

Self-worth

Loving my neighbour

One of the most persistent themes in the Bible is that we love God and, as a result, love our neighbour as we would love ourselves. The Bible assumes that we value ourselves highly and that by treating our neighbour as we would treat ourselves, we are behaving towards them in a positive and loving way.

Jesus replied, "Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, honour your father and mother and *love your neighbour as yourself.*" **Matthew 19**¹⁹

To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to *love your neighbour as yourself* is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices." **Mark 12**³³

The commandments, "Do not commit adultery," "Do not murder," "Do not steal," "Do not covet," and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: "*Love your neighbour as yourself.*" **Romans 13**⁹

The entire law is summed up in a single command: "*Love your neighbour as yourself.*" **Galatians 5**¹⁴

If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, "*Love your neighbour as yourself,*" you are doing right. **James 2**⁸

(All emphases added.)

The problem comes when I do not value myself and so I cannot treat my neighbour, whoever that may be, in a positive and loving way. My behaviour is distorted, my relationships are restricted and my life is limited by my lack of self-worth.

Basic needs and fundamental longings

As human beings, each of us is born with a number of "built-in" needs that help to define us as individuals and to ensure our survival. We are dependent upon God to fulfil these needs which are there from the moment (or even before) we are born, as fundamental longings for:

- Secure love

A sense of my belonging without fear of rejection, of being unconditionally loved.

- Significance

I have a need for significance or purpose, which gives me a sense of meaning or that my life really counts - my reason to live.

- Self-worth

Self-worth is my beliefs about being unique, valuable and capable and is fundamental in giving me a sense of identity.



We start our lives as totally dependent beings, unable to meet these needs ourselves. We cannot supply ourselves with security, significance or self-worth from birth. Our needs are provided at first by our parents and later by significant others, such as siblings, teachers and partners, as we develop and grow towards interdependence. (As social beings, we are not suited to complete independence from one another.)

Ultimately we look to God to supply those fundamental needs, which have been modelled to us by our parents and others who are close to us, as we become aware of his presence in our lives and recognise that he is the only truly reliable source to able to fulfil our longings.

What is self-worth?

We can define self-worth as my (positive or negative) beliefs about being valuable and capable. At this point it may be useful to give a few other definitions of what is not self-worth to avoid confusion. Self-worth is not:

- Selfishness, which is devotion to or concern with my own advantage or welfare to the exclusion of or with no regard to others.
- Egotistical, which is being limited to or caring only about myself and my own needs to the exclusion of others. An individual can remain highly egotistical, whilst having low self-worth.
- Positive thinking, in the sense of convincing myself in order to make what I desire or need to become reality.
- Narcissism, which is a defined set of behaviours involving infatuation and obsession with myself to the exclusion of others and the uncompromising pursuit of my own gratification, dominance and ambition. It is often a way of hiding acute personal insecurity and may involve a personality disorder.



“This next song is about our desperate struggle to please and chronic craving for approval. I really, really hope you like it.”

It is interesting to note that all of the above either exclude other people or they are out of touch with reality or both. Self-worth is rooted in reality and in relationship with others.

Where does our sense of self-worth come from?

Love yourself first and everything else falls into line. You really have to love yourself to get anything done in this world.

Lucille Ball

As children we enter the world completely vulnerable and dependent. We need to learn how to connect with and trust others and to find out that we are a separate entity and identity from our primary caregiver. We cry out to know we are unconditionally loved, valued, and deemed capable of achievement. While we are very small, parents should meet our needs for secure love, significance and self-worth. Most

of the time, we receive sufficient to provide for our needs but, because nobody is perfect, parents do not always succeed at this task. Where there is a resulting shortfall in our needs, anxiety can develop, which drives us to formulate schemes to increase the supply of acceptance and affirmation of our worth and to decrease the negatives in our lives.

Before we develop language, we are already arranging our thinking by means of images. The events of our lives are stored as pictures and feelings, whether pleasant or unpleasant, and these may make a minimal impression or have a very severe and damaging impact. Once language develops, images are processed into words and these

become our core belief system about how the world works and how we can function in it so as to get the most pleasure and least pain from our existence. The environment in which we were brought up and any traumas we suffer have a profound effect on our view of ourselves and our sense of self-worth.

The things that are overtly or covertly approved or disapproved of in our family of origin such as, “Rich people are very important” or “People who don’t go to university are of no value”, have a profound effect upon our belief system. Often parents cannot help the circumstances or events that interfere with the process of nurturing children. As young children, we relate the entire world to ourselves. If, for instance, a parent dies or leaves, we will relate this to ourselves and the message received will invariably be, “My source of love and nurture has gone. It must be because of me. I must be worthless.” Other family circumstances may be traumatic in themselves, such as emotional, physical and sexual abuse, neglect, constant parental arguments or bullying by older siblings, for example.

There are times when very severe consequences arise from a certain course of action, creating the impression that, “This is something to avoid at all costs.” Because these are may be events from our early years, we may have completely misunderstood the true cause for the consequences we experienced, but it is our perception that counts, not the true facts. So, for example, we may misbehave the day our mother goes into hospital, and may conclude that she went away because we were bad. This may cause us to formulate plans always to please everybody so that we won’t be “abandoned” again.

**Above all things respect
yourself and observe justice in
your actions and in your words.**

Pythagoras

As with the family and cultural environment, the greater the trauma, the earlier in life and the longer it is sustained, the greater effect upon the individual. As you read this, what is the earliest hurt you can remember? No matter how insignificant it seems to you now, as an adult, it will have been significant to you as a child and in your development.

The resulting shortfall in meeting the need for acceptance and affirmation that you are unique, valuable and capable means that you quickly formulate strategies to increase the supply of positive messages in an attempt to bolster your sense of worth and to diminish the negatives. Our way of thinking develops out of our beliefs and images. We are conditioned to believe that, “To have worth, I must have whatever it takes to meet my needs from whatever source I can get it.” These sources are only partly satisfactory and we will be anxious to ensure that the supply of affirmation continues, whilst there is an underlying belief that, actually, we really are worthless.

Once we reach adulthood, we will have developed repeated patterns of behaviour, which serve to meet our immediate need to be wanted and to cope with underlying feelings of worthlessness. These coping strategies fall into three broad categories:

- Achievement - succeeding at everything, driven, perfectionist
- Relationships - striving to please, being “walked-over”, promiscuity
- Disowning - denying or diminishing our feelings, detaching or dissociating

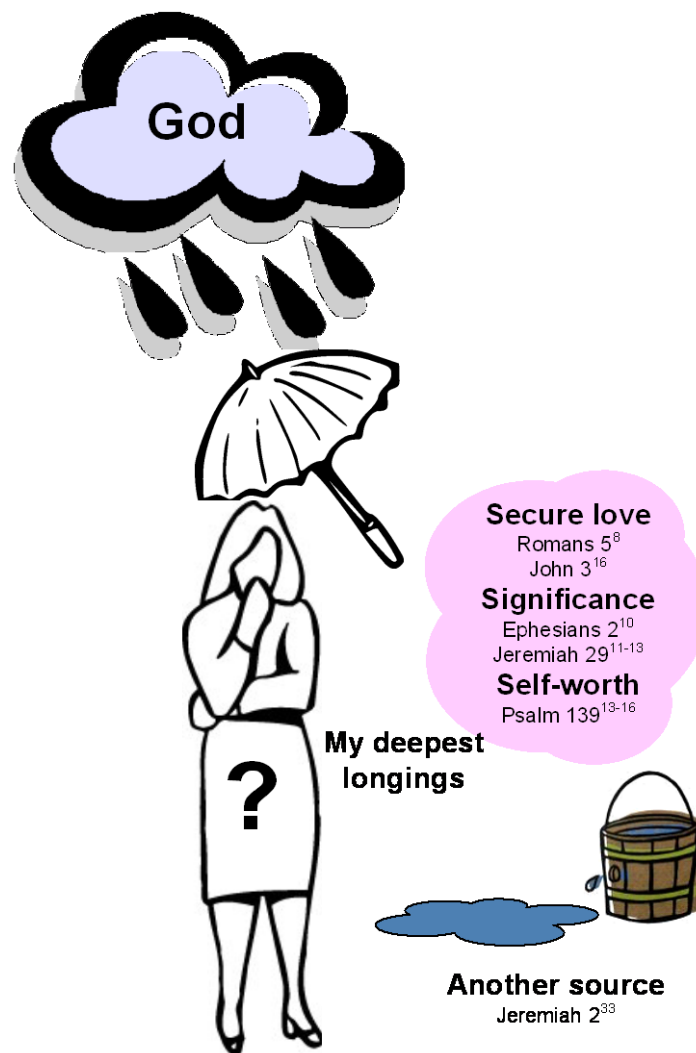
These beliefs and behaviours should be re-examined in the context of being an adult, but they rarely are and, rather than looking to God to supply our need for self-worth, unconsciously we continue to look for it in the same way that we have grown used to. This becomes our strategy for living.

There is nothing wrong with longing for a good marriage or a fulfilling job or an absence of criticism in our lives, but when the desire becomes an anxious demand, “You must come

through for me in this way!” it demonstrates that there is an unhelpful core belief regarding our self-worth.

In some or all of the areas of our lives, we may have grown used to behaving in certain ways to achieve some degree of self-worth, other than looking to God. When the other sources of providing for our self-worth fail, as they invariably do, we become anxious and may act in ways that are inappropriate to the situation, such as over reacting or running away (mentally if not physically). We may develop irrational fears or phobias, become depressed or angry and suffer from anxiety attacks. Jeremiah referred to other sources that we look to for supplying our deepest longings as ‘cracked cisterns in the desert’.

My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water.
Jeremiah 2¹³



Meeting our deepest longings

To summarise so far:

- We all have a need for unconditional love (positive affirmation or acceptance) from birth
- This gives us a sense of being valued (self-worth).
- Family culture/behaviour and/or trauma can interrupt this flow of unconditional love.

- As a child, we interpret this interruption as being our fault and conclude we are worthless.
- We look for substitutes or compromises to try and restore the flow of acceptance.
- We develop self-defeating core beliefs about where acceptance and love is to be found.
- As we grow up we anxiously try to protect these fragile sources of acceptance in case our perceived worthlessness is exposed by the failure of the source to deliver.
- Our goal is to protect ourselves from the painful emotions, often accompanied by shame or embarrassment, generated by our perceived worthlessness.
- Our anxious and compulsive behaviour will be orientated to fulfilling that goal.
- A vicious circle is created because our anxious demanding behaviour is less likely to be successful than if we were relaxed about the outcome, which seems like a matter of life and death to us.
- Consequently this lack of success in protecting ourselves reinforces the core belief that I really am worthless, which further raises our anxiety.
- Once this pattern is established, we may unconsciously sabotage our own efforts to obtain the affirmation because we cannot bear the pain of failing to obtain what we need to avoid exposing our perceived worthlessness each time.
- This, of course, further reinforces our perceived worthlessness. We can become more withdrawn and depressed, eventually we may even become suicidal.

Case study

As a small child, Billy was taken into care for a few months because his mother had difficulty coping with her life, due to post-natal depression. Billy became very withdrawn during this time and when he went back to his mother he became very anxious if she was out of sight.

As an adult he has had a number of relationships with women, which seem to follow roughly the same pattern. At the start of the relationship he becomes very anxious and tells his girlfriend a lot about himself and his needs, but he pays a lot of attention to detail and goes out of his way to please them, which they find charming. He is a little obsessive about things and tends not to give them very much space. Fairly soon he becomes jealous and starts to ask them to account for the few times that he has not been able to be with them. After a while the girlfriend starts to feel overwhelmed and a little bit scared and inevitably ends the relationship, with much tears and declarations of devastation from Billy in response. He has stalked one or two of them afterwards, though he would not admit this to himself.

These days Billy doesn't bother to socialise too much. If he meets a nice girl he tends to say something sarcastic or bitter about women, which keeps them at a distance. He hasn't had a girlfriend for a couple of years or so now. Billy feels quite low most of the time and has started taking anti-depressants.

What is God's perspective?

We are very important to God. The Father sent Jesus, his only son, to die for us because he thought we were worth it. He would still have come even if it were just for one of us. Read the 'Father's Love Letter', which is all based on scripture and see the extent of our worth to Him. This is the true basis of our self-worth - what the Father thinks of us.

When we know what we are worth (self-worth), who we belong to and where we belong (secure love) and what we are alive for (significance), we can find our identity. We all have allowed others to define us, yet we are to find our identity, our life in Jesus.

For in him we live and move and have our being. **Acts 17²⁸**

No longer do we have to dwell and be defined by our past, our hurts and our deprivations. They are no longer our identity they no longer have the power to shape us. Images and labels worn all our lives like “stupid,” “useless” and “wimp” that have shaped our whole being need to be taken off and new names and images received from our Father to shape and give us our true identity.

These wrong, unhealthy beliefs about ourselves have disturbed us, and brought insecurity, a sense of inferiority and insignificance. To avoid the pain of this state, we have formed strategies to live by and make demands on ourselves, others and God to save us from pain. Jesus has come to save us, not from feeling pain, but from being ruled by it.

The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the broken hearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness from the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion, to bestow on them a crown of beauty, instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. **Isaiah 61¹⁻³**

Do try this at home...

To take every thought captive, first we have to identify the thought, so that we recognise its presence in order to arrest it. To use the analogy of a policeman, he needs to know the identity of the assailant, before he can apprehend him.

- List the negative labels others have put on you, particularly those that are relevant to your self-worth. You may have to go back to some memories of childhood nicknames and taunts.
- What labels and negative images have you put on yourself? List these too.
- Read **Jeremiah 31³** (I have loved you with an everlasting love)
- Repeat it (preferably aloud) to yourself several times. Try putting more emphasis on different words in it each time and see what they mean. Personalise it by adding your name.
- Pray and ask the Holy Spirit to help you imagine giving Jesus the old labels - see what He does with these - and wait to receive the Father's new names for you.

Creating God in our own image!

In order for inner healing to place effectively, it is important to look at the way we may be seeing God. Through our woundedness we may be seeing him through the eyes of the “inner child” with false associations from the past. Many things contribute to our image of God - life experiences, memories, relationships and teaching.

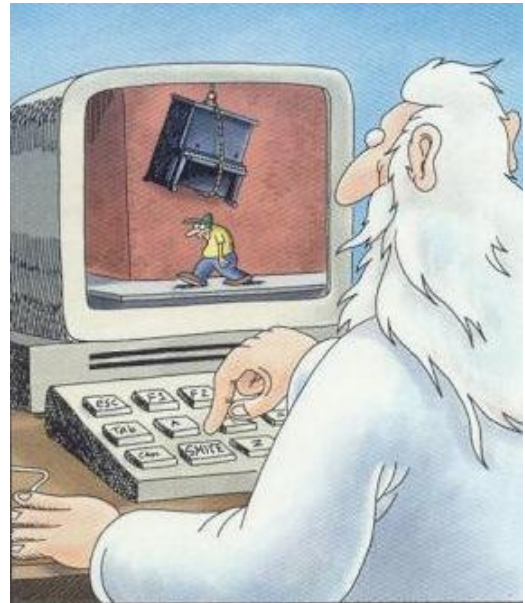
Biblical truths can easily get distorted and the truth about God gets exchanged for a lie when man creates God in his own image.

Through life's hurts and bad experiences (sometimes with other Christians), God can be seen as unlovable, untrustworthy and not available for help or healing. Children often transfer their feelings about their parents onto their image of God. For instance:

- The Legalistic God
- The Gotcha God
- The Disinterested God
- The Father Christmas God

None of these images represent the true nature of God, but when we carry around such distortions we will fail to appropriate the full healing God longs to give because deep down we are afraid of Him. We need to seek for the loving father God that is found in the Bible, who is totally reliable, trustworthy, safe and full of pure unconditional love. Healing will need to occur here before inner healing can commence and we can truly trust God.

The truth about who God really is needs to be embraced and practised by soaking our minds with the word of God (the Bible), by prayer and meditation to absorb the truth into the foundation of our beings.



Asking the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, to give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation so that you will know Him better. I pray also that you will have greater understanding in your heart so that you will know the hope to which He has called us. **Ephesians 1¹⁷⁻¹⁸**

We need to be convinced that God is capable of loving us properly and satisfying our deepest thirsts and longings as our perfect parent:

Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed the water I give him will be a spring of water welling up to eternal life. **John 4¹⁴**

Letting go - the power of forgiveness

The process of confession, repentance and forgiveness is crucial in the process of change and pave the way for the deep inner healing often required for the hurts incurred along life's journey. As we engage with the thirsts at the centre of our beings, we realise our desire for the Living Water from God that can quench and satisfy our deepest longings.

Inner healing is often required to move us out of a place of deep pain and to move forward with trust and hope. We can begin to function again and not remain emotionally crippled and defeated by our mood swings and over-reactions. When God begins to touch our deep wounds, insight, revelation and healing can come to us in a variety of ways:

- Sometimes a "divine encounter" occurs
- Healing can come over a period of time as we open ourselves up to the love of God
- Each wound and memory needs to be brought to the Lord as the Holy Spirit brings them to mind.
- The hurts and sins against us can be bound, along with their negative effects, into the cross

Inner healing is simply co-operating with the Lord to let Him come and remove from our psychological natures, the things that are blocking the flow of the Holy Spirit

Dennis Bennett

- The renouncing of childhood or adult vows that may be blocking the healing process
- Pictures and visions that come by revelation of the Holy Spirit
- The right use of the imagination to integrate healing of thought and feelings under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Our beliefs about our self-worth may or may not be rooted in childhood experiences but the hurt, pain and consequential behaviour can be devastating. We can be held back by guilt and pain from hurtful memories and broken hearts that need to be restored through forgiveness, healing and love. The brain records all of our experiences and retains the feelings associated with the events. Some of the recordings we are consciously aware of and others are repressed deeply into the unconscious. The Holy Spirit can bring these deep memories to the surface.

God does not eliminate or change memories but He does re-frame them so that their power and hurt recedes, leaving scar tissue rather than an open wound. At some stage we will need to engage in prayer to receive healing and to move on in our lives before we can repair our self-worth.

- Sometimes the memories and events that come to the our minds may be different from what was expected
- Releasing of feelings should not be rushed - give them time
- Sometimes repressed memories may be released
- Let Jesus do His work - some people “visualise” very easily, others are just aware of His presence
- Forgiveness is an important aspect of the healing process. Seeing Jesus stand between you and the one who has caused you harm taking away your guilt, shame and pain from you and giving you his healing, peace and forgiveness. This is experiencing the work Jesus accomplished on the cross and can be transforming and crucial for the whole healing process to move forward.
- You may need to forgive yourself too.

Sometimes we become aware that we have been labelled by damaging words or events. These need to be identified, named and renounced as something that have not come from the heart of God, asking Jesus to set them free from the label and to give them a new name. Many of the benefits of prayer take time to be assimilated into the our lives and we need to give ourselves time to allow this process to happen and for lasting change to come about.

Getting to the root

Increasing self-worth is a growth industry. There are a huge number of trainers and life coaches offering their particular way to enhance our sense of self-worth, promising increased confidence, wealth, career advancement and much more. Though they may be effective in the short-term, most of what is on offer tends to be superficial and deals only with the symptoms of our low self-worth rather than the sickness itself.



It is rather like cutting the foliage off a weed and leaving the root intact. Failure to deal with the root will only be a temporary setback to the weed and after a while the foliage

reappears, often stronger than before. We need to take out the root to prevent the weed from reappearing. It is the same with our self-worth. Telling ourselves that we are a great person really, despite what we tell ourselves, will make us feel better for a time. If at a deeper level, we still believe that we are worthless, our belief about ourselves will resurface and we will be back to where we started. So where do we start? First we have to be real with ourselves.

Being real and taking responsibility

There was an old blacksmith who lived in a village in the middle of Dorset. One day a car stopped outside the forge and the driver asked him the way to Dorchester. The blacksmith thought for a while and eventually replied, 'Well if I were you, I wouldn't start from here...!'

The trouble is that many people try to reach their objectives from somewhere other than where they currently are. Not surprisingly, they fail. Either they think that they have to reach some place or standard in their lives before they can start or perhaps they have a distorted view (for better or worse) of themselves and how they relate to the rest of the world. For example, it would be unrealistic for someone to say that they are naturally calm and peaceful, but not to consider the fact that they are currently taking anti-depressants, or again, it would not be real for someone to say that they are a non-smoker, when they only quit yesterday. We need to do an inventory, being honest with ourselves, no matter how painful it seems. If we have a baseline to work from, we can make progress. Trying to work from an imaginary point in our lives does not work. Make a list of where you are (good and not so good). Can you see how these relate to your level of self-worth? What would you like to change? We can have a tendency to concentrate on the negative, so make sure that you have the positives down there as well.



Pushing the pain of who we perceive ourselves to be out of sight does not mean it is no longer there! Feelings that are buried are not dead, but buried alive! They will affect our relationships and choices in every area until they are excavated and correctly handled. We cannot choose not to be upset and wounded by life, but we can and must choose to live and act well, whether we are wounded or not. We cannot choose the family in which we were raised, but we can choose the style of life we will live from today, no matter what our family was. We can no longer choose anything about the past, but we can choose a great deal about the future.

Having established our baseline, we have to take ownership of it. We have a choice to stay a victim of our circumstances or to become the agent of change in our own lives. This might be the hardest part for some of us because we may have become used to being the victim and even to find our identity in this role.

Becoming aware that we have choices about how we see ourselves and that we are capable of reversing those choices is very empowering. It is our choice to change from being a victim and from, "I am unable to be what I want to be" to "I have chosen to be the way I am (even though those choices may have been forced upon me by my circumstances or those around me - sometimes as a child)" and "I will find out why I am compelled to making these choices and with God's help I will change them as appropriate."

Only when we have made this shift, can we lay the foundations for making genuine change. This shift from victim to agent status does not deny that terrible things or injustices may have happened to us, nevertheless, we need to acknowledge that our present problems stem from our responses (even if we had no alternative) to those events and that we are the only ones who are capable of taking responsibility for lasting change in ourselves.

Once we have come to believe that certain situations will provide us with what we require to satisfy the deepest of our needs, we are bound to pursue these as our goals. To try and force the will to change without correcting false beliefs can only ever produce short-term change and joyless attempts at conformity. Leading to religious legalism and frustrating hypocrisy.

Yes, there are times when something is legitimately not our fault. Blaming others, however, keeps us in a stuck state and is ultimately rough on our own self-esteem.

Eric Allenbaugh
(motivational author and speaker)

Unconditional self-acceptance

We have seen that, as children, we have a basic need for unconditional love right from our birth but particularly from six months of age onwards. This gives us a sense of who we are (identity) and of our own self-worth. Our parents, who give us this unconditional love, are doing this as a substitute for God's love which we learn to receive for ourselves when we are old enough to understand who God is.

If we do not get unconditional love, we will be driven to find it at any cost because our life and development literally depend upon it. We might learn that we can receive (conditional) love from our parents if we please them. Soon we will develop a pattern of behaviour that is organised around making sure that our parents are kept happy. We may become a perfectionist and develop very protective attitudes towards our parents, such as not bothering them and defending them against possible attackers. Our parents may even reinforce this behaviour by making us feel guilty or stupid or full of shame and withdrawing their love if we do not conform to the adapted patterns of behaviour.

As we grow up, with the patterns of behaviour already well developed, they will be extended towards other people and we could become someone who may be compelled to please people and to avoid any kind of conflict in our lives. If we think that we may have upset someone or see a potential conflict starting to happen, we will do anything to avoid it as if our lives depended on it. We will feel a sense of guilt, shame and an anxiety or dread that does not go away until the situation is resolved and we can get back to normal.

If our beliefs about our worth are damaged by the lack of unconditional love, acceptance and affirmation received as a child, it stands to reason that receiving unconditional acceptance now will have a beneficial effect, because it is addressing the root cause of low self-worth.

Seeking to increase our self-worth, without changing our self-defeating core beliefs, can be a life-long futile pursuit. Many people end up engaged in self-hatred when they fail to achieve a goal or series of goals. However, accepting ourselves unconditionally is a healthier and more useful concept than pursuing higher self-worth.

Unconditional self-acceptance does not mean resigning yourself to the status quo or accepting sin in your life, but rather first accepting things as they are but with an eye toward moving on from that place. Unconditional self-acceptance means accepting who you are, though not necessarily condoning your every behaviour.

When we stop rating ourselves (self-worth) and only rate our behaviours, we become less afraid to take responsibility for our choices and actions. If our behaviour does not condemn us to be labelled as “bad” or “worthless”, we become much more able to change and grow.

Learning to accept ourselves without judgement is a process that takes time and, in parallel with this, we need to look at our behaviours and to understand why we feel compelled to behave in certain ways. What our beliefs are, about an event, dictates our emotions and behaviours. Because all behaviour is goal-orientated, consider what is my objective in doing this, bearing in mind that my goals are either to enhance my feelings of self-worth or to protect myself against exposing my (perceived) worthlessness?



Secure love

God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. **Romans 5⁸**

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. **John 3¹⁶**

Significance

We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. **Romans 8²⁸**

We are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. **Ephesians 2¹⁰**

Self-worth

For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place. When I was woven together in the depths of the earth, your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be. **Psalms 139¹³⁻¹⁶**