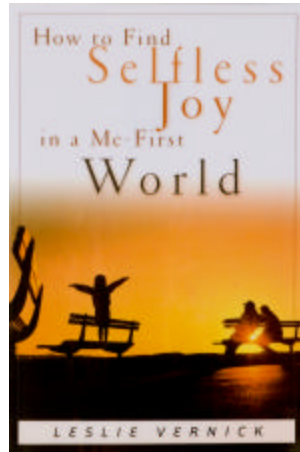


# “IT’S ALL ABOUT ME”

by Leslie Vernick



I was feeling miserable. God had recently exposed my lack of love for someone, and, to top it off, I was mad at myself over some mistakes I had made. Wallowing in self-hatred, I wandered over to my colleague’s office for support and advice. As I poured out my story, she gently stopped me. “Leslie, you’re being way too hard on yourself. You know you’ll never be able to love others very well until you first love yourself.” I nodded in agreement.

Sound familiar? We’ve all heard that. There’s even a verse somewhere in the Bible that says that, isn’t there? Not really, though Mt. 19:19 is often used to support this idea: “Love you neighbor as yourself.” As a Christian counselor, I have worked with hundreds of men and women over the years who believed, as I did, that the pathway toward good mental health and spiritual growth was through increasing our

love for ourselves. However, when we believe we must love ourselves more in order to love God or others enough, we have been deceived.

### **It's all about God.**

The Bible never instructs or commands us to love ourselves. If anything, Scripture warns us against thinking more highly of ourselves than we ought (Rom.12:3) or thinking only of ourselves (Phil. 2:3-4). Yet this doesn't mean we are to despise ourselves, either. Whether we are absorbed in self-adoration or immersed in self-hatred, we are still focused on self. Life does not center around our wants, needs, or desires. Nor does it revolve around our faults, defects, or weaknesses. A life that is centered on self, whether it is in pursuit of pleasure or avoidance of pain, will never be one immersed in God.

And God wants us to be immersed in Him. He longs for us to know Him and to love Him with all of our heart, mind, strength and will (Mk. 12:30). He wants us to understand who we are and to look at all of life from His perspective (Prov. 3:5-6). When we do, self-esteem is no longer an issue. Mother Teresa said, "Knowledge of God gives love, and knowledge of self gives humility." As we focus on loving Christ, we gain a humble self-acceptance and are set free from our inordinate self-love. Jesus' love enables us to forsake our self-preoccupation and freely reach out to others (2 Cor. 5:14).

Over the years God has revealed areas where I have been self-absorbed and self-focused. The apostle Paul warns us that in the last days "people will be lovers of themselves, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God—having a form of godliness

but denying its power” (2 Tim. 3 1-5). The following questions may help you evaluate your self-focus. Perhaps you will discover the same thing I did. My problems were usually not a result of loving myself too little, but of loving God and others too little and myself too much.

### **Do my prayers revolve around me?**

For far too long, my prayers consisted of one-way conversations. I was talking with God, but I wasn’t bothering to wait for an answer. Much like a young child with her parents, most of my prayers were self-centered as I asked God to relieve me from a burden or to do something I could not make happen by myself. God was my helper, not my Lord. Oswald Chambers said:

Spiritual lust makes me demand an answer from God, instead of seeking God Who gives the answer....Whenever the insistence is on the point that God answers prayer, we are off the track. The meaning of prayer is that we get hold of God, not of the answer.

As I began to get my eyes off my own agenda, desires and plans and started reflecting upon who God is and loving Him, my prayers began to shift as well. I longed to pray with Paul, “I want to know Christ” (Phil. 3:10). Beyond enjoying His gifts, I hungered to know the Giver.

When was the last time you were awestruck by the presence of God as you prayed? He loves the times we simply want to be with Him and are not just asking for His blessings or help.

### **Are my wants the driving force in my life?**

“I’m just not happy and fulfilled in my marriage anymore,” cried Carl, 30-something, executive with two young children. “I married too young and for all the wrong reasons. We were never meant to be together and we have nothing in common. I love God but I just can’t imagine He would want me to live the rest of my life unhappily married to a woman I don’t love. I just want to be happy.”

Carl is facing a battle of loves. He loves God, but he also loves himself. Quite naturally, he doesn’t want to suffer in an unhappy marriage the rest of his life. These feelings aren’t sinful, but they are now beginning to rule his decisions. At the moment, Carl loves himself too much; his concern is only for himself. He is not thinking of God’s glory, his wife, or his children.

The desire for happiness or relief from pain can easily lead us to focus inordinately on self. John Calvin says that “the evil in our desires typically does not lie in what we want, but that we want it too much.” God isn’t opposed to our personal happiness but He describes a way of attaining it that is diametrically opposed to the world’s way. God’s prescription for a happy heart does not come in a pretty package tied with the bows of self-love; rather, it is often bound with the chords of self-sacrifice and self-denial. Jesus tells us “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled” (Mt. 5:6).

Sadly, many of us hunger and thirst after happiness, not righteousness. We are content to linger at a table laden with cheap substitutes instead of feasting on the bread of life.

### **Am I angry or despondent when I don't get what I expect?**

Flinging her Bible to the floor, Janet stormed about my office. "I'm sick and tired of living God's way. What good has it done? I'm 36 years old and I've never been with a man because God has said to wait until marriage. My biological clock is ticking away, and I may never get married and have a child. It's just not fair."

Janet's disappointment and pain were legitimate; God certainly understood. However, her hurt turned to rage because she expected a reward for her commitment to God's moral standards.

Sometimes our understanding of God reminds me of my old S & H Green Stamp books. When I was a child we diligently saved those stamps and pasted them into special redemption books. We could cash them in for prizes after we had filled enough books. With a similar mindset, we try to collect obedience stamps from God. Eventually we think we've filled enough books, and we expect God to cash them in for what we want. When He doesn't "redeem" our obedience as we'd hoped, we become angry, discouraged or cynical.

Paul tells us how he was able to enjoy freedom even when he experienced difficulties and hardships. He wrote,

Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

(2 Cor.4:16-18).

Paul understood that life's biggest reality is eternal reality. When I am depressed or angry because life is not going as I expect, my attention is focused on me and on today's reality. I have lost eternal perspective. I have forgotten that life is not about me but about God. I am loving myself too much.

### **Am I excessively self-conscious? Do I fear failure or criticism?**

At first glance, people who defer to others, hang in the shadows, don't reach out and refuse ministry responsibilities may seem to suffer from a lack of self-love. If we look closely, however, we will see that they are just as preoccupied with self as someone who is self-centered. They simply manifest it differently: one in prideful demandingness, the other in a self-protective withdrawal. Our natural tendency is to promote the self, defend the self, protect the self and hide the self—all because we innately care about ourselves much more than we love God or love others.

A number of years ago I was severely criticized for something I wrote. It was so painful that I hesitated to ever write again. I didn't need to have more self-love or a

higher self-esteem to start writing again. What I needed was to take my eyes off myself and focus them on Christ. Only then could I be free from my self-conscious fear of failure and criticism. When I know that my adequacy comes from Christ rather than myself, I can reach out and take risks (2 Cor. 3:5). It is in Christ's love ? not my own ? that I feel secure.

### **Is self-fulfillment my highest aim?**

Some time back I attended a conference on spirituality and psychotherapy for Christian therapists and spiritual directors. Most of the weekend was devoted to the development of the self. Spiritual maturity was defined as having a good sense of who I am, a healthy sense of myself in relationship to others and an understanding of myself in process. It sounded good. Yet as I reflected further, I wondered: Could a person achieve spiritual maturity without a relationship with God? By this definition, one could.

Certainly a clear sense of who we are is necessary for growth and maturity. Taking honest stock of ourselves leads us to recognize our sinful hearts, as well as our gifts and abilities.

But sooner or later we will come to a fork in the road. One path seeks to glorify the self; the other path seeks to glorify God. The path of self-exaltation and self-fulfillment looks very inviting. Many sincere people smile and draw us forward with encouragement and affirmation. Jesus, however, cautions us that this path will ultimately lead to the loss of our true self (Lk.9:24).

The other path is much more desolate and lonely. Travelers walking it must be willing to die to their self-orientation and to commit to serving and glorifying Christ alone

(Mt. 7:14). As we do this we find that Jesus does not just redeem us, He restores us — thereby revealing our true self. Ponder the words of Thomas À Kempis in, *Imitation of Christ*:

For indeed by loving myself amiss, I lost myself and seeking Thee alone,  
and purely loving Thee, I have found both myself and Thee.

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