

*1 Yahweh, you have searched me, and you know me. 2 You know my sitting down and my rising up. You perceive my thoughts from afar. 3 You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. 4 For there is not a word on my tongue, but, behold, Yahweh, you know it altogether. 5 You hem me in behind and before. You laid your hand on me. 6 This knowledge is beyond me. It's lofty. I can't attain it. 13 For you formed my inmost being. You knit me together in my mother's womb. 14 I will give thanks to you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Your works are wonderful. My soul knows that very well. 15 My frame wasn't hidden from you, when I was made in secret, woven together in the depths of the earth. 16 Your eyes saw my body. In your book they were all written, the days that were ordained for me, when as yet there were none of them. 17 How precious to me are your thoughts, God! How vast is their sum!* (WEB)

A lot of my work in seminary had to do with pastoral care and counseling and my residency at UNC later was ALL about pastoral care. That being said, I've been thinking about the holidays over the past few weeks and thinking how difficult they can be for some folk. We normally talk about how the holidays are hard for those who are alone and for those who are somehow at odds with their family and for those struggling with unemployment or the economy.

But the reality is that the POST-holiday season can be a struggle for any of us—those who fit those categories I named and those of us who had a WONDERFUL Christmas. Those who didn't may struggle because of that and those of us who did may struggle because it is all over for the year.

So, ANYWAY, you have a bit of insight into why I sometimes choose what I want to talk to you about on any given Sunday. This Sunday, I wanted to remind us how important we really are and how valuable we really are.

Do you know someone who does artwork or builds cabinets or houses or something along those lines? I'm talking about a REAL craftsman, not some hacker like so many of us. Someone who has every skill and has the experience and the tools and the time and the DESIRE to do it REALLY right?

I know a few people—though not many—who I would trust their work even if I hadn't seen it. My dad is one of those in some areas. If you gave him a piece of wood and asked him to put a finish on it, it would come back smooth and shiny and like glass. I know that without seeing it—in this case without him even having done it yet.

You may know a welder or a mechanic or a carpenter like that. You could buy something sight-unseen because everything they do, they do right, period.

I guess you could describe God like that. All of God's creation is wonderful. The way it all fits together and the way it all works—all of creation down to the way individual hairs or feathers fit into a covering that helps keep in body heat.

Even the way the sun and the earth are in concert with days and times and seasons—all working perfectly together (though I'm not really thrilled with the tilt of the earth and the cold that comes from that right now).

I may have said it here before (and I will say it again, you can be sure) but I know I am special because God don't make no junk! Human beings are fantastic creatures and I am no exception and neither are you. The words I just read a while ago talk about that very thing. Our greatness and our fantastic-ness and our awesomeness spring from the nature and the awesomeness of God himself. God is the ultimate carpenter and craftsman and builder.

In our world today, there is a lot of talk about self-esteem and self-worth. Even though I started thinking about it based on the passing of the holidays, the whole concept is important to us. Many of the problems we experience as human beings come from not valuing ourselves properly.

Not always, but very often we can trace substance abuse, domestic violence, suicide, depression—and even obesity back to a sense of personal worthlessness. We Christians can lose our value as witnesses and as productive members of God's kingdom because of this problem. And yet we, of all peoples, should have a sense of our value and our worth based on what God has said about us in his word and based on what God was willing to do to win us back.

Nevertheless, we still struggle sometimes.

Today I want to do a couple of things. I want to give us some clues to recognizing when someone—a friend or coworker or someone in our family—or even WE—may have a tendency toward struggling with this problem or may be in the middle of that struggle. Second, I want to just kind of throw out some thoughts and verses shotgun-style to reinforce what I'm trying to get across today.

God believes in us—God believes in you and God believes in me.

I'm going to share 10 clues. Remember they are only clues. If we have some of these things in our lives it may not mean we have low self-worth but it may mean we need to be vigilant—there may be a tendency. It is my hope that if we know what to look for, we can help ourselves or those we love.

1. The first clue that there may be a tendency is our family background. Have we experienced parental abuse or even neglect? Maybe parental ignorance—not the kind we experience when we are teenagers, when our parents didn't know ANYTHING, but the kind where they didn't know how to be parents and how to love and nurture us. An extremely authoritarian or bullying parenting style can create issues.

In part, we are who we are because of where we have been.

If we come from a loving family—where we were valued, where love was expressed verbally and by actions, where encouragement was given, and where our family believed in us—we will TEND to be healthy in the self-worth department.

On the other hand, a family that was too permissive or too strict or too smothering or too neglectful or abusive or even RELIGIOUSLY over-strict/overbearing may cause a tendency to value ourselves too little.

Now, understand that this is not a blaming-exercise—just a recognition of possible triggers and tendencies. After all, children don't come with instructions and sometimes parents just do the best they can with what they know (often what they learned in their own families). Sometimes it is enough. Sometimes it is not.

2. The second clue is a fear of opening up—of letting someone inside, of “being real,” of being vulnerable in even the closest relationships. Fear is often a part of low self-esteem. We human beings have a lot of fears, but one of our greatest fears is not snakes or heights or one of those things that might have come to mind—it is the fear of rejection. If we fear failing or fear looking stupid or something like that, it is probably from a fear of being rejected. When a person is withdrawn and unexpressive in a close relationship it is often out of fear—an insecurity based on past rejections. If we keep people (even those we love) at arm's length then we don't have to fear rejection.

3. If we are easily discouraged, we may be dealing with low self-worth. Failures—whether they are real, imagined or even implied by a circumstance can cause discouragement. If we are not confident in our abilities then we may fear defeat. Maybe we've tried and failed and have just given up trying. The old “once bitten, twice shy” situation.

4. Another clue is lack of confidence—especially in making decisions. I don't know about you but making important decisions is hard for me. I suspect it is for all of us. For a person who has self-doubt, it can be excruciating. If we struggle with self-worth, we tend not to trust our own judgment in making decisions. Maybe all our decisions in the past were made by over-protective parents and we never really developed our decision-making abilities. Maybe we've made some poor decisions and we were attacked or ridiculed.

5. Clue number five is difficulty admitting that we are wrong. I know, that seems to go counter to the others, doesn't it? But when we always need to be right or when we are unwilling to forgive others who are wrong it may be that we have low self-worth. We may tend to see those things as pride-fulness or arrogance—but it is often insecurity that creates those tendencies. You've heard the old saying, “like a wolf in sheep's clothing” right? Well, this is the opposite of that. Like a sheep in wolf's clothing—masking insecurity and fear with anger and unwillingness to admit mistakes. Fearful humans often project externally what they WISH was true on the inside. In this clue, there is nothing more telling than the need to always be right.

6. Clue six is being driven. Sometimes people become high-achievers because of a deep need for approval. Often an inner need for significance and self-worth fuels a driven personality. If we get caught in this trap, we may seek to gain personal value through performance. Politics. Career. Sports. Motherhood. Even ministry. If we aren't careful we can become slaves to the opinions of others because we are seeking our value through them. If we are habitually over-scheduled and over-booked and if we have trouble saying “no” even though we are too tired—then we may be relying on the opinions of others to affirm our worth. If we work hard enough we WILL get that praise, but it is based on production or performance not on our own value as a person. Achievement will NOT guarantee personal acceptance. If we are driven by a need for approval, then we will set goals and when they are reached we may not be satisfied. We then have to set new goals and try to achieve them.

7. Criticism is another marker for low self-worth. If we constantly pass judgment and are negative about how things are done or handled then we need to think about why that is. A critical spirit may be trying to hide a poor self-image where we seek to stand taller because we are standing on those we have shoved down. Seeking to gain relative value by taking value away from others.

8. Perfectionism may be another marker. This is connected to number six—being driven. Often perfectionists are first-borns but others may also struggle. In fact, it seems to run in families. If we are perfectionists we may feel an extreme need to control and order and we may be inflexible. Impatience may be a problem—with others, but also with self. If we are seeking tranquility and acceptance through seeking perfection, then it may be a self-esteem problem. Perfectionism sets unreasonable standards and if those happen to be reached, then new higher standards have to be set. This may be manifested in many different areas. Orderliness. Correct grammar. Beauty. Personal appearance. Clothing. Decorating. Housecleaning. Perfectionists can't savor a job well-done because it could have (and should have) been better. Perfectionists feel unsuccessful even when they are successful.

9. Self-depreciation may also be a clue. This is closely related to perfectionism. If we make a negative self-comment, we may be seeking verbal reassurance from others. This person may say, "I'm not very good" or "I'm not very talented" as a way to get praise. Self-appreciators may think that everyone and everything is focused on them and they are constantly seeking to know what others think about them.

10. Escapism is a clue. Like the bumper sticker says, "reality is only for those who can't cope with drugs." We may avoid our pain and lack of personal value by escaping into alcohol or drugs or food or even material possessions. Extra-marital affairs may find some of their cause here. If we are fearful of facing consequences, inconsistencies, defects, flaws, or pressure to perform—then we may seek to escape into a fantasy world. In that fictitious world we never fail and we never let others down.

These are but a few markers. Somewhere I have several tests and could provide them if you are interested—and these days there are many online.

If you've found yourself or someone you know in these clues, let me say that this is not what God intended for us. God intended for our spirits to soar and fly and achieve much—including happiness. These kinds of problems just hold us back.

God believes in you and in me. God believes in your husband or wife and your friends and your children. If we don't believe that, all we have to do is look at the incarnation—and at God coming to earth to bring salvation through his own death—and there we find our true worth.

*Jeremiah 29:11 For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.*

**1 Samuel 16:7** *But the Lord said to Samuel, "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature...for the Lord sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart."*

**Genesis 1:27** *So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.*

**Isaiah 43:4** *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.*

God believes in you. So do I. So do all these people sitting here today. We all struggle from time to time but with the support of God and his people—we are all going to be OK. In fact, God tells us we already are. His love doesn't have conditions. His love is for all and ALL includes you as well as me.

