

Knowing God in the Real World

by Jon Paulien (Pacific Press, 2000)

Chapter One

Life's Bottom Line

When secularized people see a bumper sticker or a billboard that says, “Jesus is the Answer,” they are rarely moved to reconsider the direction of their lives. They do not feel an urge to pull over to the side of the road, kneel down, and thank God for His answer to the problems in their lives. They will either ignore the message and its implications, or respond with a flippant, “What do you suppose the Question is?” Even if they are aware of serious issues in their lives, even if they have some sense of what the question is, secular people generally do not expect to find the answer in church or in Jesus.

Is there some way bring the gospel home to a secular person and still make sense? Is the gospel as relevant today as it ever was? What difference does it make? In this chapter I would like to share with you a contemporary presentation of the gospel that has made some sense to the secular people I encounter from time to time.

Sticks and Stones

Remember that childhood verse? “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” Doesn’t that sound like the stupidest proverb you ever heard? It really isn’t true, is it? Grown men, who would put up with all kinds of physical pain for a good cause, will often fall apart if you put them into a room full of people who are laughing at them.

When I was young I was a pretty tough guy. When I was 14 years old, I had already developed a big, bass voice, and I had reached my full height and weight (well, I guess I *have* added a little to the weight in the last few years). That gave me a huge advantage on the football field during high school days. I remember those athletic days with some satisfaction now that I have reached middle age and things are not quite the way they were. But there was one day that has left a very different kind of memory. . . .

It was my senior year of academy and we had an awesome flagball team. I was the captain and the quarterback. My half-back was Danny, incredibly quick and shifty. He was a master at offering tacklers a look at his flag and then moving it away just when the other person reached for it. My fullback was Oscar-- he was something else. He was even bigger and tougher than I was, and I can remember him knocking two or three people out of my way and still looking around for somebody else to block. At the tight end position was Carlos. He was as big as Oscar, and he had great hands. All I had to do was to throw the ball into a crowd and he would somehow come out with it. Then there was Jaime, my wide receiver. He was 6'3" and 130 pounds, the fastest guy I ever saw outside of the pros.

We were great! I was throwing fairly well and we were rolling up some big scores. Everything was going well except for one rule at that school: the captains of teams that were not

playing had to referee the other games. That's OK up to a point, but things started going sour when the Bible teacher broke his ankle. He had been the quarterback of our biggest rivals, and now he was a spectator whenever his favorite team played. This man was my hero. He was the most admired man in my life. He was teaching me to know the Lord. He was the model of everything what I wanted to become someday, a teacher, a friend, and a man of God. Until that day. . .

That day I had to referee a game that his team was playing, and he stood with his crutches on the sideline. It wasn't long before I could hear his voice. "That was a dumb call. What's the matter, are you blind or something?" Time and again he had something to say about the quality of my refereeing. I tried my best to ignore him but the impact of the comments began to pile up as the game went on. "O, come on, that was obvious. Are you asleep on your feet?" "I have never seen such a ridiculous display of refereeing in my whole life!"

I thought I was handling it OK until a particular play in the third quarter. A power sweep ended up right on the sideline, right in front of him. I was right on top of the play and did my best to make the right call. He hollered angrily, "I don't believe it! I'm standing right here. I'm looking right at it. Are you stupid? Are you blind? What is your problem?" I turned to him and with trembling in my voice I said, "Look, I'm doing the best I can". He looked me right in the eye, paused for a couple of seconds, and then said with disgust in his voice, "*Your* best isn't good enough."

That game was played in a little field in the middle of a major city. I picked up the football and in fury threw the greatest spiral of my life. It landed on the top of a building nearby. I walked off the field with my head down. I found the deepest and darkest corner of the

basement in that school and I cried for two solid hours. Danny, Oscar, Carlos, and Jaime all followed me down to the basement to offer their support; but it didn't help. I cried and I cried, and no one could stop me. My friends tried to tell me that the Bible teacher didn't really mean it and that he would apologize the next day (he never did) but it didn't help. Why?

What Are You Worth?

Why would a tough guy like me cry in front of his friends for two hours? How is it that words, mere words, can be so painful? It has to do with self-esteem or self-worth, how we feel about ourselves deep down inside. It seems that if the most admired person in your life thinks that *your best isn't good enough*, a little voice deep inside of you says, "Your best will *NEVER* be good enough. Your life is over. You're a failure. You'll never amount to anything."

Self-worth, whether we like it or not, is very important to the kind of life we live. How we feel about ourselves largely determines how we treat other people and how we face the major issues of life. Unless we can find a way to develop a strong and positive sense of what we are worth, everything we do will be negatively affected. The search for a solid sense of what we are worth, therefore, is at the center of our quest for the best that life can offer.

Most people seek to build their own sense of self-worth in three basic ways. Since people are often unaware of why they do what they do, let us take a closer look at these three ways. We will examine each approach and evaluate its usefulness for building self-worth and achieving our goals for life.

Self-Worth Strategy #1: What You Have

The Possessions Approach

One of the ways that people seek to build self-worth is through the accumulation of possessions. These are yesterday's "Yuppies" (young, upwardly-mobile professionals). They seek value in terms of the things which they own, use and display. If you ask possession-oriented people what they are worth, you might get an answer like this: "Oh, something like \$450,000 in stocks, bonds, bank accounts and real estate" (what some people in the financial world call the "bottom line"). Such people value themselves in terms of how much they have. It reminds me of the bumper sticker, "He who dies with the most toys, wins." That's a crass statement of the bottom-line approach to self-esteem.

I once had the privilege of receiving a BMW by mistake from a rental company in Frankfurt, Germany. Without speed limits on the German Autobahns I felt like I was in driver's heaven! Over the next two weeks it became obvious why people love their BMWs-- they make fantastic toys. Although I may never own one, I'll never forget the experience! Cynics say, "The only difference between the men and the boys is the price of their toys!" Although I am now past 50 years of age, I find that there is no shortage of "toys" that still appeal to me and to my friends.

People's ideas about the meaning and value of life are more and more shaped by movies and television shows. Have you noticed that a high percentage of story lines coming out of Hollywood these days concern heroes who go from rags to riches? In the past it was common for story lines to highlight a rich person who gives up the perks of riches to identify with the poor, even at the risk of being misunderstood. But today it seems that no matter how poor the hero is, sooner or later in the story the hero is rewarded with riches and acclaim. These film and TV

stories are very influential on young minds. As a result, many of today's young people also identify riches with success and happiness.

I remember young person like that. After graduating from college I went back to the same inner-city school that I had attended; this time to teach. One of the students in my classes was Chester. He was a big, tough street kid from a devastated inner-city neighborhood. One day I asked him what he thought happiness was all about. He didn't hesitate one bit. "Happiness," he told me, "is a BIG, *BLACK*, CAD-EE-LLAC." Is it really? To him it was real. After all, in his neighborhood, the only people with money and respect seemed to be the pimps and the drug dealers who drove around in shiny black Cadillacs. To him, at that time, those cars represented everything that a person could want in this life. The "success" that these criminals exhibited outweighed any concern he might have had for the way in which they got wealthy.

Did you see the bumper-sticker, "When things get tough, the tough go shopping!"? There is truth in that statement. When life gets difficult, shopping can provide a wonderful distraction. It can also provide the genuine satisfaction that comes from buying the latest and the greatest. It's a great feeling to bring home a fine sound system or TV and show it off to your friends. It's a great feeling to climb into a brand new car and breathe in that great new-car smell. It's a great feeling to finally have the kind of home you always dreamed of, or even to add a nice sun-room to the basic home you've lived in for years. "Keeping up with the Joneses" is more than just a hobby. For many of us it's about life, it's about being somebody, it's about what you are worth as a human being. Our possessions *can* have a major impact on how we feel about ourselves.

When the Bottom Drops Out!

But there are some problems with the bottom line approach to self-esteem. For one thing, toys don't last. They get scratched, they rot, rust, and crash. Or even worse for some people, they come out with a better BMW next year! Have you ever had a new car and decided to head out for a drive on a beautiful, sunny day? As you approached your car the sun shines off the paint at *just* the right angle, and you see it-- the first scratch! It can feel as if someone stuck a knife in your chest and twisted it. At such moments we realize that possessions are more to us than just tools for life. They can represent some of our deepest needs and desires. And they *do* satisfy, at least for a while. In the end, however, the bottom line approach is devastating to our self-worth because the feeling doesn't last. When the toy is broken, the joy of the toy is also gone.

Simple solution, you say? Just get so rich that you can have all the new toys you want all the time? After all, If you have a whole collection of BMWs, it won't matter to you if one of them gets scratched. If you have 300 pairs of shoes, it won't matter to you if the heel comes off on one or two of them. If you can afford the ultimate palace, you will *know* that you are *somebody*.

But here is where a cruel deception seems to set in. The poor can always dream of getting rich and think that it will make a difference. But the rich soon discover that the more stuff they have, the less any of it is worth to them. They are blind-sided by a horrible side-effect of wealth that I call devaluation. Possessions lose value as they increase in quantity. There is something special about working and saving and dreaming about a purchase that the ultra-rich may never experience. When you can have anything you want, whenever you want, it just doesn't mean all

that much anymore. When someone spends 300 million dollars on a single yacht or builds a home with more rooms than anyone could ever hope to use, doesn't this portray a certain sense of despair?

When my daughter, Tammy, was seven, she asked me, "Why does Oma (a German title for Grandmother) always do things for other people and doesn't buy lots of things for herself?"

I told her, "Oma has learned that it is more blessed to give than to receive."

Tammy responded, "I don't understand that, I like getting presents and having lots of toys."

What does a daddy say to that? I remember telling her something like this, "Tammy, no child with a hundred toys can appreciate a toy the way a child with only one toy can."

She thought for a moment and then her eyes lit up. "You know what? That's true! I have so many toys that I sometimes lose interest in playing with some of them."

Smart kid. The problem with lots and lots of toys is that they become cheapened with quantity. They become devalued. The problem with possessions is that the more you have, the less any of it is worth. It's a built-in, self-defeating mechanism. The poor may not have had a chance to discover that, but the rich know it well.

With plenty of possessions you not only experience devaluation, but also worry. The more you have the more you have to worry about: worry about thieves, worry about the financial markets, worry about the motives of people who seek to be your friend. You may even worry more about your health, because wealth without health is nothing! And even if you succeeded in being healthy and wealthy your whole life long, you eventually face the dilemma of the Pharaohs. You can't take it with you! No matter what your economic status in life, self-worth has to be

built on something more permanent and more reliable than possessions.

Self-Worth Strategy #2: What You Do

The “Self-Development” Approach

The second major approach by which people seek to build self-worth is the self-development approach. They become performance-oriented. Performance-oriented people measure their worth in terms of how well they do certain things. We dream of accomplishing great things with our lives and then basking in the satisfaction that comes from achievement. We dream of becoming a star in the sports world. “If only I could be Brett Favre (the best quarterback in all of football right now), *then* I’d be somebody!” “If only I could be Michael Jordan or Tiger Woods, *then* I’d *really* be somebody.” Young men in particular often gravitate toward bodybuilding or athletics as a way to build self-esteem. Work really hard at it and you can become the big, tough guy you’ve always wanted to be! Women may search for the perfect body in a different way than most men. They may also focus on finding the right kind of make up or the perfect dress that will make everybody’s head turn.

Some may be more interested in achievements of the mind than achievements of the body. “I think I’ll go back to school and get a Ph.D; *then* I’ll really be somebody.” Perhaps we strive to be the best student in the class, the most successful salesperson on the team, the best-selling author in some subject area, or even the best pastor in our city or region.

Others are drawn to the power and influence that can come from a position of prestige. “If only I could be president of the United States, *then* I’d really be somebody.” Most would settle for president of anything! Even a small corporation will do. For people in a religious

context, president of some church organization would be even better. If you never get that far it would at least be great to own your own business or be a recognized professional like a lawyer, a doctor, a teacher or a preacher. In fact some are tempted to become preachers because it puts them up front, in a position of some power and influence. In seeking a sense of self-worth it's tempting to start valuing yourself in terms of how much you've achieved in life. And there is a God-given sense of satisfaction that comes from accomplishing a task well, regardless of whether or not others recognize what you have done.

When Achievement Falls Short

The self-development approach to self-worth, however, has some of the same problems as the bottom-line approach. Those who have achieved great things usually come to realize that the value of achievement in the pursuit of self-worth isn't nearly as great as one might think. If a high level of education, for example, were the key to self-worth, Ph.Ds should be the happiest people on earth, but that is simply not the case. If being an athletic star were the key to self-worth, there wouldn't be problems with drugs or alcohol in professional sports. Achievement alone does not spell life.

A high-level of performance seems to also suffer from its own kind of devaluation. For example, there was a time a few years back when I would get very excited about breaking 100 on the golf course. Today I am usually disappointed to score 90 (in golf the lower the score the better). The greater your performance, the higher you have to raise the bar. It is as if we were self-programed to be dissatisfied with our achievements.

But even if achievement *could* give us the sought-after sense of self-worth, the

satisfaction that comes from achievement doesn't last. No matter how successful you may have been, eventually you age. The athlete's body begins to fall apart. The professor's mind begins to play strange tricks. You get fired from that dream job. Or perhaps injury and illness rob you of your talent.

Many people remember Joe Montana, the best football quarterback of an earlier generation. At the age of 38 he moved from the San Francisco 49ers to the Kansas City Chiefs. He was still great. He was still moving the team up and down the field. But his body was starting to fall apart. He spent more than half of that season on the bench, nursing an assortment of ailments. At the close of the season he was forced to retire, even though he could still play the game as well as anyone.

Sadder still was the experience of a former conference president whom I highly respect. He went into the triennial constituency meeting full of plans for the next three years in that conference. But instead of spending the afternoon directing the meeting which would discuss those plans, he spent it cleaning out his desk back at the office! Even though it was church business, the devastation of rejection hit him hard. To the extent that our self-worth is based on even the good things we do for the Lord, we are leaning on a broken stick that can snap at any time. You can be at the top of your profession one day, and the next day you are cleaning out your desk.

Let us suppose, however, that you are extremely successful at what you are doing right now. You have a strong sense of satisfaction in your achievements and there is no hint of destruction in sight. Is it safe to base your self-worth on your performance when you are performing well? Can you really find lasting self-worth in performance even when you are at

your best? Think of it: even the best basketball players miss a game-deciding shot now and then. Even the best of golfers sometimes miss a three-foot putt. If your sense of self-worth is based on your daily performance, you can be up one day and down the next.

How I know! During one of our slow-pitch softball seasons at Andrews, I played third base on the Seminary softball team. I wasn't particularly good or bad as a rule. But one day I made four errors! Even though I'm a grown man and have spent most of my life teaching and writing, I was depressed for four days afterward. Stupid, isn't it? Or does this kind of thing happen to you, too? Was I somehow finding self-worth in my performance on a slow-pitch softball team? I have since decided that it is better to be a pitcher than a third baseman. Pitchers don't make fielding mistakes in softball. The balls come by fast and you either get the ball in your glove by luck and they say, "Great play," or it gets by and they say, "Well, it was hit too hard anyway." But at third base there is no mercy.

Even though I am fully aware of the self-worth principles I'm sharing in this chapter, I find myself measuring my worth on the basis of performance time and time again. That was certainly part of the reason I cried when the Bible teacher spoke to me so roughly. I had failed to meet my own expectations. I had hoped to be so good at refereeing that no one could find fault. Instead I experienced a miserable humiliation. Basing our value on performance and achievement is at best a fragile remedy for the human condition.

Self-Worth Strategy #3: Who You Know

The Relationship Approach

The third way that people evaluate their worth as human beings is in relation to the

opinions and behavior of other people. In the first two approaches to self-worth, possessions and performance were the criteria. Now we turn to a relationship approach, where the basis for how you feel about yourself is your perception of what other people think of you. Their words, their behaviors toward you, and your reactions to their words and behaviors strongly affect the self-worth of relationship-oriented individuals.

Of the three approaches to promoting self-worth that we have looked at so far, the relationship approach is the one we are most comfortable talking about. People generally feel more justified in building their self-worth on relationships than on possessions or performance. It certainly seems a bit more noble. While most people do not want to be perceived as dependent on possessions or performance (although we all tend to be at one time or another), they are willing to claim that good relationships can provide a sufficient level of meaning and fulfillment in life. And experience certainly seems to suggest that relationships may be the answer we have been looking for.

A good illustration is teen romance. No doubt you've noticed the tremendous transformation in teenagers' lives when they discover that there is another human being out there that thinks they are the beginning and end of all existence. Such a discovery suddenly changes everything! Thorns become roses in a miraculous transformation. Ugly ducklings become beautiful swans. Dull or negative personalities become radiant. Nothing has such tremendous power to boost our sense of value as the realization that another human being considers us precious, unique and capable. Who we are as human beings is powerfully affected by what other people think.

Parents sometimes seek to find value in the lives and actions of their children. We want

our kids to have opportunities that were not possible for us. We want them to succeed where we failed. We want them to be all that they can be. In the process we sometimes place on our kids the tremendous burden of carrying our value in their performance as well as their own. When they perform well or succeed at a task, we take pride in that ourselves. When they fail, or are rejected by their peers, we take it personally as well. What other people think of us has a powerful effect on our sense of self-worth. What others think of those we love can have a similar effect.

The people-oriented approach also explains the power of celebrity in today's world. When I was a teen-ager, my brother suggested that we attend a political rally. It was 1964 and Barry Goldwater was running for president against Lyndon Johnson. Goldwater was scheduled to deliver a speech that evening at an airplane hangar about a mile from our home. My brother thought it would be fun to go and hear what he had to say.

After parking my brother's car at the nearby airport, we approached the airplane hangar. Just before arriving at the main door, it burst open suddenly and three girls in those red, white and blue Republican hats came running out. They were screaming, "I'll never wash it again. I'll never wash it again. He shook my hand. I'll never wash it again!" They had apparently been given an opportunity to meet the candidate privately before the speech. I've thought about those girls ever since. I have wondered what their hands look like after more than 35 years! It's amazing how contact with celebrity can affect our sense of who we are and what we are worth. Close contact with someone who seems to be somebody can offer a tremendous boost to our self-esteem.

That is the main reason people practice "name-dropping." When people hint casually that

they are personal friends with (or even related to) some famous person or other, it implies added value for them. You will no doubt be impressed to hear that I am related to Hillary Clinton. Such relationships can, of course, provide special access to a public person. I remember one of the times when the Clintons were going through some tremendous difficulties with public accusations of infidelity. I thought that Hillary would appreciate some ministerial advice on how to deal with that difficult situation. I explained to her some of the dynamics of Bill's childhood that affect the way he relates to the women around him. I walked her through some tools and strategies that spouses can use to cope with the tragedy of infidelity. I offered encouragement that God would be with her no matter what took place.

I actually did say these things to her. She and Bill were attending a rally at the Hoosier Dome in Indianapolis, Indiana. I was driving by the Dome on the Interstate highway that passes nearby. I really did tell her about these things while driving by. Somehow, I'm not sure she heard me. . . Oh, by the way, not only am I related to Hillary, I am also related to Bill. I'm not exactly sure *how* we are related, but the Bible conclusively demonstrates that all three of us go back to Adam and Eve!

When I use an illustration like this in public presentations, the place immediately goes quiet and eyes widen slightly as people drink in the implications. I can sense that the audience is increasingly impressed with my importance. But are they mad at me afterward for tricking them! Nothing that I wrote above is false, it is the impression that is left that exerts the power of name-dropping. Why are we so strongly tempted to exaggerate our importance in the eyes of important people? Because the higher a person's social status the more value their opinion assigns to our value in the eyes of others. We measure our value by what others think of us. While the

Clintons are not universally admired, their constant presence in the public eye during the 90s give their personalities great evocative power in the minds of everyday people.

The above discussion underlines a major reality. Human value is assigned by others. And the value of a human being far transcends what they are made of. I understand that the total value of the minerals and chemicals in the average human body is only about twelve dollars. But if you value that same body in biological terms, its various organs can be worth millions on the transplant market. Even more extravagant is the value of the human spirit. The personality of a Michael Jordan or a Tiger Woods is valued in hundreds of millions of dollars. And Americans value the ideas of a Bill Gates or a Warren Buffet in multiplied billions of dollars! But that is little encouragement to most of us when we feel rejected or set aside by others.

When People Let You Down

While human value is measured in terms of what others think of us, this process proves to be very fragile as a basis for self-worth. Looking to others for a sense of self-worth can be damaging to both them and us. Take marriage as an example, since marriage is the most common way that people seek to build self-worth through relationships. Many people enter into marriage in the fond hope that the value they have found in the eyes of another will carry them along throughout their married lives. People seek self-worth in marriage in two primary ways, and neither of them succeed in the long run.

(1) *The Takers*: People who are quite needy hope to find worth primarily in terms of what they receive from others. Their emotional and psychological needs generally motivate them to seek affirmation and support, with little energy left over for nurturing others. While they may

from time to time feel good about building others up, for many people the predominant role is the “takers” role.

(2) *The Givers*: People who are more naturally secure, on the other hand, may find much personal value in building up and nurturing others. They gain a sense of worth by giving more encouragement and help than they receive. Some “givers” enjoy being affirmed from time to time. Others hate it. But in either case, the predominant motivation in relationship is the joy they receive from affirming and encouraging others.

Most human beings are a bit more complicated than this simple categorization suggests. In fact, experience suggests that the vast majority of people are more takers than givers, yet most people would argue that they are primarily givers. There is a serious disconnect with reality here! So the approach I take in what follows may not connect with everyone. What it does, however, is to show that no matter what the primary tendencies of the individuals in a given relationship, the search for self-worth through relationships is handicapped almost from the start.

(1) *The “Taker-Taker” Marriage*. A marriage between two “takers”, for example, can quickly create a hell that makes even loneliness seem attractive. The couple is like a pair of hungry lion cubs demanding more and more and neither has the resources to provide what the other needs. The flowering of self-esteem that romance provided (the bloom of romance can make temporary givers out of takers) is quickly transformed into the crushing disappointment of conflict and unfulfilled needs. Two empty people looking to each other in order to be filled, that is the formula for a major disaster. Marriage between takers is common, after all there are more takers in the world than givers, but it is not the most common marriage bond.

(2) *The “Giver-Taker” Marriage*. More often than not, as implausible as it may sound,

givers and takers get attracted to each other. To them, the arrangement can seem like a marriage made in heaven. Givers need to give and takers need to take. So why not link them up so everyone can be happy? But this too is a formula for disaster. In extreme cases where you have highly committed givers and takers in a marriage, the taker never has to grow up. He can just go on playing his video games, watching football, and goofing off with his friends, while his surrogate mother takes care of the kids as well as him and struggles in between to find money to pay the bills (the female can also be the taker in such a marriage).

The giver-taker marriage is destructive to the takers in that they are locked into a dependency that prevents them from discovering the fulfillment that comes with personal growth and investment in the growth of others. The takers will not gain the skills needed to achieve their hopes and dreams in life. And no giver could ever give enough to satisfy a taker's endless need for affirmation and support. So the giver-taker marriage that began with so much hope ends with the shattering of all hope for a genuine sense of value and purpose in life.

The giver-taker relationship is destructive to the giver as well. To the extent that giving is the *basis* for self-worth rather than the result, the giving becomes a dead-end street, no matter how noble it may appear at first glance. The giver in a marriage quickly discovers that very little affirmation and support is coming back in return. A conscientious giver suspects that her giving is inadequate and redoubles her efforts. But lack of support in return eventually leads to a number of unhealthy responses. The giver may burn out or break down as a result of overwhelming outflow with nothing coming back in return. The giver may use the giving to manipulate responses from the taker, which takers usually find even more galling than neglect. The giver eventually loses respect for the taker, leading to a serious breakdown in the

relationship.

(3) *The “Giver-Giver” Marriage.* The secret to self-worth, then, would seem to be found in a giver-giver relationship. But let’s examine this possibility a bit more closely. For starters, a giver-giver marriage is truly rare indeed. Givers tend not to be attracted to each in part because many givers feel uncomfortable with other givers. When your sense of self-worth is dependent on giving, receiving from another produces guilt and embarrassment. The reluctance of both parties to take frustrates each in their attempts to obtain self-esteem through the relationship. Takers are much more attractive since they meet the giver’s need to give and find value in giving. Marriages between givers tend to break up when one or the other finds themselves fascinated with some deeply needy soul “out there.” Even the “ideal” marriage in human terms, then, is not the ultimate answer to our human need for worth and meaning in life.

The same goes for our tendency to seek personal value through our children or through interaction with the “celebrities” that may cross our path. When a person seeks self-worth in children or grandchildren, it places incredible pressure on a young person. Children are forced to meet needs in their parents that they were never designed to meet. Parents seeking to fulfill their needs in their children tend to be very hard on their kids, holding impossibly high expectations in front of them. Too often such parents come home one day to find a note that says, “I know that no matter what I do it will never be good enough for you. I decided, therefore, to put an end to our misery (or run away).”

Seeking value through celebrities also falls short. That famous Hollywood star is usually just as empty of self-worth as you are, often more so. Many celebrities are amazed and even confused that other people would think so highly of them. Their own struggles with self-worth

are clearly evidenced by the divorce rate in Hollywood. If being in relationship with a Hollywood actor is the be all and end all, why do so many actors fail at marriage over and over again? Celebrities may smile on the screen, but when they get home they often can't stand the person they're living with or the life that they have to live.

Our dependence on celebrities can even be destructive to them. They become the ultimate "givers." A lot of praise and affirmation comes with being a star. But there is the constant press of people with "needs" for celebrity affirmation. Constantly giving such affirmation through a word, an autograph, or a small piece of time can be draining. After a while a celebrity comes to feel totally empty and lifeless from all the giving. And being a public person means public criticism on the part of at least some followers. As success raises expectations, criticism inevitably follows. And criticism hurts celebrities just as much as anyone else. The result? Far too many celebrities have ended their own lives or self-destructed on alcohol or drugs.

Yet even if we are fortunate enough to be in a healthy and mutually affirming relationship, the danger still remains that it may not last. The value that we gain through relationship with others tends to be temporary, fickle and fleeting. Many times I have been excited to make a new friend only to discover that they are about to move halfway across the country. Professors can be reluctant to get close to graduate students because they almost always move away in a year or two. But even when the person that respects and admires you doesn't move away, there is always the chance that they may find out something about you that will change their mind.

Some know by experience how devastating divorce can be. You start with a person who

has made a huge difference in your life. He thought the world of you and built you up in many ways. You found yourself depending on him for meaning and value. Then the day comes when, in the words of one divorcee, “he tore my heart out, threw it on the ground, stomped on it for a while and then spit on it.” What rejection or humiliation can top that? If you’re depending on another human being for your sense of who you are, you’re setting yourself up for disaster.

When your best friend can betray you, who can you trust?

Even in the best case relationship, every one of us is only a few breaths away from the reality of death. I’ll never forget the time a lady called and said, “My husband just went and died on me!” She was angry! For forty-two years he had been the earth and sky to her. For forty-two years her sense of worth was grounded in the love he had for her. He had no right to die when she needed him so much! Do you sense what she was feeling? “This man was everything to me, and when he died it was as bad as if he’d gone off with someone else.” Her anger was real and understandable. While the approach to self-worth that focuses on others seems to hold some promise in special cases, in the end it proves just as ephemeral as the other two approaches.

Self-Worth Strategy #4: The Ultimate Relationship

An Ideal Partner

Is there no way out? Are all human approaches to finding a sense of value doomed to end in disappointment? The answer to that question is yes and no. You see, the ways that we seek to find self-esteem sometimes do more harm than good. One thing is for sure, the bottom line approach is NOT the way. Anyone who has lots of things knows that things don’t satisfy in any long term sense. Just ask a Kennedy sometime. If money and the things it can provide were the

basis for happiness, the Kennedys would be one of the happiest families on earth. In the material sense one can have it all, yet discover that it doesn't do the job.

People who have achieved, furthermore, know that achievement doesn't satisfy in any long term sense either. Professional basketball players not only make millions of dollars a year, they are celebrities at the highest level. But if money and fame was where it was at, why are so many basketball stars seeking solace in alcohol, casual affairs, and drugs? Why turn to drugs when you are living the very life that so many others would love to live? Apparently achievement, even when combined with extensive wealth, is not the path to happiness and fulfillment.

Is there no way out? The esteem of others seems to be the only hope left. But it seems that we will not find a sense of value in relationship with just anyone. It takes a friend with special characteristics to provide the kind of self-worth we so desperately need. As I see it, what we need is a friend with four unique characteristics.

1) *Someone Who Has Genuine, Inherent Value.* What we need is a friend who is genuinely and inherently valuable. Not a Magic Johnson who is seeking fulfillment in the same dead-ends that you and I often seek. It has to be someone who is inherently valuable. Someone who doesn't need to find value in others or in things. Someone who is worthwhile because of who they already are.

2) *Someone Who Knows All About Us.* This friend should also be someone who knows all about us because relationships filled with secrets and surprises are fragile relationships. You never know when people will find something out about you and change their minds. "Oh, if that's the way you really are, I don't want to have anything to do with you." The kind of

relationship that builds self-worth doesn't keep secrets in a closet somewhere. Openness and transparency are critical.

3) *Someone Who Loves Us As We Are.* Many people, however, have decided that they don't like us on account of who we are. We need a genuine, true friend who is not fazed by our weaknesses and shortcomings. We need someone who has taken the time to know us intimately yet is fully committed to accepting us and loving us no matter what we may say or do. We need someone who will never leave us even when we try to leave them. We need someone who knows all about us, yet loves us just the same. Such a relationship can provide a secure floor under our sense of self-worth.

4) *Someone Who Will Never Die.* Yet even a relationship with all three characteristics will be insecure as long as death looms as a daily threat. People could find the perfect partner which their self-worth demands, only to lose them in death just when they need them the most. The ultimate problem with self-worth is that we will only truly find it in relationship with a person who will live forever.

As hopeless as that sounds, let's consider for a moment the positive consequences of finding a friend who 1) is genuinely valuable, 2) knows all about us, 3) loves us just the same, and 4) will never die. To be loved and cherished by such a person will even out the ups and downs in our experience. As we're basking in that kind of love, we are freed from the need to prove ourselves to others (and even ourselves), we can have an inner peace about who we are. If we are loved by someone who is truly valuable, it won't really matter anymore what others think about us. When somebody starts criticizing us and tearing us down, we can just smile at ourselves and say, "Consider the source. I already have the one relationship that truly matters.

Ignore the distraction.”

Genuine self-worth means that life offers a tremendous sense of fulfillment, knowing that we matter to the one person in our life who truly matters. Only when our own deepest needs are met, can we begin to truly consider other people’s needs. Out of our sense of value we will be able to give ourselves in service to others without expecting or manipulating some return.

A true sense of self-worth is also the basis for genuine freedom. Possessions, performance and people, as avenues to self-worth, confine us in slavery to an illusion. We strive mightily each day for things and experiences that do not satisfy in the ultimate sense. But when we know that we are accepted by God we become alive to reality as it actually is. We become alive to our own weaknesses, yet without self-condemnation. We become alive to the needs of others, yet without the need to manipulate them for our own purposes. In Christ we escape from confinement in “the world” to a reality that transcends our limited experience. It is like the movie “The Truman Show” where the main actor, without knowing it, has lived all his life in a giant set, with all his interactions with others carefully programmed. At the end of the movie, he finds a door at the “horizon,” and escapes from his made-up world into reality!

A sense of self-worth is truly the basis for a life that is worth living. But is it really possible on this earth? Is there anyone out who is truly valuable and lives forever? Or are we simply talking in philosophical terms about something that will never happen to us? Have we truly reached the end of all hope? Is there no way out? No! No! A thousand times no! The greatest story ever told is that a friend with exactly the four characteristics described above actually does exist. I’m talking about a person who is worth the whole universe, who lives forever, who knows everything about you, and who loves you just the way you are. And He is

eager to make himself known to you.

The name of this friend is Jesus. Is He truly valuable? The reality is that He made the whole universe and everything that is in it. He's worth the whole universe and any universe that could ever be created. He owns more and has achieved more than anyone else we could imagine. Does He know all about us? Yes He does, even the innermost thoughts and feelings (John 2:23-25; Heb 4:12-13). Does He love us in spite of all He knows about us? Yes He does, He loves you and me so much that He would have died for us if we had been the only ones who needed saving! He died for us even before we did anything to respond to Him (Rom 5:6,8). And now that He has been raised from the dead, death has no more claim on Him (1 Cor 15).

Jesus meets all the qualifications of the one we need so desperately. He is the kind of friend who offers real hope. You don't have to deserve Jesus, you don't have to earn His love. He already loves and accepts you as you are. It doesn't matter what you've done or where you've been. He is the one true source of self-worth. If we're looking for self-esteem anywhere else, we will find it only for a time and then we will lose it again. That's reality. But our situation is not hopeless. Our truest and most valuable friend lives and His name is Jesus.

To me this explains the tremendous survival of Christianity. Century after century Christianity goes on because century after century people discover what it means to know Jesus. They discover that knowing Him is the key to everything that matters in life. This explains the martyrs. Would people go to the death for Jesus unless they knew that dying with Jesus was preferable to living without Him?

This is why the assurance of salvation, of being right with God, is not optional. Human beings desperately need to know where they stand in the universe, what they are truly worth. If

you don't know that you have eternal life, that you are right with God, you will be forced to seek that reality in some other way. You will live by the bottom line, by your performance, or you will depend on your human relationships for happiness. You may even seek life through religious achievements and relationships.

But none of these will truly satisfy. More often than not, people without the assurance of salvation become critical and fault finding. Without even realizing it, they have turned away from Jesus to seek life in possessions, performance and people. Assurance of salvation, on the other hand, is the basis for radiant, joyful living. When you know that you are right with God, you don't have to prove yourself to Him or to anyone else. You don't have to accumulate things, trophies or relationships.

Assurance of salvation is also the key to turning away from sin. Sin is simply a dead-end approach for meeting your own personal needs. Sin is trying to meet your needs by buying things. Sin is trying to meet your needs by performance or in another person. At times, even pastors may come to a point in their lives when they say, "My life is empty and maybe this other person can provide the spark I need. Maybe this other person will love me the way I deserve to be loved." And that person is not your spouse. Sin is anything, even a good thing, that promises life apart from a relationship with Jesus. A comfortable home is a good thing. Successful evangelistic campaigns and academic degrees are good things. Solid relationships with other human beings are good things. But if any of these take the place of Jesus in our lives, they will prove to be false hopes.

This is what temptation is all about. Temptation is not simply an urge to do something evil or contrary to the laws of God or humanity. Temptation is often an urge to do something

good in order to find life. Even the best of activities can become substitutes for real life. So whenever we are tempted by these three areas of self-esteem; namely, performance, possessions or people; we need to ask ourselves some serious questions.

Why is my need not being met in Christ right now? Why am I really buying these toys? Why do I think I need to go back to school? Why am I trying to find a better job? Why am I wanting to develop this particular relationship? Why is this person so attractive to me? We tend to avoid reflecting on these questions. But reasons matter. The bottom line is this: unless our sense of worth is established in our relationship with Jesus Christ we will be forced to seek it somewhere else, and the results will not be pretty.

Biblical or Psychological?

Are these concepts truly Biblical or have I gotten lost in the mazes of psychology? This is a very important question. Unless our basic answers to life are grounded in more than just human assumptions, we are simply headed for disappointment. Fortunately, the Bible does speak strongly to the issue of self-worth. The key word that leads us into the biblical perspective on value is the word “glory.” The crucial question asked by the Bible writer is, “What do you glory in?” Let’s look at a few texts in closing.

Jeremiah 9:23,24 says:

“Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom
or the strong man glory in his strength
or the rich man glory in his riches,
But let the one who glories, glory in this:
that he understands and knows me . . .”

The text says, “Don’t glory in riches, in possessions. Don’t glory in physical or mental

strength. Glory in the Lord - that's what life is all about." Jeremiah saw clearly that the basis of real life could not be found in our fascination with possessions and performance. John 12:42-43, on the other hand, points us to the perils of people-oriented glory.

“Many of the rulers believed in Him,
but they did not confess it on account of the Pharisees,
in order that they might not be thrown out of the synagogue:
For they loved the glory of men
more than the glory of God.”

Why did the rulers of the time reject Jesus? Because they loved the praise that other people provide more than the praise that God provides. Whenever we place human relationships ahead of God, we show what we truly value in life.

Perhaps the best text dealing with the subject of self-worth and its substitutes is found in Gal.6:14.

“May I never ever glory,
except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ,
through whom the world has been crucified to me,
and I to the world.”

When Paul talks about “the world” in this text he is talking about possessions, performance and people. That's what the “world” is all about. The world is necessary; we could not exist without possessions, achievements and relationships with other people. But even the best things of this world cannot compete with the cross as a means for determining human value. Nothing that I do, or that anyone else does for me, could possibly take the place of what God has done for me in Jesus Christ.

When we truly know what the cross means, we will have something to glory about. When we truly understand the significance of what Christ has done for us on the cross, the world

with its possessions, performance and people will find its true place. The cross tells us that the greatest person in the whole universe valued us so much that He was willing to die for us. That places infinite value upon us. We are worth as much as the whole universe to Jesus.

Possessions, performance, and people are important, but their role in building self-worth is insignificant in comparison with the cross. When depended upon for value, possessions, performance and people become sin, dead-end ways to find one's self-worth.

For the Bible, then, one question looms above all others in regarding to what human beings are worth. The question that the Bible asks us about self-esteem is this, "Where is your glory?" Is your greatest glory in possessions, performance, or a list of friends? Or do you glory in the cross of Jesus Christ? That becomes the ultimate question. Where is your glory?