

Today's Christian Woman

Series

LEADER'S GUIDE

Where Do We Get Self-Worth?

In a culture that idolizes physical beauty and physique, where do we find our personal worth?

When physical beauty, intelligence, athletic ability, or talent is the basis for self-esteem, the average person can have feelings of inferiority, emptiness, longing, and worthlessness. Shea M. Gregory, in an article for TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN, humorously shared her struggles with feelings of inadequacy and unworthiness. She ultimately realized her value was not based on physical appearance, but on God's love and sacrifice for her. This, in turn, helped her to focus on the inner beauty that God develops in his children, rather than the outward appearance seen by people.

Upon what should our self-worth be based? What gives us value as human beings? How can we focus on inner beauty in a culture seemingly obsessed with physical beauty? Is it possible to find our worth in God alone?

Scripture:

Exodus 4:1–17; 1 Samuel 16:1–13; Psalm 139:1–18; Isaiah 43:1–4; Romans 5:8, 8:37–39

Based on:

"Pretty Woman," by Shea M. Gregory, TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN, September/October 1997, Vol. 19, No. 5, Page 78



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PART 1

Identify the Current Issue

Note to leader: Prior to the class, provide for each person the article "Pretty Woman" from TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN magazine (included at the end of this study).

When we compare ourselves to others, or a culturally perfect standard of acceptance, we can begin to have doubts about our own worth and acceptability. The term *self-esteem* is usually used to define how we view ourselves. *The American Heritage Dictionary* defines it as "pride in oneself." Our culture stresses the importance of building self-esteem, saying we need to build ourselves up in pride to feel good about who we are. We attempt to do this by self-improvement methods. However, we may still feel a discrepancy between who we are and who we want to be, and our views about ourselves can actually be diminished. Current trends of extreme makeovers, liposuction, plastic surgery, Botox, and airbrushed supermodels can add to our dissatisfaction.



As believers, we need to focus neither on our self-esteem nor pride in our abilities, accomplishments, or outward physique, but rather on our self-worth and value as seen through the lens of God's Word.

Discussion starters:

- [Q] What does our contemporary western culture tell us about a person's value?
- [Q] What advertisements, commercials, or television programs come to mind that stress the importance of physical beauty, intelligence, or athletic prowess? How do media affect how we view ourselves? What benefits are there to these messages? What disadvantages or damage can these messages cause?
- [Q] What do you think gives a person value? Explain the basis for your conclusion.
- [Q] With what issues of self-esteem or self-worth have you struggled? What gives you feelings of self-worth, self-acceptance, or worthiness? Is there a common thread of experience that leads to these positive feelings?

PART 2

Discover the Eternal Principles**Teaching point one: God affirms us by loving us unconditionally.**

Read Isaiah 43:1–4, Romans 5:8, and Romans 8:37–39. Shea M. Gregory says that in her struggle with self-esteem, she yelled at her brother, "What do I have to do to get a little affirmation around here?!" All of us long for affirmation that we are valuable and loved. In the search for this affirmation that we are loved, however, we can fall into the trap of attempting to



make ourselves acceptable or worthy. What Shea Gregory found is true for us as well. God loves us unconditionally. He loves us even with all of our faults. He loves us with an unending love, and nothing can ever separate us from that love. He loved us enough to die for us. In that great love of God, we can find our true worth. Our value is not in what we look like, how smart we are, or how many muscles we have developed. We don't have to have strong abs, perfect teeth, or buns of steel. We have value because God says we do. We are precious to him and honored. He loved us enough to go to the cross to die for us; because of that we know we are valuable and loved.

- [Q] In longing to be loved and affirmed, with what fears do you struggle? What behaviors can these fears produce? How can these behaviors be damaging? How does God's perfect love cast out fear? How does this help us to accept ourselves and be happy with the person God created us to be?
- [Q] Why is it important for us to know God calls us by name? What does it mean, in Isaiah 43, that we are his? How does this make you feel?
- [Q] We can fall into wrong thinking that God loves us because we are good, yet in Romans 5:8, God says that he died for us while we were still sinners. How does this give us assurance that God's love for us is not dependent upon us?
- [Q] Romans 8 tells us that nothing can separate us from God's love. What have you feared might separate you from God's love? Why do you think God lists specifics of what cannot separate us from his love? Which of these is most meaningful to you? Why?

Teaching point two: God made us, and all his works are wonderful.

Read Psalm 139:1–18. David said we were knit or woven together by God in our mother's womb, and that God's eyes were on our unformed body. These words imply a step-by-step process that demonstrates God's attention to detail. Our Creator loves us so intimately that he cares about every detail in our lives. He knows what we are doing every moment of every day. He understands our thoughts and is familiar with all our ways, including our habits, idiosyncrasies, and motives. He knows what we are going to say before we do, and anywhere we go he is already there.

God is holy and perfect in all he does. He makes no mistakes; yet often we, his creatures, look at ourselves and are displeased with what he created. Psalm 139 tells us we are "fearfully and wonderfully made." David said he knew that "full well." Today's generation does not seem to have that same assurance that we are created well. Instead of believing the world's image, which points out what they see as flaws, we should believe God's truth that we are wonderfully made. God made us all uniquely and creatively, yet we seem to strive to fit the idea of beauty imagined by man. Not only does this criticize God's work, but it lowers our feelings of self-worth.

- [Q] Which of your attributes have you wished you could change? Why? Think back to specific situations where you began to wish these attributes were different. What precipitated your longing to be different from what you are? Are there situations where working to change your attributes would be a good thing? Give examples.



- [Q] What does Psalm 139 say about how God made us? What are the implications from this passage about his attention to detail? What do you think God's thoughts are about how he made us? How should that affect our thoughts?
- [Q] Different cultures have different ideas about what is beautiful. How do we form our ideas about what is beautiful? Why do we develop standards of beauty? What standards of beauty from around the world would our culture not consider beautiful? What are the implications from the idea that "beauty is in the eye of the beholder"?
- [Q] Why does God create us all uniquely? Think about nature. How does diversity actually increase beauty? How does diversity glorify God, the Creator?
- [Q] How would life be different if we accepted each other the way God created us, believing that we were "fearfully and wonderfully made"? How would we feel differently about ourselves? About others?

Teaching point three: God does not focus on our earthly bodies, which are temporal and quickly wither and fade, but on our souls, which are eternal.

Read 1 Samuel 16:1–13. God looks past our exterior to the inner issues of the heart. He focuses on our thoughts, motives, and intentions. He cares about developing our souls, which are eternal, much more than he cares about our physical appearance, which he says quickly withers like grass. Do we have a heart that wants to follow and obey him? Do we love him with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength? Do we love others as much as we do ourselves? Do we use the attributes, talents, and skills he has given us to puff ourselves up or to glorify him and love and help others? The inner beauty of a soul that seeks hard after God will last for eternity.

- [Q] Why did Samuel think Eliab would be the one God would choose as king? What physical features might Eliab have had that Samuel thought might be beneficial for a king, or that might have impressed Samuel? Why did God tell Samuel not to focus on outward appearance?
- [Q] Why do humans focus so much attention on the outward appearance? What specific physical characteristics do we see as important, and why? How can a person's outer appearance keep us from focusing on his/her inner qualities?
- [Q] Why did God choose David instead of Eliab? What heart qualities do you think God was looking for in a king? In us?
- [Q] We tend to focus a lot of time and attention on improving our outward appearance. Why do we do this? Our outer appearance can be improved some, but even those improvements are temporal, because our bodies quickly deteriorate and die. Time is truly the great equalizer for physical beauty. When we focus on developing our soul, character, and thus our inner beauty, we are making improvements that are eternal. When we examine ourselves, what qualities should we be working to improve? How do we do this?
- [Q] How can remembering that God looks at our heart, not our outward appearance, help us in our feelings of self-worth?



Teaching point four: Fear of failure, lack of confidence, and procrastination are all by-products of low self-worth that can keep us from accomplishing God's will in our lives.

Read Exodus 4:1–17. In this passage, Moses struggled with fear of failure, lack of confidence, and feelings of inadequacy. These strong emotions kept him from accomplishing what God wanted him to do. First, Moses dealt with fear of not being believed or respected, and then he focused on his physical limitations. When Moses told God his list of reasons about why he could not possibly accomplish all God wanted, God did not try to convince Moses that he didn't have inadequacies, nor did he tell him to work on improving his inadequacies before God could use him. Instead, God reminded Moses that he knew all about his shortcomings, because he had made him, and that he was capable of working out any difficulties Moses faced. God promised to help Moses. Moses, however, continued to focus on his inadequacies despite God's reassurances.

God is not limited by our inadequacies. Moses was focused on completing the task in his own strength, instead of relying on God to accomplish his plan. When our fears are stronger than our trust in God, we are disobedient.

- [Q] What fear of failure did Moses have? What feelings of inadequacy did he deal with? Why do you think he was lacking in confidence?
- [Q] How did God reassure Moses? Why do you think Moses persisted in his belief that he was inadequate, despite God's reassurances? What was God's response to Moses when Moses continued in his insecurities, despite God's reassurances? Why do you think God responded this way?
- [Q] What blessing would Moses have missed by letting his fears control him?
- [Q] How can our dissatisfaction with ourselves or lack of confidence keep us from God's assigned work? What would you like to do for God's kingdom that you have not had the confidence to tackle?

PART 3**Apply Your Findings**

When we focus on loving God and others rather than thinking about ourselves, our feelings of inadequacy and inferiority diminish. Feelings of inferiority or lack of self-confidence can keep us from the work God has called us to do. When we rely on God's strength instead of our own, we will use our talents, abilities, and all God has given us for his glory.

- [Q] What talents or abilities can you use for God's glory that you have previously been afraid to use?
- [Q] What talents or abilities can you use to love God's people that you have previously been afraid to use?



[Q] What blessings have you missed because you have allowed your feelings of inadequacy to keep you from all that God has for you?

Optional Activities

- ◆ *Develop a plan, together with short-term goals, to accomplish something for God that you have been afraid to do until now.*
- ◆ *As a group, think of a service project that would include some element of risk. Then do it.*
- ◆ *Have each person in your group write her name on an index card. Pass the card around the group. Use this as an opportunity to edify one another by recording inner qualities of beauty, strength, or character you see God developing in each person.*

Conclude with prayer, asking God to help you see yourself through the filter of his Word and to give you the courage and confidence you need to take risks for his kingdom.

—Study prepared by Julie Kloster, speaker and freelance writer

Additional Resources



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[Self-Esteem: Devotions by Christian Musicians](#)



The Biblical View of Self-Esteem, Jay E. Adams (Harvest House Publishers, 1986; ISBN 0890815534)



Christ-Centered Self-Esteem: Seeing Ourselves Through God's Eyes, Charles C. Gerber (College Press Publishing Co, 2001; ISBN 0899006493)



The New Building Your Mate's Self-Esteem, Dennis Rainey (Thomas Nelson, 1995; ISBN 0785278249)



The New Hide or Seek: Building Self-Esteem in Your Child, James Dobson (Baker, 2001; ISBN 0800756800)



Self Esteem: The Cross and Christian Confidence, Alistair & Joanna McGrath (Good News Publishing, 2002; ISBN 158134371X)



Self-Esteem: Seeing Ourselves as God Sees Us, Jack Kuhatschek (InterVarsity Press, 2002; ISBN 0830830650)



Overcoming the Rating Game: Beyond Self-Love Beyond Self-Esteem, Paul Hauck (Westminster/John Knox, 1992; ISBN 0664253105)



Wanting to Be Her: Body Image Secrets Victoria Won't Tell You, Michelle Graham (InterVarsity Press, 2005; ISBN 0830832661)



Today's Christian Woman

Series

ARTICLE

Pretty Woman

I thought “beautiful” was out of reach for an average woman like me. Or was it?

By Shea M. Gregory, for the study “Where Do We Get Self-Worth?”

When I was a little girl, I used to wonder if, before we were born, we stood in line in heaven and requested our lives.

“Ah,” I imagined a large angel with an imposing wing span speaking to me, “you’re going to be a girl. Very well, what would you like? Long legs? A great figure? Fame? Fortune?”

Innocently I answered him, “If you please, sir, I’d like ... a nice personality.” And with no time to reconsider—Zap!—I was born and here I am. Less than five feet tall, not-so-straight teeth, blotchy skin, and enough of a figure for two women.

Once, I asked my brother if he thought I was pretty. He glanced up at me from his sheet music and told me to go away. “Darnell, I’m serious,” I whined. “Am I pretty?” Realizing the only way to get me to leave was to answer me, he took a deep breath and looked me over from head to toe.

“Your face is all right,” he said finally. “You have a quirky personality. You’re okay.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I asked, my voice rising. “So, what you’re saying is, I’m too fat and I act like a fool!”

“That’s not what I said,” he answered calmly, returning to his work.

“That’s not what you said? That’s exactly what you said!” I spit out at him. “You said no guy will ever want me because I’m ugly and I’m stupid! What do I have to do to get a little affirmation around here?!” I yelled, storming from the room.

So this was my life. Throughout it I struggled with feelings of ugliness and inadequacy. My friends had good looks, skinny ankles, and straight teeth. They got asked out on dates. I got dates on a fruit tray at Christmas. They became homecoming queens and cheerleaders while I wallowed in a state of below averageness, longing to be an airbrushed model, waiting to wake up beautiful.

Then one day I met Jesus. A girlfriend had invited me to church. As I sang along with the rest of the voices lifted in worship, I was overcome by a sense of guilt and



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unworthiness. This wonderful God we were singing about, how could he love fat and ugly me? But during the service I began to realize that God does love me—just as I am. That day I accepted God's love and sacrifice for me. Over time I've gained the assurance that he loves me more than I can imagine and that I'm truly beautiful in the way that matters most—on the inside.

But my old negative feelings about myself didn't immediately disappear. Some days, they came in droves, and I struggled to battle them off. Like the time I met with my friends Diane and Leona for lunch.

I was thirtysomething, reaching my sexual prime, unmarried, and retaining water. It wasn't a good day. We met at a local restaurant and the topic of conversation quickly turned to men.

"So, how's Eugene?" Diane asked.

Leona waved her hand. "Oh, please, no," she answered.

"You're not seeing him anymore?" I asked.

"Girl, that was two weeks ago," she replied, "and we weren't really seeing each other. We were just, you know, talkin'."

"Oh," Diane and I replied in unison.

"No!" Leona stressed emphatically and started naming other guys she'd met recently.

"What I want to know is how and where you meet these men?" Diane queried.

Leona sighed heavily as if disgusted by it all. Personally, I was on the edge of my seat, ready to take mental notes. At the first opportune moment, I'd run to the bathroom and write it all down on a square of toilet paper. She took a slow, laborious bite of her sandwich and chewed thoughtfully.

Please answer the question, I thought to myself. I was holding my breath. My future hung in the balance between Leona's answer and pastrami on rye.

She took too long. I reached over and moved her plate to the other end of the table. "Spill the beans, now!" I hissed.

Leona pouted as if I'd hurt her feelings, then rolled her eyes. She'd seen this look before. It was ugly. My glare spoke envy. It exposed my desperation and longing, all the feelings a mature Christian woman should have been able to rise above. But this Plainer-Than-Jane was sick and tired of being quirky. I wanted a man.

"Where are the men? How do I get one?" I whispered.

Leona pursed her lips. But I held my ground. No info, no sandwich.



I won.

"You know how it is," she said. "You walk out the door and men ask you out on a date."

What?!

"Oh," I replied softly. Obviously I lived in the wrong neighborhood. I looked to Diane. After a few moments she remembered she had food in her mouth and closed it.

"You girls know what it's like," Leona continued. "You can't even walk to the car these days without having men stop to talk to you."

"No, Leona," I said flatly. "I don't know what it's like."

"Oh, girl, yes you do," she insisted.

I watched Leona. She was drop-dead beautiful from head to toe. Her movements were soft and flowing, her voice soft, sultry. Every hair was in place and her fashionable clothes fit perfectly. I tried to remember the last time I'd visited a beauty salon and thought of the four-year-old bra I was wearing, held together with a carefully placed safety pin. I felt very inadequate.

"Do men ask *you* out every time you walk out your door?" I asked Diane later that afternoon when she dropped me off at home.

"No," she said.

"Me neither. Do you think I should move to a different street?"

My friend looked at me searchingly. Looking at me like that, she reminded me a lot of my brother.

Waving good-bye, I got an idea. It came to me suddenly, like a craving for chocolate. I ran to the house and into the bedroom, stripped, and stood naked in front of the mirror. After the initial shock wore off, I peered at myself from every imaginable angle, trying to catch my best side. *If I can accentuate my best angle, I'll be asked out all the time, too*, I thought to myself. Finally, however, I gave up and did humanity a favor by putting my clothes back on.

Self-esteem depleted, I hung my head and was ready to fling myself onto the bed in despair when I saw my Bible next to my pillow. I opened it to Psalm 139. "I am fearfully and wonderfully made" is what the psalmist said in verse 14.

"I know God, but ...," I began to protest; then the words of 1 Samuel, chapter 16 came to mind. "Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart" (v. 7).



I was thoughtful for a few moments. Then, hesitantly, I got up and peeked back in the mirror. All of me was still there, every lovin' inch. "Well, God," I said, still looking at my not-so-perfect, ample reflection, "Your Word says I'm special, so it must be so." The face smiling back at me winked knowingly. I said a short prayer of thanksgiving and did the best thing I could have possibly done for myself at that moment. I went shopping.

Leona's married now. She says she was just walking down the street. "You know how it is downtown, girl. You walk past a store and all the guys come out. They ask you out; they ask you to marry them. So one day ..."

I've walked down that street a hundred times and no shop owner or clerk ever asked me anything, not even what time it was. It was hard, but I forced myself to face reality. They must've all been busy with customers when I went past. Obviously, they hadn't read 1 Samuel lately.

I asked my brother recently, "Darnell, am I pretty?"

He smiled. "You're a precious pearl," he said, "a beautiful, godly woman."

Guess we've both improved over the years.

—Shea M. Gregory is a freelance writer living in California.

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