

Self-esteem Revisited

By Mark Jarvinen

⁴ *The word of the LORD came to me, saying,*
⁵ *“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations.”*
⁶ *“Alas, Sovereign LORD,” I said, “I do not know how to speak; I am too young.”* ⁷ *But the LORD said to me, “Do not say, ‘I am too young.’ You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you.”* ⁸ *Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you,” declares the LORD.* ⁹ *Then the LORD reached out his hand and touched my mouth and said to me, “I have put my words in your mouth.”* ¹⁰ *See, today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant”* (**Jeremiah 1:4-10**).

Most people think that God’s primary job in the world is to tell people what’s wrong with them. In truth, that’s part of His message. It is in the Word of God that we discover our deep need for a Savior. But to be completely truthful, God’s greatest delight in coming to people is to remind them of their extraordinary worth and His love for them, and also to reveal His plan to use them for His purposes. In fact, our worth to God started before we were born. God called Jeremiah to be His spokesman, saying, **“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; ...” (v.5)**. Not even our parents can say they knew us before we were born – only God can say that! God had gifted Jeremiah and set him apart for a special purpose before he was even born. Dare we believe the same about ourselves? The word **“knew,”** used here, carries with it a sense of relationship and approval. God’s knowledge of us isn’t like abstract data stored on a computer hard drive. God’s knowledge of us is active and relational. He brought us into existence. We were in his mind before the world was made. It was by His choice that we

are alive today. In addition, God foreknew us as being among those who would one day be his own by faith. Besides teaching us the value of human life and demonstrating His incredible love for us as people, the fact that we have been known by God gives us an incredible sense of worth!

Have you noticed how American culture establishes worth based on external qualities and accomplishments? We value youth, beauty, athletic ability, intelligence, education, productivity, wealth and fame. But what happens when you have it all and lose it? What happens when a super-model gains weight or develops wrinkles. What happens when a super mind is stricken by Alzheimers? What happens when a superstar athlete with a long-term contract sustains injury or fails to produce? Externals prove to be superficial and inadequate in determining human worth. Our self-worth must be anchored to something more lasting and secure.

So much of self-esteem talk these days is tied to our abilities. We tell children they can be whatever they choose to be. Of course, that's not really true is it? Oh sure, it's important to develop our God given talents, but even 8 hours a day of voice lessons won't make me sound like **Andrea Bocelli**, any more than 8 hours per day in the gym during my physical prime would have enabled me to make the **NBA**. To succeed at that level requires outstanding ability, extraordinary physical attributes, in addition to lots of hard work. The problem is that in today's culture, without extraordinary abilities to bolster our egos, we may doubt our worth as people. ***The truth is, you can't be anything you want to be, but you can be everything God wants***

you to be. Our identity and self-esteem must be grounded in God's grace and design for us or our lives will eventually unravel.

First, we all need to ...

I. ACKNOWLEDGE OUR POTENTIAL.

When God told Jeremiah that He valued him and had plans to use his life in a significant way, Jeremiah protested that he was only a child and could not possibly be of value to God. **Verse 6** has Jeremiah saying ***“Ah, Sovereign Lord, ... I do not know how to speak; I am only a child.”*** One resource I used in my preparation for this message said that the Hebrew word translated **“Ah,”** used in the **NIV** text here would be better translated **“Awww,”** like a teenager would respond to a parent in a mixture of pain, disgust, and a touch of rebellion, as when asked to do something he/she didn't want to do. **(Kenneth Sauer, Sermon Central.com)** Scholars believe Jeremiah was in his teens when called by God to be a prophet. He was inexperienced and lacking in adult wisdom by the standards of his day. The word translated **“child”** in today's text literally means **“one who has not yet taken responsibility for a profession.”** But the Lord said, ***“Do not say ‘I am only a child.’ You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you” (v.7).*** In other words, God said to Jeremiah, ***“You are not just a boy, you're my ambassador, who will proclaim my Word to whomever and wherever I send you.”*** God had plans for Jeremiah that because of his youth, he could not understand. Jeremiah saw himself as having no value, but God saw ***Jeremiah's potential.*** Therefore, it is more important how God sees us than how others see us or even how we see ourselves. You may not seem like much in your own estimation, but it's who you are in God's eyes that matters most.

One of the most important conversations in my life took place at the **Tip-Top Café** in Bessemer, Michigan, when I was a 10th grader. While sipping Cokes together with my pastor, he told me in a way that seemed sincere that he saw ministry potential in me. I wish you all could have known me as a 10th grader – I felt nothing like a candidate for ministry – lacking in both conviction and confidence. But his comment intrigued me, and in some way opened me to God’s possibilities for my life. Could God use me? Two years later, having professed faith in Christ, and with a vague but growing sense that to know Christ was to serve Him, I turned down full tuition grants from both Northern Michigan University and Michigan Tech University to attend a **Lutheran Bible School in Los Angeles**, where God penetrated my hard shell of defensiveness and insecurity with the truth of His Word. Seven years after my Tip Top Café conversation, having heard God’s call to ministry, I entered seminary - and the rest is history.

How does God see us? Listen to what the Psalmist says about God’s involvement in our creation – ***“For you (God) created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. ... Your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be” (Ps. 139:13 & 16).*** Your lives and mine have value because we were created by God as unique and special individuals, regardless of our abilities. Furthermore, our days are written in His book, which is just another way of saying that God has a purpose and a plan for our lives that is specially suited for us. God says, in ***Jeremiah 29:11 – “I know the plans I have for you, ... plans to give you a hope and a future.”*** That’s what I call potential.

The Bible is a book of possibilities and hope. On the other hand, the Bible is a very honest and straightforward. In God's eyes, we all have great potential, but we also need to ...

II. ADHERE TO GOD'S PROMISES.

It is so entirely human to make excuses when God taps us on the shoulder to be used of him. It wasn't only Jeremiah who made an excuse when confronted by God's call to be His spokesman. When God revealed that He wanted **Moses** to lead His people out of slavery in Egypt, he responded at the burning bush saying, ***"I'm slow of speech."*** When God called **Gideon** to save Israel from the Midianites, he responded saying, ***"I'm from the weakest clan in the tribe of Manasseh and I'm the least in my family."*** But in each case God made a promise of provision. God did the same for Jeremiah, telling him in **v. 8** – ***"Do not be afraid of them (those to whom he would preach), for I am with you and will rescue you,"*** Jeremiah would not have to go it alone. God would never fail him nor forsake him. He would be with him and rescue him when the going got tough. Jeremiah was known as the ***"weeping prophet,"*** encountering serious trials and deep rejection throughout his ministry. Yet, the promise of God's presence and rescue saw him through each and every crisis.

God promises us his abiding presence and rescue still today. We may not feel qualified to be used of God. We may make our excuses. But God's promises hold true regardless of our feelings. We are not alone. God is there to calm all our worries and fears. He gives us his Word that comforts and sustains us. I really like

Romans 8, one of my favorite chapters in all of Scripture. There the Lord provides our ultimate assurance: ***“What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us” (Romans 8:31).*** Following this verse is a list of things that could cause fear in any human heart, but to those who love God and are called according to his purpose – nothing will be able to separate us from the love of Christ.

What have we learned so far? We must acknowledge our potential, adhere to God’s promises, and finally, we must ...

III. AUTHENTICATE OUR PURPOSE

In ***Jeremiah 1:10***, God spoke to young Jeremiah, saying, ***“See, today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant.”***

God appointed Jeremiah to his task and put his message in the prophet’s mouth. Four of the six verbs are negative, or destructive. Two of them are positive, used to build up. **Law and gospel** – the law to show our sin, the Gospel to show our Savior. Notice that Jeremiah was appointed to take this message to ***“nations and kingdoms.”*** Ultimately his ministry was not to be limited to Israel. God’s message is for the world – a prominent theme during this season of **Epiphany**.

The message that God appointed Jeremiah to preach is the same message the world needs today. The law overthrows our sinful nature and strips away human pride. The law tears down any thoughts of our own worthiness and uproots the evil in our hearts and

lives. But just as harsh as the law is, so soft and sweet is the Gospel of Christ. The Gospel tells us of the finished work of Christ – all that Jesus accomplished for us through His death and resurrection, making possible the forgiveness of sins and eternal life. The Holy Spirit, working through the Gospel creates faith in receptive hearts. ***“... faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ” (Romans 10:17).***

As believers in Jesus Christ, this message of law and gospel has created faith in our hearts. It has saved us and given us life. The world we live in is by and large smug in their self-reliance and independence from God. Many resist when God calls for sin to be torn down, uprooted, and destroyed. When it comes to the issue of a right standing with God, many consider themselves good enough or at least as good as the next guy. ***“Why do I need a Savior?”*** they respond in their hearts. Ah, but Scripture says, ***“There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death” (Proverbs 14:12).*** People need the Lord, and we who have believed the Gospel and been forgiven and set free by Christ are those who have been called to share it. Jeremiah accepted the calling on his life to share God’s message to Israel and the nations. In so doing, he authenticated his purpose. This is our purpose as believers too. By participating in the Gospel enterprise with the gifts God has given us, we authenticate that purpose in our lives.

CONCLUSION

Jeremiah stopped making excuses and acknowledged his potential, he stopped living in fear and adhered to God’s promises of provision, and he accepted God’s appointment as a prophet,

authenticating his purpose. He knew who he was and what he was called to do. **How does this speak to the issue of self-esteem?**

The story is told of an *American tourist in Paris* who picked up an *amber necklace* in a trinket shop. When he arrived at New York customs he was shocked at the high duty he had to pay on the necklace. When he arrived home, he had the necklace appraised and the jeweler said he'd give him **\$25,000** for it. Stunned, he sought a second opinion from an expert appraiser who offered **\$35,000**. When he asked the appraiser what made the necklace so valuable, he said, **"Look in the magnifying glass and see for yourself."** When he placed his eye next to the glass, he saw an inscription which read: **"From Napoleon Bonaparte to Josephine."** It was the name on the necklace that gave it such extraordinary worth. **(Rodney Buchanan, Sermon Central).**

As believers in Christ, inscribed on your life and mine is the name of our **Owner**, God our Heavenly Father. Our value, our self-worth, is found in that inscription. He has made us with His own hands. Through His Son, He has provided for our eternal well-being. Through faith, we belong to Him and share in the privilege of inviting others to become part of His family too. When everything else in life feels unstable and insecure, anchor your worth to Christ and seek to live according to His unchanging truth and you will never be cast adrift on the raging seas of fear and uncertainty. **A-men.**