

What Does Jesus Teach Us About Self-image?

What was Jesus' emotional and psychological state of health, and why?

You would think that Jesus escapes the normal demands of psychological and emotional health. After all, he is the Son of God and the most perfect human being ever to walk the earth. But remember that as much as he is God, he is also fully human, and as such, has the same emotional and psychological wiring as you and I. That means he actually has the same needs we do, and if they were not met, he would suffer just the same. As we look at Jesus, we will see that he is healthy in all regards: he knew where he came from, he felt secure in himself, and he knew what his purpose was.

In this chapter we are going to explore the three key components of Jesus' healthy self-image, see how they were built, and understand why we have a desperate need for those same components in our life.

To demonstrate the depths of Jesus' psychological and emotional health, we are going to examine a scene, recorded in the Gospel of John, chapter 13, from near the end of his earthly life.

Jesus Washes the Disciples' Feet

1 It was just before the Passover Feast. Jesus knew that the time had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love.

2 The evening meal was being served, and the devil had already prompted Judas Iscariot, son of Simon, to betray Jesus. 3 Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; 4 so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. 5 After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him.

6 he came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?"

7 Jesus replied, "You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand."

8 "No," said Peter, "you shall never wash my feet."

Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me."

9 "Then, Lord," Simon Peter replied, "not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!"

10 Jesus answered, "A person who has had a bath needs only to wash his feet; his whole body is clean. And you are clean, though not every one of you." 11 For he knew who

was going to betray him, and that was why he said not every one was clean.

12 When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. "Do you understand what I have done for you?" he asked them. 13 "You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. 14 Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. 15 I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. 16 I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. 17 Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.

Cast your eyes back for a moment to verses 3-5 and note these key phrases:

* *Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power*

Jesus is fully aware and comfortable with his place in the world, knowing what he can and cannot do.

* *and that he had come from God*

Jesus knows his origin, that he comes from God the Father.

* *and was returning to God*

Jesus knows his destiny and his destination.

* *so ... He wrapped a towel around his waist*

Jesus is entirely comfortable serving others, not worried about the low social status that this task implied, since it was usually done by a household servant. He is able to take on a position of humility with no loss of his own self-worth. This is so shocking that Peter, ever the quick-to-speak disciple, objects.

In summary, what we encounter here is a Jesus who is very conscious of his origins, aware and comfortable with his place and role in the world, confident in his final destination, and so secure in his own worth that he does not feel that serving others diminishes him in any way. That is a healthy self-image.

How was Jesus' self-image shaped?

Next, let's look at the ways in which Jesus self-image was shaped.

To start our investigation, we will jump to the scene where Jesus is baptized by John the Baptist.

13 Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. 14 But John tried to deter him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"

15 Jesus replied, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness." Then John consented.

16 As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him. 17 And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." (Matthew 3:13-17)

Although this is just a small extract from Scripture, it contains a treasure trove of guidance on the question of self-esteem. Let's break it down:

John tries to deter Jesus, but Jesus insists, and then John complies. John the Baptist was a pretty intimidating character. Clothed in camel hair, with a diet of locusts and honey, John had a reputation as a straight-speaking prophet who would not be trifled with; yet Jesus has no hesitation in directing John to do what he asked. I think this reveals a pretty strong sense of self, and perhaps an even stronger sense of destiny. Jesus knows that he needs to be baptized "in order to fulfill all righteousness," i.e., to keep in line with what God wants from his life. He seems secure in his identity and purpose.

Then comes the voice from heaven, the voice of the Father: "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." Contained within those 13 words are the basic building blocks of healthy self-esteem:

Identity: *This is my Son* - The Father acknowledges and is publicly proud of his parental connection with Jesus. For Jesus, he hears his Father "own" him with pride. He hears his Father unashamed to declare their relationship. There is no embarrassment or hesitation.

Love: *Whom I love* - The Father is not distant or removed, or emotionally unengaged. He loves his son, and he wants the world to hear it. There's no confusion of emotion here. It is simply pure, divine love that is being expressed.

Affirmation: *With him I am well-pleased* - The verdict of the God of the universe on what his Son just did is that he is "well-pleased." What Jesus just did was not merely adequate, just making the passing grade; it caused the Father to be well-pleased. Jesus receives the fatherly affirmation that he needs, given without measure.

The next evidence of the building blocks of Jesus' self-image is found in the event commonly known as the Transfiguration, recorded in all three of the synoptic Gospels. For our purposes, we'll use the version in Matthew:

17 After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. 2 There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. 3 Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus.

4 Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters - one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah."

5 While he was still speaking, a bright cloud enveloped them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!"

6 When the disciples heard this, they fell facedown to the ground, terrified. 7 But Jesus came and touched them. "Get up," he said. "Don't be afraid." 8 When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus. (Matthew 17:1-8)

In a speech similar to the one given at Jesus' baptism, the Father again takes the opportunity to affirm the Son:

This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!

Identity: *This is my Son* - Again, there is ownership, connection, and an acknowledgment of the special bond between them.

Love: *Whom I love* - Again, we see an outright admission of God's fatherly affection for his Son.

Affirmation: *With him I am well-pleased* - This is another affirmation that Jesus' obedience pleases his Father

Affirmation: *Listen to him:* - There is a new component here, different from the baptism speech. The command for those present to listen to Jesus also is very affirmative, since it is God's confirmation that Jesus has something important to say, something that should be followed. It is not a stretch to see this as God's statement of belief in Jesus - that he will continue to speak God's way, and that they can do no better than to listen to him. It is as if God is saying, "He's getting it right. Pay close attention! Listen!" If the God of the universe gives you the thumbs up on your communication, that is a powerful affirmation.

Our last stop on this lightning tour will be a very brief excursion to an incident that happened when Jesus was only 12 years old. This story does not so much show the *shaping* of Jesus' self-image as much as *evidence* of what was already there, even at this tender age, because of his sense of being important to God:

41 Every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the Feast of the Passover. 42 When he was twelve years old, they went up to the Feast, according to the custom. 43 After the Feast was over, while his parents were returning home, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but they were unaware of it. 44 Thinking he was in their company, they traveled on for a day. Then they began looking for him among their relatives and friends. 45 When they did not find him, they went back to Jerusalem to look for him. 46 After three days they found him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. 47 Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers. 48 When his parents saw him, they were astonished. His mother said to him, "Son, why have you treated us like this? your father and I have been anxiously searching for you."

49 "Why were you searching for me?" he asked. "Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?" 50 But they did not understand what he was saying to them.

51 Then he went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them. But his mother treasured all these things in her heart. 52 And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men. (Luke 2:41-52)

There are a couple of things to notice here. Being lost would be an alarming situation for most children, but that seems not to be the case with Jesus. He is happily debating and chatting with the teachers in the Temple courts. His answer to his parents' query is telling:

Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?

First-century Jews were not in the habit of calling God "my Father," and the fact that Jesus uses that phrase suggests that he senses a close intimacy and bond with God, beyond that normally experienced by others. We could conclude that Jesus isn't alarmed about being lost because he is, in a sense, not lost at all; he is in his "Father's house." The bond and connection that he feels with his heavenly Father is sufficient to overcome the loss or absence of his earthly parents, Mary his mother and Joseph, his adoptive father. He has an awareness of his relationship with the heavenly Father that others simply do not comprehend fully at this point - thus, the statement in verse 5 that "they did not understand."

Another indicator of Jesus' overall health comes in verse 52, which states that "Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men." Jesus' development as a child encompassed the mental ("wisdom"), physical ("stature"), spiritual ("favor with God") and relational/social ("favor with ... men").

Perhaps the last clue to the significance of a proper sense of our identity is found in the temptation narrative from the book of Matthew:

1 Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil. 2 After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. 3 The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread."

4 Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

5 Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. 6 "If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down. For it is written:

"He will command his angels concerning you,
and they will lift you up in their hands,
so that you will not strike your foot against a stone."

7 Jesus answered him, "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

8 Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. 9 "All this I will give you," he said, "if you will bow down and worship me."

10 Jesus said to him, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'"

11 Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.

Did you see it? In both verse 3 and verse 6, Satan starts his challenge with "If you are the Son of God ...". It is a direct attack on Jesus' identity. The enemy seeks to make Jesus question his identity and then prove it in an illegitimate manner. He does that because he knows that this is the core of our being, and more than anything else, influences how we think and act.

If the enemy successfully assails us in the area of our identity, he can neutralize us, and make it ever more likely that we will fail to understand our value, significance, and usefulness to God. For Jesus, just as for us, a right perspective on identity is key.

What does this reveal about our needs, and what happens if those needs aren't met?

The logical conclusion to all this is that just like Jesus, we have certain elements that are supposed to make up the building blocks of our self-image. Knowing that we were wanted before we ever entered this world, knowing that we are loved by our parents, knowing that we have value and a purpose, being affirmed for what we

contribute – those are all essential to a healthy view of self.

If we don't get those needs met, then a gaping hole exists in our psyche, and we will try to fill that hole with all manner of things, ranging from the moderately healthy to the extremely damaging. It has become almost a cliché in business, that the most successful individuals are those who are over-achieving in order to try and impress a parent that they failed to impress as a child. In many sad cases, the parent whose affection and affirmation they seek may not even be alive, but there is something within us that longs for the parental "Well done," and a significant deficit is created in us if we don't receive that as children.

When those basic needs are not met, we are forever adrift, trying to establish who we are, in ways that are tenuous and unstable. We might try to fit into the in-crowd, and pay a high price for such acceptance – engaging in behaviors and adhering to value systems that may be very different from who we really are, or want to be. Perhaps we try to impress at school, and being strong academically becomes our defining factor. Perhaps bad behavior gets the attention of our parents more than good behavior ever did, and we are so hungry for attention that even negative attention is better than being ignored.

I wonder if the almost-rabid devotion some sports fans have for their team reveals at its heart a search for identity, a group to be a part of, the opportunity to associate with (hopefully) an entity that wins. Even the language choice, "We lost to Notre Dame last night," when the person is no longer at college shows either a legitimate sense of *alma mater* pride or a yearning to hark back to that sense of belonging.

When our need for love is not met, anything that feels like love will do as a substitute until real love comes along. How many young girls give up their virginity to young men who claim they love them, but who then soon move on to the next conquest?

How many men marry the first girl who will sleep with them, because in their limited experience, that is the closest to love they've ever been?

In the absence of genuine love, both men and women will accept sexual intimacy as a substitute. We are hard-wired to desire intimacy, and if we can't get it in legitimate ways, then illegitimate will do.

Teen pregnancy and promiscuous behavior are not caused by illegitimate desires. They are caused by legitimate needs being met in illegitimate ways. In fact, that could be said of almost all sin: it is not that the desires themselves are wrong. It's a question of context.

For many individuals who do not get those needs met, the pain is immense.

Depression, isolation and loneliness can result. Since we naturally seek to avoid pain, we will try to numb it any way we can.

The bottom line is that just like Jesus, we need to have a healthy sense of identity, to know that we are loved, and to be affirmed for who we are.

In this chapter we have seen that Jesus' healthy self-image is made up of the same building blocks that can create a healthy self-image in us. Just as a solid sense of identity, love and affirmation permeated his life, so they need to sink deep into our heart and soul, too.