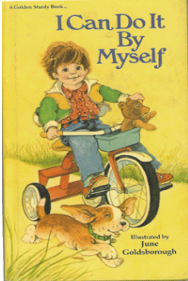


Me, Myself, and I



Self-denial. It's one of the most basic of Christian concepts yet it is one of the most difficult to fulfill, particularly in the secular culture of the West. It not only goes against the basic nature of most humans, it is counter to the messages we receive on an almost daily basis.

"Watch out for #1." "Be all that you can be." "S/he's a self-made millionaire." "I'm okay, you're okay."

These and many other messages appeal to the self, but what are the biblical teachings about self and how can we respond?



Then

It began in the Garden. After God created Adam and Eve and developed a relationship with them, Satan entered the idyllic scene, approaching the woman. "You will be like God," Satan suggested (Genesis 3:5). "You don't need God—you can do it by yourself. Be all that you can be!" he proclaims. "It'll be good for your self-image. Go on, take a bite. It won't kill you." He convinced Eve "that the tree is desirable to make one wise," and she ate. She gave it to Adam, and he ate.

The consequences of their self-interest continued through the centuries as human beings displayed a remarkable tendency to choose self over God. Cain murdered Abel out of jealousy. Jacob coveted Esau's birthright. Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery. David sent Uriah to his death because he wanted Bathsheba. God gave Israel the Law to shine His light on sin, but Israel continued to choose self more often than not.



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When Jesus began His ministry, Satan understood the stakes. God was trying to undo what he had done in the Garden. Satan saw that a repeat performance was necessary. "Satisfy yourself, show yourself, empower yourself," (Matthew 4:1-10), he challenged Jesus. And when Jesus resisted—not really Satan, but His human nature—the stranglehold of sin and death was broken. Mankind was no longer condemned to the slavery of self-indulgence, but people were still free to choose self over God. John and James sought an exalted position in the Kingdom. Ananias and Sapphira lied to make themselves look good. The Gospel provided an escape from sin, but still we choose self.

Self-Love and Self-Denial

Some may find it curious that Jesus used self-love as a standard. Jesus told His disciples *"If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever*

loses his life for My sake will find it" (Matthew 26:24b-25), and yet He says, "*Love your neighbor as yourselves.*" This seems particularly contradictory when you consider that Jesus was speaking to Scribes and Pharisees (Matthew 22:39 and Mark 12:31) when He cited the second greatest commandment. Elsewhere, He is highly critical of the Scribes and Pharisees specifically because of their self-interest. "*Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!*" He Says. "*For you clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside they are full of robbery and self-indulgence*" (Matthew 23:25).

A foundational biblical lesson teaches that there are two selves: "the flesh," corrupted by sin and helpless to do anything to escape; and the renewed self, emptied through self-denial to be refilled with the Holy Spirit. Jesus not only taught self-denial, He practiced it: "*Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of Himself, unless it is something He sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, these things the Son also does in like manner*" (John 5:19). Ultimately, he submitted to a grotesque death on a Roman cross, voluntarily experiencing extraordinary human suffering because it was the Father's plan to undo the damage Satan had led Adam and Eve to in the Garden. Clearly crucifixion was something Jesus would have preferred to avoid (see Matthew 26:39, Mark 14:36, Luke 22:42), and in submitting, He provided the ultimate example and validated His own words: "*Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends*" (John 15:13).

Years later, Paul used Jesus' example to motivate early Christians to love and self-sacrifice: "*Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others. Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but **emptied Himself**, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross*" (Philippians 2:3-8, emphasis added).

So which "self" (the old or the new) is Jesus referring to when He said "*Love your neighbor as yourself*"? I think the answer is "both." To those mired in self-interest and self-indulgence, it is almost mocking—"You love yourself so much; you ought to love others as much." To those mired in self-interest, Jesus' command is simply impossible since self-interest inevitably conflicts with charity and altruism.

To those who have died to the old self, however, the new self led by the Spirit is of genuine value—the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19)—to love our neighbors as we love ourselves is therefore to love them as we love the Spirit of God.

Even when we make the commitment to follow Jesus, a battle rages between the old and new self, and Paul is the perfect example. Early in his ministry, Paul joyfully described the results of his conversion: "*I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me*" (Galatians 2:20).

But perhaps no New Testament figure had a greater natural tendency toward pride and self-confidence. He acknowledged this in a letter to the Corinthian church: "*to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me—to keep me from exalting myself* (2 Corinthians 7b)." He

also revealed his own internal conflict, admitting *"For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the wishing is present in me, but the doing of good is not. For the good that I wish, I do not do; but I practice the very evil that I do not wish... Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?"* (Romans 7:18-19, 24).

Self-Esteem

The self-esteem we should have based on God's design was shattered in the Garden. Men and women try to fill the emptiness they feel from this loss in all manner of human ways, but in the end, none of them work. That is how a man as great as Solomon, who possessed just about everything a man can possess, was led to conclude, *"Thus I considered all my activities which my hands had done and the labor which I had exerted, and behold all was vanity and striving after wind and there was no profit under the sun"* (Ecclesiastes 2:11).

Only by dying to the flesh and rising in the Spirit (see Romans 6:1-11), are we restored to God's image and able to experience a relationship with Him. We can walk in the Garden like Adam and know Him intimately. Knowing that God loves each of us so much that He allowed Himself to become one of us and suffer for us, brings an incomparable sense of divine self-esteem.

Even so, self-esteem finds its highest expression not in the individual, but in the collective. God gives each of us differential abilities and talents, but when we fail to use them or use them only for self-gratification, they are useless. This was the primary problem Paul addressed in a letter to the church in Corinth—they were using the spiritual gifts distributed by the Spirit to create divisions based on self-perceived levels of spirituality. He chastises them for this behavior and declares the importance of every member of the body (see 1 Corinthians 12). He also reminded the Roman church of the member-body relationship: *"For through the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith. For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another"* (Romans 12:3-5).

A church that is functioning as a unified, interdependent body, serving as Christ served—with emptied selves and self-sacrificing purpose, generates healthy spiritual self-esteem for both the body and the individual members. The alternative, "where jealousy and selfish ambition exist," James tells us, "...is disorder and every evil thing" (James 3:16). Selfishness destroys the church as surely as it destroys the individual.



Benjamin Franklin and the "Art of Virtue"

In the United States, we want to believe that our nation was founded on Christian principles and, indeed, many early American settlers were pious individuals seeking freedom from legalistic state religions, but by the middle of the 18th century, Enlightenment philosophy was more pervasive than fundamental Christianity. No American hero more embodies this than Benjamin Franklin. Rejecting his Puritan Massachusetts upbringing, Franklin moved to Philadelphia as a young man and



Benjamin Franklin
Engraved by J. Thomson,
1805
From an Original Picture
by J.A. Duplessis

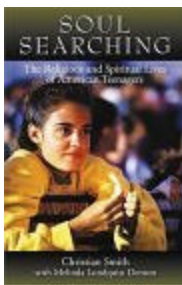
soon embarked on a personal experiment in virtue.

Seeking to perfect himself, believing "I can do it by myself," he first identified 13 virtues: temperance, silence, order, resolution, frugality, industry, sincerity, justice, moderation, cleanliness, tranquility, chastity, and humility. He was convinced that he could gain each of these through practice so that they would become habits. "My intention being to acquire the habitude of all these virtues," he commented in his [autobiography](#). "I judg'd it would be well not to distract my attention by attempting the whole at once, but to fix it on one of them at a time; and, when I should be master of that, then to proceed to another..." He even went so far as to develop a chart on which he plotted these virtues against day and recorded his progress. Eventually, he transferred his charts to a large memorandum book that he carried with him the rest of his life.

Not surprisingly and by his own admission, Franklin's attempt at self-improvement largely failed. To begin with, almost immediately after he set on this course, he states that "I was surpris'd to find myself so much fuller of faults than I had imagined." While he took satisfaction in observing a reduction in faults, some virtues escaped him altogether. Of "Order" (#3 on his list), for example, he says, "In truth, I found myself incorrigible with respect to Order; and now I am grown old, and my memory bad, I feel very sensibly the want of it."

It should be noted that while Franklin professed a belief in God and set the goal of his final virtue, humility, as "Imitate Jesus and Socrates." But he admits that he only added humility to his list after a Quaker friend pointed out Franklin's tendency toward pride. Furthermore, he specifically disavowed any religious ties to his virtues: "tho' my scheme was not wholly without religion, there was in it no mark of any of the distinguishing tenets of any particular sect. I had purposely avoided them; for, being fully persuaded of the utility and excellency of my method, and that it might be serviceable to people in all religions..." In other words, Franklin believed his method of acquiring virtue would help religion! In his belief, stubbornly held despite his own failure, that a man could "do it by himself," Franklin was actually the first notable American humanist. He even thought about forming a sect around his "Art of Virtue."

To be fair, he acknowledged God in his autobiography and summarized his religious views as follows: "That there is one God, who made all things. That he governs the world by his providence. That he ought to be worshiped by adoration, prayer, and thanksgiving. But that the most acceptable service of God is doing good to man. That the soul is immortal. And that God will certainly reward virtue and punish vice either here or hereafter." Consequently, Franklin would probably be more accurately described as a humanistic deist.



Moralistic Therapeutic Deism

In the June 25, 2005 issue of [World Magazine](#), cultural editor Gene Edward Veith described research carried out through the [National Study of Youth and Religion](#) (NSYR) at the University of North Carolina ("[A nation of deists](#)", pg. 28). The research, which is based on interviews with more than 3,000 teenagers and was recently published in [Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers](#) (Smith, Christian, with Melinda Lundquist Denton, Oxford University Press), reveals predominant beliefs that are decidedly unbiblical with disturbing implications for both the present and future of the church. In the book, Smith and Denton coin the phrase, "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism" (MTD) to describe the collective beliefs of American teens.

Smith and Denton's summary conclusions (as quoted by Veith) were that most American teenagers believe:

1. "A god exists who created and ordered the world and watches over human life on earth."
2. "God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions."
3. "The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself."
4. "God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem."
5. "Good people go to heaven when they die."

These are not "bad" concepts, and if everyone practiced them, I suppose the world would be a marginally better place, but they are far more akin to Benjamin Franklin's humanistic "Art of Virtue" than they are to any divinely-stated biblical truth. The implication of MTD is that people, in their own right, possess the ability to be "good, nice, and fair to each other," but the perception that the "central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself" will often be in conflict.

More importantly, MTD is a works-based philosophy that ignores Grace (see Ephesians 2:8-9) and denigrates the sacrifice of Christ Jesus on the cross by implying it was unnecessary. "I don't need Grace," MTD proclaims. "I can do it by myself."

"I Can Do It By Myself"

When our older daughter was a child, we read to her a lot. One book I can remember is June Goldsborough's I Can Do It By Myself (© 1981, Golden Press, Western Publishing Company, Racine, WI). It is a picture book showing little girl doing a number of things. "When I get up in the morning, I wash my face and brush my teeth," it begins. "I can do it by myself." That tag line is repeated five times. It's an innocent little book, designed to give children self-confidence. A more recent version of the same idea, "All By Myself" (Mercer Mayer, Golden Books) appeared in 2001.

In looking over the book the other day, something disturbed me. In 19 illustrated pages, showing the girl (who appears to be about four) washing her face, dressing herself, eating her breakfast, visiting a friend, working in a garden, riding her tricycle, choosing a library book, cleaning the supper table, taking a bath, reading a book, and going to bed, a parent (mother washing dishes) appears only once. Is the underlying message of I Can Do It By Myself that children don't need parents? I doubt that was Goldsborough's intent, but it's loud and clear. Anyone who has ever had children knows one hardly needs to teach that message! "I can do it by myself," is virtually the motto of many four year olds.

How much of a disservice do we do to our children when we teach or reward complete self-sufficiency? Even Jesus admitted "*I can do nothing on My own initiative. As I hear, I judge; and My judgment is just, because I do not seek My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me*" (John 5:30).

In fact, most of us never disavow that motto, particularly in the United States where the image of the rugged individualist, the self-made man, or the independent thinker represents among the highest virtues in society. How can this help but invade our spiritual thinking. In some this takes the form of believing they don't need God at all. In others, that they don't need fellow-believers. Maybe that's why confession is either non-existent or superficially ritualistic in our churches. "I don't need others," we think. "I can do it by myself."

Self-_____ (Fill in the blank)

In the "last days," Paul says. *"men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, revilers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, unloving, irreconcilable, malicious gossips, without self-control, brutal, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power (2 Timothy 3:1-4).* We are living in the "last days," not in some immediate eschatological sense, but in the sense that the "last days" are merely those between the Jesus' Resurrection and His return.

Notice how many of these characteristics are self-indulgent, self-gratifying, self-righteousness, self-promoting, self-satisfying, self-serving, self-confident, or self-willed. These are characteristic of the "old self" and, while more attractive terms are applied, many of them are cited by modern psychology as characteristic of a positive self-image.

"Self" is one of the most ubiquitous prefixes in our language. A few of those hyphenated words have negative connotations (self-centered and self-satisfied, for example), but most are considered positive. What manager wouldn't jump at the chance to hire a candidate who was self-possessed, self-confident, and self-assured; a self-sufficient self-starter with self-control and a positive self-image? These are characteristics we usually value in an employee. Such people require less training and supervision and have fewer personal problems, but from an eternal perspective, are these characteristics valuable?

The world espouses false standards of self-worth—success, money, intelligence, experience, talent, popularity, good fortune, righteousness—when there is only one legitimate source of self-worth and only one route to the source. What we need to be teaching our children and practicing ourselves is not "I can do it by myself," but "I can do it with God's help" or, as Paul put it, *"I can do all things through Him who strengthens me"* (Philippians 4:13).

Discussion

I received this question (along with some other comments I won't pass along) from one subscriber:

Why do you have such a problem with the founders of America? First, you call them disobedient, then you call Franklin a humanist.

DS: As I said in the [Patriotism](#) issue, I believe this nation has a history of being and remains the most just and charitable one in history (despite all our warts). My comments were about biblical issues, not political ones. I dislike a lot of the revisionist history that is prevalent in academic circles today, but silly myths and oversimplifications are also inappropriate. It is God who deserves glory, not our founding fathers, many of whom were indeed deeply spiritual men. Nevertheless, their actions in defying their reigning ruler are contrary to biblical teaching. King George and the English parliament of the times were not evil in the way Hitler, Pol Pot, or Hussein were, so there really isn't any biblical justification for colonial defiance.

As far as Benjamin Franklin is concerned, historians are unanimous about his humanism and his general rejection of specific religions. Despite this, and to his credit, he recommended that the Continental Congress offer a prayer at the beginning of each day. His motivation was probably to remind the powerful egos

assembled in Philadelphia that there was an intelligence greater than theirs, and it may be revealing that the Congress rejected Franklin's suggestion, primarily on the objections of Alexander Hamilton, who is supposed to have said that the representatives, having just shucked off King George, did not need the intervention of another "foreign power."

Humanism is not a 20th century invention—many early American leaders believed in the inherent goodness of Man and his ability to solve his own problems.

From a minister in Texas:

Good issue, Dick. However, I must disagree with you in an area that may only be semantic.

I see no command in the Bible that calls us to "love ourselves." In the 70's the psycho -preaching climate of self-esteem led to very questionable interpretations of the great commands. We were told that we were commanded to love God, love others and love ourselves. That we could not love God or others unless we loved ourselves first.

Major textual and interpretation problems: #1 Jesus said there were only two great commands (not three)—which were "love God, love neighbor"; #2 if we have to love ourselves first (which is not based on text in any form or fashion) before we can love others doesn't such imply an idolatry of self (placing love of self over and above love of God)?

"Loving neighbor as yourself" is more like Paul's admonition for husbands to love their wives "as they do their own bodies." The point? "He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hates his own body, but nourishes it and tenderly cares for it..." (Ephesians 5:28, 29). Loving neighbor as yourself is not so much a call for self-esteem regarding one's psyche—Paul indicates it is like we naturally care for our own bodies. He is speaking generally here! We naturally tend to love ourselves! As an old Youth Ministry veteran of 18 years I had bought into the "love yourself" line for a long time until I ran across a few studies (I can't actually quote them here because I've since misplaced them) that demonstrated "street kids" who ended up in prostitution and gangs demonstrated a high sense of self-esteem! What? I was told that the reason people are living on the streets or are involved in aberrant behavior is because of low self-esteem!

Does this mean we are to despise ourselves and treat ourselves with contempt? Not at all. I think there is such a thing as a healthy self-concept—but it is found in the passage you quoted: losing your life for Jesus' sake to find it! I think it interesting in John 13:34 Jesus says the command to love one another is a new command. In my own opinion, I think what is new is the degree. Before we "love our neighbor as we [naturally] love ourselves." But now we are to love like Jesus did—self-sacrificially!

I'm not certain that we have a disagreement here. We may be saying the same thing using a little different language. Like I said, I agreed with your emphasis and most everything you wrote. But I have really found our psycho -preaching tradition (of the 70's) to be more harmful than helpful—and perhaps the worst culprit is the over emphasis upon self-esteem.

He also referred me to an interesting study by Abraham Malamat in the July/August 1990 issue of Biblical Archaeology Review. By the way, I think the difference is a little more than semantic.



Not sure about or don't agree with something in Ekklesia Then & Now? First, be a Berean (Acts 17:10-11). If you still disagree, [post a message](#) so we can all share in the discussion!

NEXT ISSUE: How Do I Love Thee?

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