

## **Who Is Great?**

In her book, *Generation Me...*, Dr. Jean Twenge documents the spectacular failure of the self-esteem movement from its beginning in the 1970's until today. Despite enthusiastic predictions to the contrary, raising kids' self-esteem does not make them more successful or productive. It does, however, train them to feel good about themselves always, even when they do bad things.

For example, 74% of high school students admit to cheating on tests. The link to self-esteem is clear: if everyone deserves to feel good regardless of how they behave, why should a student feel bad about stealing a copy of the exam? It doesn't mean he's a bad person. At least that's what the self-esteem movement would say.

Dr. Twenge makes clear the difference between self-esteem and self-respect. Self-respect is achieved gradually, by behaving morally and accomplishing things. Self-esteem is an entitlement. As Twenge explains, "most [self-esteem] programs encourage children to feel good about themselves for no particular reason."

Is that really such a bad thing? Yes! Numerous studies show basically no relationship between high self-esteem and academic achievement, strong work ethic, or harmonious relationships with others.

A California task force spent a quarter-billion dollars trying to raise Californians' self-esteem, only to find that it had no effect on teen pregnancy, juvenile delinquency, drug abuse, or chronic welfare dependency.

There is one personality trait however, that is definitely linked to achievement. Do you know it is? Self-control. Although "discipline" and "obedience" have become dirty words in some educational circles, people with high levels of self-control are the most likely to succeed. They earn higher grades and finish more years of education, they're less likely to abuse drugs or have children out of wedlock. As Dr. Twenge notes, "Self-control predicts all of those things researchers had hoped self-esteem would, but hasn't." <sup>i</sup>

The self-esteem movement is not promoting self-respect but none other than the first of the seven deadly sins: pride. Why is this the first? Because it is the sin that consumed the angel Lucifer and caused him to be removed from the presence of God. In our text today, we need to see, first of all, that when Jesus saw this deadly sin creeping into the lives of His disciples...

### **I. He Was Quick to Confront It.**

Mark 9:33 says:

**They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the road?"**

From what Jesus says next, it's clear that He knew what they had been arguing about. This isn't necessarily because of His divine powers, but simply because they had been walking along a quiet road. He heard them! So, why did He ask them what they were arguing about? Because He wanted to see if they would admit it!

Parents? Are you paying attention here? Do you accept your role as a teacher of your children? Are you willing to challenge their thinking?

I have a PhD in the Philosophy of Education. Through the centuries, teachers have had varying roles, all depending on their philosophy of learning. Jesus clearly subscribed to what is called a “Traditional Philosophy of Education.” This philosophy believes that truth is set, it’s absolute, it will never change. However, not all truth has been discovered yet so education is the adventure and struggle to discover as much truth as possible and or correct views that were wrong. The teacher, because of his or her age and life experience and knowledge, is the best guide for the student who is just beginning this exciting journey to discover truth.

A more recent philosophy of education believes differently. It’s called a Progressive Philosophy of Education and it holds that truth is not set but, in fact, is being created, amended, even radically changed day by day. So, what once used to be true is no longer true but has been replaced by a superior truth. In this new “universe of learning” then, those who are older, those with more experience or knowledge are not the best qualified to teach. In fact, the best teachers are the young, those who have not been “spoiled” or “prejudiced” by the “old, decaying forms of passé truth.” This philosophy of truth is the reason that older people are so disrespected in this culture because the older you are the less “truth” you will likely possess. You hear this philosophy clearly in the old Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young song, *Teach Your Children Well*. The second verse speaks to children and says:

*And you, of the tender years, can't know the fears that your elders grew by.  
And so please help them with your youth, they seek the truth before they can die  
Teach your parents well, their children's hell will slowly go by.  
And feed them on your dreams, the one they fix, the one you'll know by.  
Don't you ever ask them why, if they told you, you would cry,  
So just look at them and sigh, and know they love you. <sup>ii</sup>*

Some people think that this progressive view of education is what Jesus was proposing to his disciples when he placed a child before them and said:

**Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me...** (Mark 9:37) Or as Matthew records Jesus saying:

**...I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.** (Matt. 18: 3)

But no, no, that’s NOT what He’s doing!!! Jesus is NOT promoting an “evolving philosophy” of truth! When Jesus spoke about the Law which defines what is true in the moral realm, what did He say? He said:

**I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven...** (Matt. 5: 18-19a)

Do you see how this modern philosophy of truth has invaded the church? Some Christians actually think that parts of the New Testament are passé and no longer relevant for our time because truth is evolving. That’s not biblical thinking, that’s unbiblical thinking!

Jesus has made Himself clear. If you hold and practice this modern view of “evolving truth,” you are not a follower of His. When Jesus saw that an untruth was creeping into the conversation of His disciples, He wasted no time in confronting it. To Jesus Christ, Truth is like His Father: eternal, unchanging, sometimes difficult to find but when it is found, tremendously rewarding.

So, then, why DID Jesus place a child before His disciples? Because...

## **II. Jesus Wants His Disciples to Be Humble (like a child), Not Proudful.**

The common consensus for decades in America has been that high self-esteem, thinking highly of oneself, being confident that you are the best at what you do, is essential for your own psychological health and for performing well at whatever it is you chose to do in life. So, if you’re watching some sports competition on TV and one player is being trounced by another, you’ll often hear the announcer say, “Wow! That guy has lost all his self confidence!”

However, in 2005, the magazine *Scientific American*, not known as a voice that champions culturally conservative or Christian viewpoints, ran an article entitled, “*Exploding the Self-Esteem Myth.*” In that article, study after study was presented that showed that it was not only false that high self-esteem was necessary for psychological health but that low self-esteem was not at the root of individual or societal problems or dysfunctions. This set off a firestorm of debate which isn’t over yet, but the research has not been contradicted. High self-esteem, what the Bible calls pride, is not a benefit to our lives but a detriment. It’s not a strength. It’s a weakness.

This is the point Jesus was making when He heard His disciples pridefully arguing over who was the greatest and He took a little child in His arms, a toddler really, and said:

**...I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. (Matt. 18:3)**

Please notice, here in Matthew, He’s not talking about being “least” but of not even being IN the kingdom of heaven. That’s severe! Then He said:

**Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. (Matt. 18:4)**

Little toddlers can be willful but they are also quick to melt down and cry for help because they know they are not the strongest, smartest or most powerful in the room. In Aramaic, the language Jesus taught these lessons in, the word for “child” and the word for “servant” are the same. Same word! So, do you see how this matches what Jesus is teaching in Mark 10 when He says:

**...You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. (Mark 10:42-45)**

Now, what exactly is Jesus saying here? Is He saying that it’s wrong for a Christian to exercise any kind of authority over another Christian? Is He saying that there should be no hierarchy in the church or the home or society; that Communism is the ideal political structure for Christians – we’re all merely equal comrades?

No, that's not what He's saying. How do we discern the meaning of difficult passages? We let Scripture interpret Scripture. In many other places in the New Testament, we see hierarchies of authority being endorsed. Romans 13 says that we should *'submit to the governing authorities'* of the state. In Eph. 6, Christian workers are told to obey their earthly masters and children are told to obey their parents. In Eph. 5, wives are told to submit to their husbands and in Hebrews 13:17 it says that in the church all Christians should *'Obey your leaders and submit to their authority.'* So, Jesus is not creating a hierarchy-free world with this teaching. Then what IS He doing?

He's describing HOW to exercise legitimate authority. He's not trashing the concept of someone having authority over someone else, He's saying, "There's a right way to hold authority and there's a wrong way." The wrong way is to use a position of authority only to enforce one's personal agenda. Jesus didn't criticize the Gentiles for having a system that was based on a hierarchy of authority. No, He endorsed such a system. When the Roman Centurion came to Jesus to ask Him to heal his servant, Jesus said He would go with him. But the Centurion said, "No, there's no need for that. I understand authority. I have people I direct and they do what I say. So, based on your authority, I know that if you just say the word, it will be done." And Jesus said, *"I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith."* (Matt. 8:5-13) No, Jesus fully endorsed hierarchical systems of authority. His concern was when individuals tried to USE their legitimate authority to serve themselves, rather than to serve the needs of others.

Do you see that in this Mark 10 exchange? It's all about James' and John's attitude. They say: (Mark 10:37)

**...Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory.**

Now, look just before this request. What had Jesus just been talking about? He had once again predicted His death and resurrection. So, Jesus had just spoken about the ultimate act of unselfish humility that He was about to perform and James and John go, "Oh, hey Jesus, speaking of the resurrection - that reminds us... when you're sitting on the seat of ultimate authority over the whole universe, we'd like to sit in the seats of authority right beneath you. Okay?"

Do you see the incongruity here? Jesus can hardly believe they are so clueless! He responds patiently: (Mk. 10:38-40)

**"You don't know what you are asking... Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?"**

**"We can," they answered.**

**"...You will drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared."**

Then Jesus goes into a lengthy explanation about the right way to exercise authority.

**...whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many. (Mk. 10:43-45)**

There's nothing wrong with wanting to be great, it's "why" you want to be great? It's "how" do you think you can become great. It's by whom you want to be

considered “great”. Greatness was the driving passion for someone who at one point in his life was very, very close to God: Lucifer. Isaiah 14 describes Lucifer’s desire for greatness. It was a desire not to serve, but to be served. We find here Lucifer’s five “I Wills” that are focused on using power and authority, not for others but purely for himself:

**You said in your heart, “I will ascend to heaven;  
I will raise my throne above the stars of God;  
I will sit enthroned on the mount of assembly,  
On the utmost heights of the sacred mountain.  
I will ascend above the tops of the clouds;  
I will make myself like the Most High.”** (Is. 14:13-14)

Do you see how Lucifer’s intentions are so radically different from Jesus’ intentions? Lucifer said, *“I will ascend...”* Jesus said, *“I will serve... I will give my life...”* The people you admire, the people you consider role models: when they speak, who do they sound like – Lucifer or Jesus?

In 1875 a British poet named William Ernest Henley published a short poem that expressed his way of coping with life’s challenges. He called it “Invictus.” The final stanza ends with these famous lines:

*“It matters not how strait the gate, how charged with punishments the scroll,  
I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul.”*

Many people today believe that this is the only attitude capable of overcoming the difficulties and hardships of life. Just sixteen years after Henley’s poem was first published, a fellow Englishman, pastor Charles Haddon Spurgeon offered another philosophy. On June 7, 1891, in the closing words of his final sermon, Spurgeon urged his people to submit to a better “Captain” for their souls than themselves. Spurgeon said:

Every [person] must serve somebody: we have no choice as to that fact. Those who have no master are slaves to themselves. Depend upon it, you will either serve Satan or Christ. Either self or the Savior. You will find sin, self, Satan, and the world to be hard masters; but if you wear the uniform of Christ, you will find him so meek and lowly of heart that you will find rest unto your souls... If you could see our Captain, you would go down on your knees and beg him to let you enter the ranks of those who follow him. It is heaven to serve Jesus.

Who is great? Jesus didn’t just answer that question, He lived it. He is the definition of humility. Humility is not self-hatred, it’s self-respect that equals respect for others and bows with ultimate respect for the One who has Created us and served us with His life: Jesus the Christ. And as Spurgeon says, “If you could only see our Captain...” His love, His respect for you, His joy in serving you; if you could only see Him, “you would go down on your knees and beg him to let you enter the ranks of those who follow him. It is heaven to serve Jesus.” And Jesus told us exactly how we could serve Him. He said:

**...I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.** (Matt. 25:40)

May you take many steps toward true greatness this week. Let’s pray...

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<sup>i</sup> "The Self Esteem Myth," *Townhall.com*, Ashley Herzog, 8/9/2007

<sup>ii</sup> Lyrics by Graham Nash