trust 4. Those Whose Wisdom You Trust |
|---|---|
- Who knows you and your life well enough to speak into a significant decision?
 - Do you have the humility to seek guidance when it is needed? Is pride or insecurity your obstacle to transparency?
 - How well do you listen when seeking guidance? Does fear or impatience serve as your obstacle to humble listening?

Step Six: Seek God’s Guidance through Study and Prayer

- | | |
|--|--|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Spiritual Awareness 2. Self-Awareness 3. Family Awareness | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. Church Awareness 5. World Awareness 6. Spirit Awareness |
|--|--|
- Do you pray and read your Bible regularly so these are not new disciplines during a time of decision?
 - When you read your Bible do you reflect and when you pray do you pause to allow God to speak?
 - Do you view yourself as belonging to your family, church, and the world in a way that their concerns impact your prayer life and decision making process?

Step Seven: Decide with Confidence and Freedom

- When the point of decision comes do you usually feel a sense of freedom and confidence?
- Can you resist the sense that you have been “demoted” to God’s “Plan B” when a decision goes poorly?
- Do you feel God’s love in the freedom He grants to allow you to make decisions based upon His design for your joy?

An explanation of this resource is available on video three at
www.bradhambrick.com/gcmdecisionmaking

REFERENCES

- Blackaby, H. & King, C.. (1994) *Experiencing God: How to Live the Full Adventure of Knowing and Doing the Will of God*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman.
- Bonhoeffer, D. (1996) *Meditations on the Cross*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.
- Bridges, J. (1994) *The Disciplines of Grace*. Colorado Springs: NAVPRESS.
- Calvin, J. (2003) *Calvin's Commentaries Volume XXI*. Grand Rapids: Baker
- Edelstein, M. <http://www.threeminutetherapy.com/self-esteem.html>
- Ellish, J. http://www.psychologicalscience.org/journals/pspi/4_1.html and <http://www.carlsonschool.umn.edu/assets/71495.pdf>
- Fee, G. (1988) *New International Biblical Commentary: 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson.
- Goode, E. “Deflating Self-Esteem’s Role in Society’s Ills.” *New York Times* (October 1, 2002)
- Grudem, W. (1994) *Systematic Theology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.
- Lewis, C.S. (1966) *Letters of C.S. Lewis*. New York: Brace Jovanovich.
- McDow, M. & Reid, A. (1997) *Firefall: How God Shaped History Through Revivals*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman.
- Piper, J. (1995) *The Purifying Power of Living by Faith in Future Grace*. Sisters, OR: Multnomah.
- Piper, J. (1996) *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist*. Sisters, OR: Multnomah.
- Piper, J. http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Articles/ByDate/2001/1517_Toward_a_Definition_of_the_Essence_of_Biblical_Counseling/
- Plantinga, C. (1996) *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans.
- Welch, E. (1997) *When People Are Big and God Is Small*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing.

Appendix A



WHO I AM IN CHRIST

Adapted from Bob Kellemen, RPM Ministries (www.rpministries.org) and, Excerpted from *Soul Physicians*.

Salt of the Earth Matthew 5:13	Redeemed Romans 3:24; Ephesians 1:7	Competent to Disciple Others in Christ Romans 15:14	A Minister of Reconciliation 2 Corinthians 5:18
Light of the World Matthew 5:14	Credited with Christ's Righteousness Romans 3:21-26; 4:3-24	Sanctified by the Holy Spirit Romans 15:16	Christ's Ambassador 2 Corinthians 5:20
A Disciple of Christ Luke 14:27; John 8:31	Dead to Sin Romans 6:2	Acceptable to God in Christ Romans 15:16	Christ's Spiritually Pure Virgin 2 Corinthians 11:2
Christ's Witness Luke 24:48; Acts 1:8	Raised to New Life Romans 6:4	Holy in Christ Ephesians 5:26; Colossians 3:12	Rescued From This Present Evil Age Galatians 1:4
Set Free From Sin John 8:32, 36	United with Christ in His Resurrection Romans 6:5	Blameless in Christ 1 Corinthians 1:8	Crucified with Christ Galatians 2:20
I Have Abundant Life John 10:10	My Old Self is Crucified Romans 6:6	God's Fellow Worker 1 Corinthians 3:9	Redeemed from the Curse Galatians 3:13-14
I Have Peace John 14:27; 16:33	No Longer Sin's Slave Romans 6:6-7	God's Field 1 Corinthians 3:9	Chosen to be Holy Ephesians 1:4
Clean in Christ John 15:3	Alive to God Romans 6:11	God's Building 1 Corinthians 3:9	I Have God's Resurrection Power Actively Working in Me. Ephesians 1:17-19
Bearer of Lasting Fruit John 15:4, 5, 8, 16;	Not Under Law, but Under Grace Romans 6:14	God's Sacred Temple 1 Corinthians 3:16-17; 2 Corinthians 6:16	Saved by Grace Ephesians 2:5, 8
Completed in Christ John 15:11	A Slave to Righteousness Romans 6:19	Washed in Christ 1 Corinthians 6:11	Raised Up with Christ Ephesians 2:6
Overcomer of the World John 16:33	No Longer a Sufferer of Condemnation Romans 8:1	Bought and Redeemed with a Price 1 Corinthians 6:20	Seated with Christ in the Heavenly Realms Ephesians 2:6
Not of This World John 17:16	Not Controlled by the Flesh, but Controlled by the Spirit Romans 8:9	A Growing Reflection of the Lord's Glory 2 Corinthians 3:18	Christ's Workmanship Ephesians 2:10
A Christian, "A Little Christ" Acts 11:26	Predestined to be Conformed to the Image of the Son Romans 8:29	Renewed Inwardly Day by Day 2 Corinthians 4:16	Prepared in Advance in Christ Jesus to do Good Works Ephesians 2:10
Freely & Fully Justified Romans 3:24, 26, 28, 30	More than a Conqueror in Christ Romans 8:37	A New Creation 2 Corinthians 5:17	



WHO I AM IN CHRIST

Adapted from Bob Kelleman, RPM Ministries (www.rpmministries.org) and, Excerpted from *Soul Physicians*.

<p>Salt of the Earth Matthew 5:13</p> <p>Light of the World Matthew 5:14</p> <p>A Disciple of Christ Luke 14:27; John 8:31</p> <p>Christ's Witness Luke 24:48; Acts 1:8</p> <p>Set Free From Sin John 8:32, 36</p> <p>I Have Abundant Life John 10:10</p> <p>I Have Peace John 14:27; 16:33</p> <p>Clean in Christ John 15:3</p> <p>Bearer of Lasting Fruit John 15:4, 5, 8, 16;</p> <p>Completed in Christ John 15:11</p> <p>Overcomer of the World John 16:33</p> <p>Not of This World John 17:16</p> <p>A Christian, "A Little Christ" Acts 11:26</p> <p>Freely & Fully Justified Romans 3:24, 26, 28, 30</p> <p>Sanctified 1 Corinthians 6:11</p> <p>A Saint Philippians 1:1; 4:21, 22</p>	<p>Redeemed Romans 3:24; Ephesians 1:7</p> <p>Credited with Christ's Righteousness Romans 3:21-26; 4:3-24</p> <p>Dead to Sin Romans 6:2</p> <p>Raised to New Life Romans 6:4</p> <p>United with Christ in His Resurrection Romans 6:5</p> <p>My Old Self is Crucified Romans 6:6</p> <p>No Longer Sin's Slave Romans 6:6-7</p> <p>Alive to God Romans 6:11</p> <p>Not Under Law, but Under Grace Romans 6:14</p> <p>A Slave to Righteousness Romans 6:19</p> <p>No Longer a Sufferer of Condemnation Romans 8:1</p> <p>Not Controlled by the Flesh, but Controlled by the Spirit Romans 8:9</p> <p>Predestined to be Conformed to the Image of the Son Romans 8:29</p> <p>More than a Conqueror in Christ Romans 8:37</p>	<p>Competent to Disciple Others in Christ Romans 15:14</p> <p>Sanctified by the Holy Spirit Romans 15:16</p> <p>Acceptable to God in Christ Romans 15:16</p> <p>Holy in Christ Ephesians 5:26; Colossians 3:12</p> <p>Blameless in Christ 1 Corinthians 1:8</p> <p>God's Fellow Worker 1 Corinthians 3:9</p> <p>God's Field 1 Corinthians 3:9</p> <p>God's Building 1 Corinthians 3:9</p> <p>God's Sacred Temple 1 Corinthians 3:16-17; 2 Corinthians 6:16</p> <p>Washed in Christ 1 Corinthians 6:11</p> <p>Bought and Redeemed with a Price 1 Corinthians 6:20</p> <p>A Growing Reflection of the Lord's Glory 2 Corinthians 3:18</p> <p>Renewed Inwardly Day by Day 2 Corinthians 4:16</p> <p>A New Creation 2 Corinthians 5:17</p>	<p>A Minister of Reconciliation 2 Corinthians 5:18</p> <p>Christ's Ambassador 2 Corinthians 5:20</p> <p>Christ's Spiritually Pure Virgin 2 Corinthians 11:2</p> <p>Rescued From This Present Evil Age Galatians 1:4</p> <p>Crucified with Christ Galatians 2:20</p> <p>Redeemed from the Curse Galatians 3:13-14</p> <p>Chosen to be Holy Ephesians 1:4</p> <p>I Have God's Resurrection Power Actively Working in Me. Ephesians 1:17-19</p> <p>Saved by Grace Ephesians 2:5, 8</p> <p>Raised Up with Christ Ephesians 2:6</p> <p>Seated with Christ in the Heavenly Realms Ephesians 2:6</p> <p>Christ's Workmanship Ephesians 2:10</p> <p>Prepared in Advance in Christ Jesus to do Good Works Ephesians 2:10</p>
--	---	--	--

Appendix B

Guilt, Shame, and Regret

Often a sense of low self-esteem reveals confusion about the experiences of guilt, shame, regret. This appendix is written to help you differentiate these three experiences and receive the unique hope God offers for each.

Are these words synonyms? They feel very similar. Each is unpleasant. There is a natural instinct to want to hide or cover up. Frequently we are embarrassed to admit or want to talk about these emotions with others. There is a sense of being dirty, damaged, or bad in the midst of these experiences. We have a tendency to believe that these emotions define us (at least to some degree).

They seem to be triggered by similar types of events. There was something wrong that happened and we were part of that event(s). Socially, the triggering event is believed to carry a stigma that would make us less acceptable. Memory of the triggering event is very “sticky” in our memory and hard to forget.

I would argue that these emotions / experiences, when rightly understood and interpreted, are three distinct experiences and that the gospel speaks to each in unique ways.

Defining the Three Experiences

- Guilt is a sense of legitimate condemnation in response to personal sin.
- Shame is a sense of illegitimate condemnation in response to suffering.
- Regret is a form of grief for a reasonable desire / expectation that was never realized.

We rightly feel guilt when we lose our temper, misrepresent the truth, fail to fulfill a promise, neglect a responsibility, dishonor an authority figure, make a crude joke, take advantage of someone, or fail to represent Christ accurately in some other way. If we do not feel guilty for these things, our conscience is seared (at least to some degree).

We feel shame (among other emotions) when we have been abused (physically, verbally, or sexually), are limited by chronic pain, have been betrayed by a spouse or trusted friend, lose our job, are helpless after a catastrophe, or experience other hardships that are not the result of personal sin. If we “own” these emotions in the same way we own guilt, then we feel a false sense of condemnation.

We feel regret when a parent died when we were young, an illness prevents us from pursuing a dream, an opportunity does not come our way, or some other reasonable and legitimate desire is unfulfilled. If we interpret these experiences as God’s rejection or a reflection of our value, then we over-personalize these events as if they carried a message.

The Gospel for Each Experience

The gospel answers guilt with forgiveness. Guilt leaves a moral stain on our soul which the blood of Jesus washes clean and then replaces with His own righteousness. Sin does not become our identity because the gospel transforms us from rebels against God to ambassadors for God.

The gospel answers shame with comfort and truth to counter lies of suffering. Shame leaves no stain, but traps us in the confusion of suffering’s lies. The gospel patiently cuts through those lies of shame and offers us the freedom that comes with the identity of being a dearly loved child of God. As a loving Father, God is tender in removing lies of suffering knowing that we often cling to them like a dysfunctional security blanket.

The gospel answers regret with the assurance of that we are in the providence of a good God. The gospel reveals a God who transforms the unfortunate events of life. It does not force us to call painful or unfortunate things good, but it does reveal the character of a God who redeems the darkest moments (even Jesus on Calvary) for His glory and our good.

As you seek to make application of this post, ask yourself the following questions:

1. How and when have you confused the experiences of guilt, shame, and regret?
2. How has this confusion caused confusion (or offense) about the kind of help God offers in the gospel?
3. How would rightly identifying your emotions in these experiences help you draw upon God’s hope in the gospel more effectively? If this is difficult for you Appendix D provides additional guidance.

Appendix C

Suffering, Self-Reliance, and Self-Esteem

What is one of the most destructive messages we learn when life is hard for a pro-longed period of time? “It doesn’t matter what you do. You are powerless to create relief or obtain what you really want. Life is hard because you are too weak to make it good.” These are the messages of learned helplessness.

Much of what is taught in the name of self-esteem is meant to combat this mentality toward the hardships of life. Often, those who disagree with self-esteem theory (as this seminar does) discuss how “loving yourself more” as the solution to life’s problems ignores the sinfulness of people’s hearts. For those who are seeking a higher self-esteem as a way to sin less (i.e., learn anger management, quit looking at pornography, lie less, etc...) they need to hear why pursuing self-esteem would exacerbate their struggle by playing into the selfishness and self-centeredness that made sin seem appealing in the first place (James 1:14-15).

But what about those who are looking for relief from their struggle with learned helplessness because of suffering? Do they need to be cautioned against self-esteem theory for the same reasons or in the same way? No. Yes, they are still sinner and, yes, their sin would be exacerbated by self-esteem theory just like someone in anger management. But to have the same conversation in the same way would be to feed their sense of helplessness by heaping shame on top of guilt.

The empowerment that those who have grown timid and passive under suffering seek is good. If we speak to them about the dangers of self-esteem theory in the same way we do to those seeking relief from sin, we mislabel their search for motivation, a voice, justice, or decency as pride, selfishness, vengefulness, or entitlement. We feed the common misconception that to care for someone differently because of their suffering is to trap them in victimization or to allow them to wallow in excuses.

The gospel gives voice to the oppressed in suffering as much as it gives liberty to those trapped in sin (James 5:1-6). The gospel gives reasons to press on for those discouraged by suffering as much as it gives reasons to stop to those blinded by sin (James 1:2-4, 14-15). The Bible does not feel compelled to choose between caring for people in their sin and their suffering.

It should be stated clearly, any discussion of the short-comings of self-esteem theory that only cautions how it feeds the self-centeredness of sin is incomplete. This omission would make such a work “harsh;” not because the tone would necessarily be rude, but because the action steps provided would implicitly require people to take responsibility for their suffering.

This seminar has sought to affirm the differences that exist between sin and suffering; because both sin and suffering present unique challenges to our pursuit of identity, purpose, confidence, security, and wisdom. But it has not done so by writing ten chapters (five for sin; five for suffering), because every person is both a sinner and sufferer. There are not two separate audiences who need separate approaches, but one audience who needs to think through these issues from both angles.

Why create a separate appendix to make this point? Here are four reasons I’ve chosen to highlight this point.

1. **In this conversation people often talk past one another.** If you have read or heard debates on this subject, doubtless you got the sense that the two sides were not talking about the same thing. Often, from my perspective, that has been the case and the failure to distinguish how the gospel speaks to sin and suffering is the primary reason.
2. **To prevent a misapplication that would perpetuate false guilt.** Unless this point is made clearly then many who need to grow in identity, purpose, confidence, security, and wisdom because of suffering would feel condemned for their struggle. If this happens, it would give them an immunity to God’s hope and should, therefore, be guarded against.
3. **To help us affirm and redeem a good motivation in self-esteem literature.** It would be easy to hear a presentation about why someone is wrong and assume a malicious motive is being assigned. That would be unfair and unhelpful. I am both grateful for and indebted to those who have studied how suffering affects our sense of self; many of whom did so from a vantage point of self-esteem theory.
4. **To advocate for the further examination of how the gospel speaks to suffering.** In my opinion, if we did a better job as a church of showing how the gospel impacts the experience of suffering, then there would much less of a “market” for self-esteem literature. In order to win our culture (which is so much more important than winning a debate) we will need a well-developed alternative that addresses the entire human condition more than a well-developed argument that addresses a variety of deficiencies.

Appendix D

WOULD SHAME BY ANY OTHER NAME HIDE JUST AS FIERCELY?

Why ask a question like, “Would a rose by any other name smell just as sweet?” What could we hope to get from this deliberation that would be of value? Doesn’t everything “flowery” smell good? I remember when I learned that the answer is a definitive no.

Our trash can was beginning to smell. I was sure that I had an ingenious double solution that would win the admiration of my wife: potpourri roach spray. With one thorough application any odor from the trash can would be gone and any potential bug problem would be eliminated. When my wife arrived from the other room, I was informed that a roach spray by any other name smells just as foul. To this day I still think it should have worked.

What about with our emotions? If we mislabel an emotion, does that impact our ability to respond to a situation healthily? The clear answer is yes. This is because emotions are not passive. Emotions are not inconsequential fluctuations in our heart that “just happen to us.” Emotions are (among other things) a call to specific actions. One of the ways that our emotions reveal our hearts is that they call us to do something about the events around us. Consider the following examples:

- Guilt is a call to acknowledge wrongdoing, repent, and make restoration.
- Anger is a call to aggressively correct an injustice.
- Joy is a call to celebrate a significant, good event.
- Anxiety is a call to eliminate a threat or to plan for protection.
- Peace is a call to rest.
- Frustration is a call to solve a recurring problem.
- Annoyance is a call to quiet a relatively insignificant irritant.
- Depression is a call to give up in the face of hopelessness.
- Offendedness is a call to defend rules of decency and respect.
- Passion is a call to deliver a significant message or carry out an important vision.
- Confusion is a call to look for answers.

What happens if we mislabel confusion (lack of clarity about how to resolve a situation) as guilt (a sense that we should take responsibility and repent)? What happens if we confuse anxiety (a timid, defensive planning to protect) with offendedness (a bold, righteous defense of decency)? What happens if we call hurt (let down from a reasonable expectation) anger (the desire to aggressively defend what should have been mine)? What happens if we *feel like* we are responding appropriately, but the mislabeling of our emotions is leading us into sincere foolishness.¹

This happens in the lives of many people for at least two reasons. First, emotions are confused because emotions are subjective. My guilt (irritated sense of failure) may feel different from your guilt (blushing desire to hide). My joy (satisfying sense of accomplishment) may feel different from your joy (cheery celebration with friends). These are natural differences that have to do with personality, temperament, family history, personal values, and a myriad of other factors.

The differences we experience at this level are neutral and, therefore, should be sought to be understood rather than debated for uniformity. Like most parts of life, we will all vary in the amount of effort we must put into understanding our own emotions and the emotions of others. Part of our general maturity (which has implications for our spiritual maturity) is gaining a self-awareness of how we experience and express particular emotions.

Second, emotions are confused because emotions are easily manipulated. From our earliest days, parenting (to some degree) sought to shape, define, and train our emotions. “You hit your brother. You should feel bad.” “You hit the ball. You should be proud.” “You did not obey Mama. Wait until your father gets home (worry).” In a context where parents exercise this responsibility biblically (although none do so perfectly), this shaping is a means of God’s grace.

¹ This calls our attention to an important cultural shift. We live in a culture where sincerity, genuineness, and authenticity have replaced righteousness, purity, and holiness as the highest virtues. It has become more important to be “true to yourself” than it is to “do the right thing.” If we are going to think biblically about emotions, we must discuss *healthy, appropriate, or proportionate emotions* in a way that illuminates this cultural shift.

However, as we go through life, we will undoubtedly get strong mixed messages about our emotions. “You should not feel that way.” “Do not let anyone judge your emotions. Just be true to how you feel.” “Emotions don’t matter.” Then there are the mixed evaluations about whether a given action was good, bad, over-the-top, harsh, lenient, rushed, passive, or just right. All of this exists in a normal human life and creates confusion. How should I feel about [blank]?

What about the person who spends an extended period of time in an abusive, neglectful, or otherwise unhealthy environment? Responsibility, fairness, appropriateness, decency, proportionality, and care (foundational variables in identifying appropriate emotions) all become distorted. One may learn to take responsibility for and fix whatever goes wrong (guilt) because no one else will. Unpredictable events automatically may become labeled as threats (anxiety) because it takes so little to trigger abuse. Minor defects may become major points of emphasis (shame) because you might not get spoken to for days. It does not matter what I do (apathy or callousness) because my actions are not going to change the unhealthiness of my environment.

As you read these misfiring calls to action in the emotions above, it can seem like there is no hope. How do we get back on track when our emotions get mislabeled? If emotions are relatively subjective, how do you evaluate them objectively enough to ever rightly label them again? The solution begins not in the experience of the emotion, but in the call to action of the emotion.² Initially we are not able to change the experience of the emotion (heart rate, feeling in our stomach, blushing, tense muscle, racing and random thoughts etc...). What we can evaluate and change in light of God’s character (the true and accurate standard from which all emotions emerge and take their definition) is the call to action.

What follows is a step-by-step plan for understanding, evaluating, and changing (if necessary) how you feel about or in the midst of an event. Because this appendix is not working through a particular emotion (shame, anxiety, depression, etc...) or a particular experience (conflict, rape, failure, etc...), there will not be a large number of biblical references. The goal of this appendix is not to give you all the right answers, but to help you to ask the right questions.

Until we ask good questions we will not get good answers. The goal is to help you understand emotional confusion within a biblical world-view so that the relevance of biblical teaching in your area of struggle will be clearer and, thereby, your motivation for implementing God’s Word higher. It is highly recommended that you work through this material with a pastor, counselor, or trusted/mature Christian friend.

At the end of the appendix a diagram and journaling tool will be provided to assist you in walking through these steps with the various emotional situations you face.

STEP 1: Identify What You Naturally Feel

For this step, consider the following questions.

- What words do you naturally use to describe what you are feeling?
- Before anyone else responded, how did you complete the sentence, “Because of what happened, I felt [blank]?”

Your goal here is not to guess at what the right answer will be. You will not be able to make progress towards the right answer until we know where you are starting. At this point the goal is not a destination but progress. Your goal is just to get an accurate read on what your first response was so that we can use that information to determine what type of changes (if any) need to occur in a given circumstance.

STEP 2: Identify the Natural Call to Action

As you take this step, ask yourself:

- What did your emotions cause you to want to do?
- What are the things that you would normally do after a situation like this?
- What would your friends who know you well expect of you in a similar circumstance?

² While we can find situations that parallel many of our experiences, the Bible is not meant to be a catalog or encyclopedia. Furthermore, just because we find a similar experience to our own in the Bible, this does not mean that the biblical character’s response (unless it is Jesus) is normative for how we should respond. The breadth of experiences found in the Bible should comfort us that God is not caught off guard or unprepared for our circumstance. Rather the Bible—through instruction, example, encouragement, and poetry—teaches us how to respond to life. It is in this framework (the story of redemption) that we work backwards from appropriate response to appropriate emotion(s).

The goal at this step is to identify where your emotions take you. You will not be able to directly change your emotions, even if you determine that they were mislabeled in step one. What you can do is change the actions that you currently believe are “natural” in these types of situations. As you discipline yourself to act in accord with biblical wisdom (step 5), then healthier emotions will emerge.³

STEP 3: Evaluate the Situation

The first two steps are purely experiential. There is no standard being applied. Step three now provides the raw material needed to begin to move towards a biblical standard. Consider the following questions. Not every question will be relevant for every situation. But if you are used to responding on the basis of your emotions, these questions should give you the tools to begin to evaluate situations differently?

- What happened? Who was involved?
- In what order did the events happen? What led into the events?
- At what points were biblical commands or priorities violated?
- What commands or priorities were violated? Who violated them?
- What was done during the event to try to steer it in a better direction?
- In the midst of the situation, what did you think about most?
- What was most important to you?
- What was your desired outcome? How did that change as the situation progressed?
- What was the desired outcome of the other person(s)?
- How effective was the resolution, reconciliation, or problem solving afterwards?

STEP 4: Identify Themes of the Situation

There is one more assessment you need to do in order to best equip yourself to understand and train your emotions. You need to identify the aspects of the situation that triggered a confused or unbiblical response and call to action.

- What were the aspects that you identified in step three that were most rattling, confusing, hurtful, or anger provoking?
- How would you summarize the theme of those events in a single sentence?
- In what similar situations do those same themes emerge?

Taking the time to make these evaluations prepares you to know when to expect to apply what you are learning about yourself and God’s character. You will know what type of situations to pray about and the type of preparations you need to make. You will not always be able to prepare for these circumstances, but even in your spontaneous struggles, you will be able to recognize them earlier and more clearly identify the characteristic patterns.

STEP 5: Identify the Biblical Calls to Action

Now that you have defined the situation, you can ask better response questions. As you seek to answer the questions listed below you may have to consult with a trusted Christian friend, pastor, or counselor. It is better to be humbly confused than blindly impulsive. Pausing to ask a new question is often the first step towards wise living.

- What would a biblical call to action to this situation look like?
- What would have most reflected God’s character and purpose in the beginning, middle, and end of the situation?
- How and when would those changes have been implemented?
- Now that the situation has ended, what would most reflect God’s character and purpose?

A right evaluation of a situation precedes a right emotional response to that situation. Unfortunately, our hearts often feel before they evaluate. This is why we identified our natural response in step one. Now your responsibility is to biblically evaluate your response to the situation so that whether you responded wisely or foolishly you will learn from the situation. This is what it means to be a good steward of the events of our lives.

³ Often this type of statement can be very frustrating for people. “How right do I have to act before I get some emotional relief?” they wonder. This is a fair question. There is no promised time table for the relief. But God is faithful. The challenge at this stage is to desire God’s character as much as (eventually more than) you desire God’s blessing (peace).

STEP 6: Identify the Corresponding Emotions

Look at the biblical calls to action you listed in step five.

- What emotions are required to motivate those actions?

If this is difficult for you, use the list of emotions on the next page.

- Ask yourself this question, “Would this emotion aid or detract from my efforts to do what I identified that I need to do in this situation?”

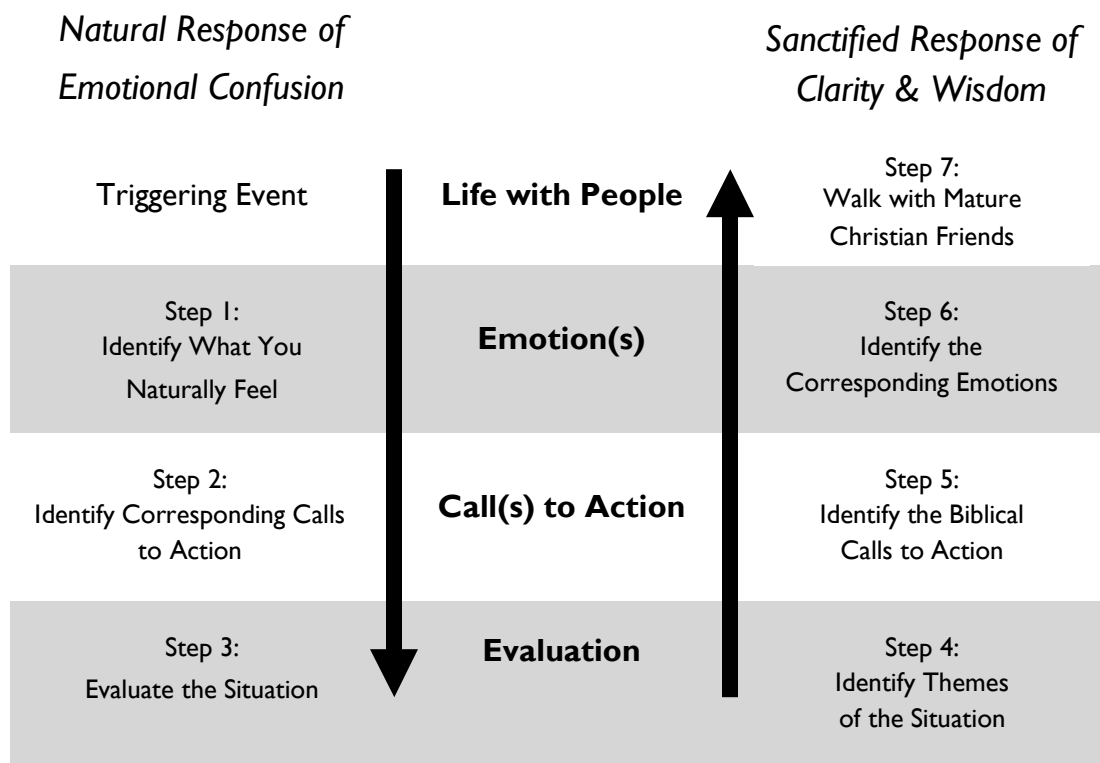
The list that you are creating should become one tangible way to measure how your spiritual maturity is penetrating your emotional/relational life. How much are your emotions in these types of situations (step 4) calling you to wise, biblical actions (step 5) instead of the unhealthy actions that were natural to you (step 2)?

STEP 7: Walk Through this Process with Mature Christian Friends

If emotional clarity is a struggle for you, I am sure you have already asked yourself the question, “How am I supposed to be able to answer these questions accurately if I am this confused?” It is a very fair and good question. By God’s grace it is possible, but there is another key resource God provides for this area of growth – His people.

Walking through this type of evaluative process with our brothers and sisters in Christ should be a regular part of every believer’s life (not just the emotionally confused). This is one aspect of what it means to carry one another’s burdens (Gal 6:2). It is through this process that we (both the confused and the clarifier) become more convinced and encouraged that God’s Word is living and active, able to penetrate the complexities of life (Heb 4:12-13). Conversations of this nature should not be viewed as remedial Christianity or time out for the faith-challenged Christian. This is what it means to be an active part of one another’s lives as the New Testament calls us to (Heb 3:13-14).

In concluding this article, I want to provide you with two tools to assist you in implementing what you have been taught. One is a diagram that illustrates the process you will be going through each time you walk through these seven steps. The second is a journaling tool that is designed to help you be able to record, reflect on, and compare your notes on the various incidences of emotional confusion you may face.



List of Common Emotions

abandoned	defiant	envious	innocent	remorseful
accused	deficient	evasive	insecure	resentful
aggressive	deflated	excited	isolated	sad
alienated	dejected	excluded	insulted	satisfied
agonized	depressed	exuberant	intense	self-pitying
aloof	despairing	flustered	jealous	sheepish
angry	despondent	fearful	jubilant	shocked
annoyed	deserted	frantic	livid	shy
apathetic	disappointed	frightened	lonely	silly
apologetic	disapproving	frustrated	loved	smug
arrogant	disbelieving	furious	mean	spiteful
ashamed	disconcerted	gloomy	melancholy	stubborn
baffled	discouraged	grieving	mischievous	sure
belittled	disgusted	guarded	miserable	surprised
bewildered	dishonest	guilty	mournful	sympathetic
bitter	dismayed	happy	negligent	suspicious
bored	disoriented	hateful	optimistic	thankful
burdened	distant	helpless	outraged	thoughtful
callous	distasteful	hopeless	paranoid	thrilled
cautious	distracted	hopeful	peaceful	tranquil
cheerful	distraught	horrified	perplexed	trapped
cheated	distressed	hostile	pessimistic	uncomposed
compassion	downcast	humiliated	pleased	undecided
confident	downtrodden	hurt	protective	underestimated
confused	elated	hysterical	proud	uneasy
content	embarrassed	ignored	provoked	unwanted
crushed	enthusiastic	inadequate	puzzled	upset
curious	ecstatic	indifferent	regretful	uplifted
deceived	enraged	indignant	relieved	weak

Emotional Clarity Journaling Tool

STEP 1: Identify What You Naturally Feel

What words do you use to naturally describe how you feel in this situation? In parentheses beside each emotion rank on a scale of 1 to 10 how intensely you feel that emotion.

STEP 2: Identify the Call to Action

To what responses or solutions do these emotions naturally lead you? What is it that you naturally wanted to do in this situation?

STEP 3: Evaluate the Situation

Summarize what happened in this situation. Use the back if necessary.

STEP 4: Identify Themes of the Situation

What were the key aspects of this situation that triggered your natural responses listed in step two?

STEP 5: Identify the Biblical Calls to Action

What responses would have most reflected God’s character and purpose in this situation?

STEP 6: Identify the Corresponding Emotions

What emotions would motivate the type of actions you listed in step 5?

STEP 7: Walk Through this Process with Mature Christian Friends

What mature Christian friends or mentors would be most helpful to you in this situation?

Appendix E

What Do I Do Now?

A plumb line of the Summit counseling ministry is, “We don’t do events; we create resources.” That means you should be asking yourself, “What can or should I do with this information now?”

We have created a series of brief videos that answer that what-now question from several different perspectives. Each of these can be found at:

www.bradhambrick.com/whatnow
www.bradhambrick.com/identity

Personal Study or Small Group

Question: I’ve been to several of the Summit counseling seminars and notice there appears to be a couple of different kinds. You frequently recommend studying them as a small group or with a friend. That seems like a great idea, but since I haven’t done that before I’m not quite sure how to start something like that. Do you mind giving me guidance?

Pursue Personal Counseling

Question: After attending this seminar I realized I would like to pursue counseling to help me grow in this area. It sounded like there are several different options available. Would you mind explaining to me what those are and how I could connect with the one that best serves me need?

Leveraging My Workplace

Question: I’ve heard rumors that I’m supposed to be able to use the Summit counseling seminars to leverage my workplace for gospel influence. My first impression is that it sounds awkward and intrusive; like I’m telling people they’ve “got issues” or “need help.” But I’m also worried about putting up Christian material that might be offensive to some people who visit my workplace. But I would at least like to hear what you’ve got to say. How would this work?

As a Professional Counselor

Question: I’m a licensed counselor (LPC) and came across the Summit counseling seminars. I’m excited to see the church addressing these kinds of subjects, and I’m curious how you might see someone in my position (or a LCSW or LMFT) using the materials. I can see recommending them to my clients who are open to an overtly Christian aspect to their counseling, but it seems like there could be more uses than just counseling homework. Could you share your thoughts on how those in private practice might use these resources?

Our goal in Summit counseling is to (1) equip the church to care for one another and our community with excellence; (2) provide quality counseling services that allow our people to get involved in the lives of others with confidence – knowing additional, experienced care is available to come alongside them if needed; and (3) create ways for our members and other Christians in our community to leverage their workplace and careers for greater gospel impact in their spheres of influence.

We hope this seminar and these videos give you a vision for how this can happen and stirs a passion in you to be a part of God’s work of redeeming and restoring hurting individuals and families.