

January 10, 2010
Baptism of Our Lord

“Who esteems who?”

Isaiah 43:1-7

Frankly, I think self-esteem is overrated. I once dated a woman who had a wonderful daughter named Samantha who was rather talented in gymnastics. I attended one of Sam’s meets and she took second place in her age group—she was about 10 at the time. Her mother was fawning all over her for how well she did and Samantha seemed satisfied with second place. Maybe it’s a guy thing, but I thought the object was to take first place and dummy me blurred out, “You know, losing is just nature’s way of saying ‘You stink.’”

Judging from Samantha’s mother’s reaction, you would have thought I just murdered a puppy! She was shocked and appalled that I would say such a thing and risk damaging her poor daughter’s delicate psyche. I figured Samantha was a tough kid to go through all this gymnastics training and also knew my sense of humor, so it was a safe way to get across a point; in competition don’t be OK with losing, the object is to win. I stand by that sentiment. But I also learned an important lesson; parents can be nuts about this whole self-esteem thing. Be careful criticizing kids—especially if you’re dating their mother. It doesn’t end well.

Don’t get me wrong. I think it’s healthy for kids and adults to have a healthy self image. But you need to be realistic. People need to know that in whatever you’re doing, if you’re not making the grade it isn’t OK. In a kids’ soccer league it’s fine to encourage and reward children for doing their best. But you have to learn that in the real world failures will happen, but they shouldn’t be considered acceptable. If you’re my mechanic and you tell me, “Your car isn’t running, but at least I tried my best to fix it,” I’m not paying you.

In the real world you don’t get to say, “I think I’m good and special and OK because I feel that way about myself,” and that makes it so. The simple fact is that others are going to assign value to you according to your words and actions. If you don’t get the right answers on the test, you fail. If you don’t do the job, you get fired. If you say stupid things about your girlfriend’s daughter’s gymnastics performance, trust me, you pay for it.

Unrealistically high self-esteem in the face of God is even more dangerous. There are some people, maybe sitting here right now, who think they are pretty good. They don’t think they are perfect, but they think they are good enough. They think, “I’ve tried hard enough.” They look around this broken world and see all the murder and war and corruption and immorality and think, “I’m better than most.” In the scheme of good and evil, sin and holiness, salvation or condemnation, they think that they may not be the best, but they came in second place and they’re OK with that.

Here’s the measure and it applies to your deeds, your words, your thoughts, your very hearts; do not covet, do not lie, do not steal, do not commit adultery, do not kill, honor your dad, mom and those in authority, honor and value God’s Word and the preaching of it, honor the name of the Lord your God, value and honor nothing above the Lord your God, love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and love your neighbor as yourself.

I doubt there is anyone here that thinks they’ve done this perfectly. If you do, you’re living in La La Land and have lost touch with reality and should seek professional help immediately. But if you are thinking that you’ve done this pretty well, done it good enough to get by, done it good enough to hold onto a high self esteem in the face of these commandments, I’ve got one thing to say to you; the law is God’s way of saying “You stink.”

There is no second place. Jesus says in Matthew, *“You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”* That’s the bar. That’s the requirement. Anything short of that is “a poor miserable sinner” who justly deserves God’s temporal and eternal punishment. We stink. According to the law we have got to look at ourselves and then find ourselves standing in a puddle of our own self esteem. There is no being OK with second place. There is only failure.

“You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.” These words of God at the baptism of Jesus are the ordination, the proclamation of the winner. This is the man who does it all perfect. This is first place. From His baptism Jesus will go out and be tempted and will not fail. From there Jesus will continue to do all things well. Where you and I don’t measure up, Jesus will fulfill the requirements of God’s good and perfect law. Righteousness-wise, Jesus is the only human being who does not stink.

And you might be thinking, “Thanks a lot for that pastor. And I thought life was cold *outside* of church this morning.” (24 degrees Fahrenheit) Yes, this truth does tend to make us feel cold, dead and worthless. God’s law has a way of doing that to sinners.

But remember how the real world works. We may think we are worthless, but value is not assigned to a thing by itself. Value is assigned to things by how much others are willing to pay for them. In the same manner we may rightly see ourselves as worthless and miserable sinners, but that doesn’t determine our value; God does.

“Because you are precious in my eyes, and honored, and I love you, I give men in return for you, peoples in exchange for your life. Fear not, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you. I will say to the north, Give up, and to the south, Do not withhold; bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the end of the earth, everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made.”

God loves us and values us greatly. He spoke these words through His prophet Isaiah to a rebellious nation of Israel and speaks them also to us, the new Israel, still rebellious in our sins. God’s Word of law stings us and sends us into despair, but His word of love and grace is the end of the law and sweetness to our ears. God deems us precious, honored and loved.

How highly are we valued? *“You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.”* We are so valued by God that He sacrifices His own self, His perfection, His Son to purchase us back from the condemnation of sin. We are that prized of a possession that God sent Christ Jesus, who is the fullness of God born into humanity, to for us be the perfection we are required to be. And then God heaps all of our imperfection and sin on Jesus and has His Son bear the punishment for it in our stead.

Knowing this state of affairs, how can we do anything but rejoice in the Lord our God who holds us so precious? Dare we rejoice in ourselves, take pride in and have a great self esteem about what we are in and of ourselves? Certainly not.

Of ourselves we are nothing. We are not creations of ourselves. We are not glorious in ourselves. Without God we are poor and miserable because we are only decaying and dying. But called through the Holy Spirit to faith in Christ’s sacrifice, we are purchased into the glory of God. We live out this given glory by living our lives in the best imitation of the perfection of Christ that continually makes us perfect. In our baptism of forgiveness of sins we are washed into His baptism, His ordination as the holy one of God come to take away the sins of the world. We are baptized into His death, resurrection and glorious kingdom for all eternity. We are in Christ, and therefore perfect and glorious.

Don’t value self esteem. Esteem Christ as the highest good in your life and know that only because of Him are you valued and prized beyond compare by almighty God. Esteem the

baptism which gave you new life in Him. Esteem the holy life you have been enabled to live because of the precious blood He shed, the enormous price He paid to make you His. Live your life knowing that you live forever in Christ because God almighty in heaven looks on you, and because of His precious Son, you are also precious in His sight.

Amen.