



Self-Esteem & Self-Worth – They're Not the Same

Self-esteem is what we think we're worth. Self-worth is what we're actually worth. The two don't always match. Our estimate of our worth may have nothing to do with reality.

Self-esteem grows (or wilts) somewhat unreliably because it relies on our own efforts. We work hard at doing whatever makes us feel good about ourselves: getting approval from others, doing a job well, collecting good stuff. When we succeed our self-esteem soars; when we fail ... well we all know that scenario. Linking our worth to what *we* can do raises our anxiety level and wears us out. But linking our worth to what *God* has done? That works much better. What has God done about worth? He's given it to us. Our efforts can only produce self-esteem; it takes God's efforts to produce self-worth.

Our efforts only produce self-esteem; it takes God's efforts to
produce self-worth. Self-worth is God's gift, not our achievement.

I'm particularly drawn to God's words about worth because, once I believed them, they changed my life. God says He's made me in His image. That's astonishing – the God who epitomizes worth has made me like Himself. That means I can stop working at getting worth. He's done the same for you. That means you can stop working at getting worth. There's no need for us work for what's already there.

God (who epitomizes worth) has made us like Himself.
We don't need to strive for worth – it's already there.

Right at the beginning of the bible God tells us He's made us like Himself:

Genesis 1:27 *And God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.*

It's not just man or just woman; it's both. We all bear the image of God. Other living things - fish, birds, cattle, and creeping things (i.e. non-humans) - are made after *their* kind." But us? We're made after *God's* kind. Each of us, whether or not we belong to Jesus, bears the image of God.

What does it mean to bear the image of God? I can tell you more easily what it does not mean. It does not mean that God cloned Himself. We image-bearers don't have God's power or knowledge or ability to always be everywhere at once. And we (as easily observed) don't always do what's right. Omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence, and never sinning belong to God, not to us. We don't share any of those traits.

We resemble God in a different way. We share something God calls “spirit.” He defines Himself as spirit and defines us the same way. We are, at our core, like God – we both are spiritual beings.

The God who epitomizes worth has made us like Himself; He’s given us His image; He’s given us His unchanging, unfading, everlasting worth. That’s all well and good, this gift that God’s given us, but His gift does us no good until we believe it’s there. Belief is crucial.

Beliefs and Behavior

Few of us claim the reality that we all – every one of us – is made in the image of God. Even fewer believe that they have been given profound and dependable worth. What a loss, for what we believe about who we are profoundly shapes how we behave.

Until we believe we’re worthwhile, we’ll never stop guarding and grooming ourselves, never be free of our self-centered fantasies, and never start caring for others. Knowing who we really are gives us the confidence to pay attention to others; it lets us value “somebody besides me”; it allows us to love people (and to love God).

Being certain of our worth impacts everything we say and do and frees us from all kinds of errors. It frees us from the self-absorption that crowds out our awareness of others. It frees us from devaluing others when they disappoint us or offend us and keeps us from devaluing ourselves when we fail. It frees us from anxiously scanning our environment lest our flaws be exposed.

Our worth is solid, not because we do enough or have enough or are esteemed by others but because we’re esteemed by God. God has given us real worth. He has made us like Himself – like the best of the best. Worth doesn’t get any better than that.

So throw away self-esteem and embrace self-worth. (It’s always good to believe in what’s true.)

A Few Questions

- Does your sense of who you are at the core remind you of God?
- Can you separate what you do from who you are? If that’s difficult for you, I recommend two books: John Eldridge’s book, [Waking the Dead](#), and a book I’ve written, [Grappling with Your Identity](#).
- How about your sense of the people around you? Do they remind you of God?
- Think of someone who bothers you. Can you see behind their surface to the image-bearer hidden within? Are you willing to try? (See [Honor Your Mother](#), [Meeting Mom in Heaven](#), and [Christian Hypocrisy](#) for some ideas.)