

# “The Doer of Our Deeds and the Speaker of Our Words”

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My subject this morning concerns the pursuit of self-esteem. I’m going to resist defining self-esteem and simply use the term to circumscribe a number of ways of viewing the self. I would like to explore the nature of the self and the conditions under which it flourishes. In particular, I want to ask this question: What is the eternal value of the pursuit of self-esteem?

Whatever the valid uses of the term *self-esteem* are, however much good is intended, I wonder if self-esteem isn’t a red herring. The term *red herring* comes from the practice of dragging this smelly fish across a trail to destroy the original scent. Thus a red herring is a diversion intended to distract attention from the real issue. I suggest that the issue of self-esteem is a diversion to distract us from the real issue of our existence.

We might be justified in telling people to fix their self-esteem in order to solve their most basic problems if we knew nothing of man’s premortal life, or the spiritual purpose of his earthly probation, or his glorious destiny. But the fullness of the gospel of Jesus Christ teaches the true nature and true needs of the self. There are two major human conditions that the self is subject to that may have led to

the idea that the pursuit of self-esteem was important: man’s vulnerability, or even pain, incident to the fall of man; and the conflict and insecurity, or pain, created by personal sin.

First, the pain incident to fallenness: Like our Savior, though to a lesser degree, we condescended to come to a fallen world, having agreed to submit to a considerable reduction in our premortal powers. As we came to earth, separated from the presence of heavenly parents, we died spiritually (see Helaman 14:16) and, in a sense, we were “orphaned.” And now, with memory veiled, and much reduced from our premortal estate—somewhat as aliens in a world that is inimical to our spiritual natures—we may carry an insecurity, a self-pain that pervades much of our emotional life. Like Adam and Eve, we feel our self-consciousness or spiritual nakedness. The scriptures teach about this nakedness as a feeling of guilt or shame (see 2 Nephi 9:14, Mormon 9:5). Do we have a sense of loss from deeply buried memories of who we once were in contrast with who

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we are now? But here is my main question: Is it possible that in our efforts to find security, we have fallen into a number of errors? Is it possible that we have created the whole issue of self-esteem in an attempt to soothe this fallen, homesick self?

But there is a better way. Our Savior, who felt all this pain himself (Alma 7:11–13), would not send us to earth without compensation for the distresses he knew we would feel, separated from him. He would not leave us comfortless. You recall the passages in John in which the Savior has told the Twelve that he will be with them only a little while (John 13:33). Peter responds with, “Lord, why cannot I follow thee now? I will lay down my life for thy sake” (John 13:37). Jesus senses their pain, almost their desperation, at his leaving them. He promises, “I will not leave you comfortless: I will come to you” (John 14:18). The English word *comfortless* translates the Greek word for “orphans”: “I will not leave you orphaned.” The Savior continued,

*If a man love me, he will keep my words: and my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him. . . .*

*. . . my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid. [John 14:23, 27]*

Here we grasp the stunning insight that the Lord Jesus Christ himself is that consolation, that compensation, designed from the foundation of the world to comfort the human pain of fallenness, to compensate men and women for their earthly reductions and sacrifices. Only the Atonement, or more expressly, the *At-one-ment*, can heal the pain of the Fall.

Now to the second source of pain: The Lord explained, speaking to Adam: “When [thy children] begin to grow up, sin conceiveth in their hearts, and they taste the bitter” (Moses 6:55). What is this bitterness? The Lord says it is the conception of sin in our hearts. The pain of

fallenness, then, is compounded by the bitterness of sin.

To understand why sin produces bitterness in the human soul, we remember that each individual spirit was begotten by glorious heavenly parents and thereby inherits a nature that is at its very core light, truth, intelligence, and glory (D&C 93:23, 29, 36). “Knowest thou not,” the Prophet John Taylor wrote, “that thou art a spark of Deity, struck from the fire of his eternal blaze, and brought forth in the midst of eternal burnings?” (“Origin, Object, and Destiny of Women,” *The Mormon* 3 (28): 3, 29 August 1857). Christ says, “I am the true light that is in you, and that you are in me; otherwise ye could not abound” (D&C 88:50). Christ is the life and the light of every person (John 1:4, 9). King Benjamin teaches similarly that God preserves us from day to day, lending us breath, that we may live and move—even supporting us from one moment to another (see Mosiah 2:21), and that all we have and are come from him (see Mosiah 4:21).

I ask, if we live and move and have our being in him (see Acts 17:28), where is self-esteem? How do I even separate my self out from the abundant grace that makes my life and even my intellect go forward in some marvelous symbiosis with my Creator?

Is it not obvious that we, created out of the very stuff of truth and permeated by his power, cannot live against our own natures of light and truth and intelligence without setting up conflict and spiritual dis-ease within ourselves? The quality of our emotional and spiritual existence is absolutely governed by divine law, and whether or not we know about these laws, or observe them, we are continually and profoundly affected by them. I suggest that at the base of much low self-esteem lies not only spiritual conflict but a deep self-disapproval, whether conscious or not, over neglect of the spiritual laws that govern happiness and freedom.

So here we have a challenging situation: a person, whose primeval nature is truth and light and purity, begins, under the influence of a fallen environment and a fallen body, to act against his spiritual nature. His sins of ignorance or choice produce bitterness, and he begins to suffer—but usually he doesn't know what the real source of his unhappiness is. He thinks it has something to do with the people around him, or he thinks it has to do with his circumstances. But Elder Neal A. Maxwell observes: "The heaviest load we feel is often from the weight of our unkept promises and our unresolved sins, which press down relentlessly upon us" (CR, October 1989, p. 106; also, "Murmur Not," *Ensign*, November 1989, p. 85).

Resistance to our spiritual natures manifests itself as guilt, despair, resentment, self-pity, fear, depression, feelings of victimization, fear over the scarcity of needed things, and other forms of distress. These are all functions of the fallen self, and we all necessarily experience them. But the pursuit of self-esteem will not solve the problems of the self that is in conflict because of sin. It will not even solve the problems of those who suffer from others' sins against them.

King Benjamin called this fallen self the natural man:

*For the natural man is an enemy to God, and has been from the fall of Adam, and will be, forever and ever, unless he yields to the enticings of the Holy Spirit, and putteth off the natural man and becometh a saint through the atonement of Christ the Lord, and becometh as a child, submissive, meek, humble, patient, full of love, willing to submit to all things which the Lord seeth fit to inflict upon him, even as a child doth submit to his father. [Mosiah 3:19]*

Could this putting off of the natural man through the Lord Jesus Christ actually be a recovery of our true, premortal self?

We have this account of King Benjamin's people, who, upon hearing the word of God, became painfully conscious of their carnal state. They cried out, "O have mercy, and apply the atoning blood of Christ that we may receive forgiveness of our sins" (Mosiah 4:2). Whereupon their sensitive souls were cleansed by the Holy Spirit, top to bottom, of all their accumulations of willfulness and disobedience; into that vacuum rushed the sublime love of God. They received "peace of conscience, because of the[ir] exceeding faith . . . in Jesus Christ" (Mosiah 4:3). They probably had not realized just how spiritually sluggish they were until that Mighty Power consumed in love all their sins and their pain and their sickness and their infirmity. They became acquainted with God's goodness and tasted his love.

King Benjamin, seeing their joy, taught them how to retain it:

*I would that ye should remember, and always retain in remembrance, the greatness of God, and your own nothingness, and his goodness and long-suffering towards you. . . .*

*. . . if ye do this ye shall always rejoice, and be filled with the love of God, and always retain a remission of your sins. [Mosiah 4:11–12]*

What does the Lord mean by the nothingness of man? We recoil at nothingness because we try so hard to overcome our feelings of unimportance. But nothingness refers to man's state in this mortal sphere (see Mosiah 4:5). Nothingness describes not man's lack of value, but rather his powerlessness during his mortal probation and, especially, his all-encompassing need for the Lord. Nothingness reminds us of the reductions we voluntarily subscribed to before the foundations of this world in order to come to earth and learn how to be taught from on high.

Elder Richard G. Scott recently told of a sacred experience when strong impressions

came to him during a period when he struggled to do a work the Lord had given him far beyond his personal capacity to fulfill. The Lord said to him, “Testify to instruct, edify, and lead others to full obedience, not to demonstrate anything of self. All who are puffed up shall be cut off.” And then the Lord said to him, “You are nothing in and of yourself, Richard.’ That was followed with some specific counsel on how to be a better servant” (“Acquiring Spiritual Knowledge,” *BYU 1992–93 Devotional and Fireside Speeches* [Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University, 1993], p. 155).

You remember Ammon, who joyfully described his own nothingness:

*I do not boast in my own strength, nor in my own wisdom; but behold, my joy is full, yea, my heart is brim with joy, and I will rejoice in my God.*

*Yea, I know that I am nothing; as to my strength I am weak; therefore I will not boast of myself, but I will boast of my God, for in his strength I can do all things. [Alma 26:11–12]*

For Ammon, it seems, the whole concept of self-esteem was irrelevant. Being filled with the love of God was of far greater worth than any sense of self-confidence. If one grand objective of earth life is to gain access to the grace of Jesus Christ for our trials and divine development, then we will immediately realize that self-confidence is a puny substitute for God-confidence.

With respect to confidence, the Lord says, “Let thy bowels also be full of charity towards all men, . . . let virtue garnish thy thoughts unceasingly; then shall thy confidence wax strong in the presence of God” (D&C 121:45).

The Lord identifies love and virtue as the essential ingredients in feelings of confidence and security. By these we dwell safely in the Holy One of Israel (see 1 Nephi 22:28).

Indeed, might the pursuit of self-confidence actually pull us away from the connection the

Lord is trying to make? Might it merely produce “carnal security” (2 Nephi 28:21)?

Have you noticed that the pursuit of self-esteem seems to produce anxiety, whereas increasing humility and faith in the Lord produces consolation and rest? Mormon describes Church members who, waxing “stronger and stronger in their humility, and firmer and firmer in the faith of Christ,” are filled with joy and consolation (Helaman 3:35). Alma instructs his son to teach the people to humble themselves and “to be meek and lowly in heart; for such shall find rest to their souls” (Alma 37:34).

Some may not like the dichotomy between the pursuit of self-esteem and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Some may say that you can pursue and have both. But I do not find this idea of both pursuits in the scriptures. It seems to me that King Benjamin finds these two incompatible. He said to remember your own nothingness and God’s goodness. In trying to have both, is there a possible double-mindedness? James says that a double-minded man is “unstable in all his ways” (James 1:8). Nephi says of self-promotion:

*Priestcrafts are that men preach and set themselves up for a light unto the world, that they may get gain and praise of the world; but they seek not the welfare of Zion.*

*Behold, the Lord hath forbidden this thing; wherefore, the Lord God hath given a commandment that all men should have charity, which charity is love. And except they should have charity they were nothing. [2 Nephi 26:29–30]*

Nephi seems to view setting oneself up for a light to the world in order to get praise as directly antithetical to having the pure love of Christ. One apparently can’t do both. The Savior says, “Therefore, hold up your light that it may shine unto the world. Behold I am the light which ye shall hold up” (3 Nephi 18:24). In Doctrine and Covenants 88, verse 67, again he says that if our eye be single to his

glory, our whole bodies will be filled with light: “Therefore, sanctify yourselves that your minds become single to God, and the days will come that you shall see him” (D&C 88:68). It seems as though the less attention we can give to self-esteem, the more light we can have.

Low self-esteem is often associated with feelings of incapacity, or a sense of victimization, or the realization that we can’t make happen the opportunities, the approval, the feelings, etc., that we feel we need. But our relief comes when we realize that God made us powerless so that as we cleaved unto him, he could work his mighty miracles in our lives. Indeed, Moroni teaches that hopelessness and despair come of that iniquity which is lack of faith in one’s access to the Lord Jesus Christ (see Moroni 10:22–23).

We may think that we or some other mortal opens the necessary doors to our future, but this conclusion is an error: We ourselves do not open these doors; only the Lord does. We give him our obedience, our diligence, our cooperation, but he opens and closes the doors. We can only make right choices; he controls the consequences of our choices.

Often doors have closed before us that seemed to lead to the opportunities we thought we had to have. We assumed that the closed door was a reflection of some inadequacy in ourselves. But perhaps the closed door had nothing to do with whether we were good or bad or capable or incompetent. Rather, a loving Father shapes, even now, our path according to a prearranged, premortal covenant (see Abraham 2:8). The opening or the closing of these various doors is absolutely dependent on the Lord’s perfect perception of our developmental needs. All the elements that we really need for our individual experience here, he puts onto our path. The most important things that will happen to us in this life will come to us often by no initiative of our own, but they come because he is piloting the plan. He says that he does nothing save it be

for our benefit (see 2 Nephi 26:24); he has promised that all things work together to our good in order that we may be conformed to the image of his Son (see Romans 8:28–29).

Therefore, one does not need to fear that one’s future lies in the fact that an authority over us plays favorites, or that one’s employer isn’t well-disposed toward him. Under such a belief, one might be tempted to think that only self-promotion, or image manipulation, or compromising of what one really believes will open the doors one needs to open. But even though someone in authority thinks he opens doors, there is really only one Keeper of the Gate (see 2 Nephi 9:41). “No weapon that is formed against thee shall prosper,” he says, “This is the heritage of the servants of the Lord” (3 Nephi 22:17).

Now, I ask you, as various doors open and close, as the Lord Jesus Christ orchestrates even the details of our lives, where is the need to pursue self-esteem? We don’t need it. Faith in the Lord Jesus Christ will take us farther.

Christ himself is our model where the self is concerned. Hear the manner in which he presents himself. He says,

1. “The Son can do nothing of himself, but what he seeth the Father do: for what things soever he doeth, these also doeth the Son likewise” (John 5:19).

2. “I do nothing of myself; but as my Father hath taught me, I speak these things” (John 8:28).

3. “The words that I speak unto you I speak not of myself: but the Father that dwelleth in me, he doeth the works” (John 14:10).

You remember that Moroni wrote that the resurrected, perfected Christ spoke to him in “plain humility” (Ether 12:39). Elder Maxwell observed that “The Savior—the brightest individual ever to walk this planet—never sought to ‘prosper’ or to ‘conquer’ ‘according to his genius’ and ‘strength!’” (See Alma 30:17.) (“Out of the Best Faculty,” BYU Annual University Conference, 23–26 August 1993, p. 37). Alma

identified the precept that man prospers by his own resources as the doctrine of the antichrist (see Alma 30:17).

It seems to me that the self may actually be an interloper in most of what we do and that we can find relief from the stresses and strains of self-promotion by saying, in effect, “Get thee behind me, Self.” I wonder if this is what the Savior means when he says, “He who seeketh to save his life shall lose it: and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it” (JST Matthew 10:39). The self seems to be a constant intruder as we strive for selflessness. But President Benson pointed out that “Christ removed self as the force in His perfect life. It was not *my* will, but *thine* be done” (CR, 5 April 1986, p. 6; also, “Cleansing the Inner Vessel,” *Ensign*, May 1986, p. 6; emphasis in original).

I have become aware of how demanding of attention the self is. What a lot of prayer and deliberate living it will take for me to remove my self as the force in my life. I have become aware that all my sins rise out of the self-absorption of my heart—impulses rising like the ticking of a clock in their persistent quest for self-promotion, self-defense, and self-gratification. It seems as though a change is needed at the very fountain of my heart out of which all thought and emotion rise. Could I actually come to the point where I could act without calculating my own self-interest all the time? Could I really live my daily life so that I was constantly searching out the Lord’s will and drawing down his grace to accomplish it? And when the Lord in his mercy meshes his power with my agency and my effort and brings forth some measure of success, I ask, where is self-esteem? Where is even the need for self-esteem? I feel as though I just want to say instead, “Oh, Lord, increase my faith.”

How then does one appropriately think about oneself? I offer you Elder Enzo Busche’s remarks. He said,

*A disciple of Christ is . . . constantly, even in the midst of all regular activities, striving all day long through silent prayer and contemplation to be in the depth of self-awareness to keep him in the state of meekness and lowliness of heart. [“Truth Is the Issue,” *Ensign*, November 1993, p. 25]*

It seems appropriate as well to be conscious of our preciousness to our Father and at the same time to feel meek and lowly before his sacrifices on our behalf, his reverence for us, and his continuing graciousness to us. Again, Elder Busche spoke of the point at which we realize the Lord’s love:

*This is the place where we suddenly see the heavens open as we feel the full impact of the love of our Heavenly Father, which fills us with indescribable joy. With this fulfillment of love in our hearts, we will never be happy anymore just by being ourselves or living our own lives. We will not be satisfied until we have surrendered our lives into the arms of the loving Christ, and until He has become the doer of all our deeds and He has become the speaker of all our words. [Busche, “Truth,” p. 26]*

When Christ is the doer of all our deeds and the speaker of all our words, I have to ask, where is self-esteem? Where is the need of self-esteem? I propose that self-esteem becomes a nonissue for the person who is perfecting his faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

If I decide to give up some of the attention my self demands, what will I replace it with? The Lord answers, “Look unto me in every thought; doubt not, fear not” (D&C 6:36). The self is so demanding that perhaps one can only let go of the pursuit of self-promotion as one cleaves to the Lord Jesus Christ (see Omni 1:26). Like Peter walking on the water, it may be our sudden self-consciousness that will cause us to fall (see Matthew 14:30).

The world speaks of self-image, but Alma spoke of receiving the image of God in our

countenances (see Alma 5:14). In fact, as the *Lectures on Faith* inform us,

*All those who keep his commandments shall grow up from grace to grace, and become . . . joint heirs with Jesus Christ; possessing the same mind, being transformed into the same image . . . , even the express image of him who fills all in all; being filled with the fullness of his glory, and become one in him, even as the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are one. [Lectures on Faith 5:2]*

It seems as though the perception of the self as an entity separate from God will, under the right conditions, just get thinner and thinner.

President Benson has pressed us to be changed for Christ, captained by Christ, and consumed in Christ (see “Born of God,” *Ensign*, July 1989, p. 5). We might ask, what is it that must be consumed? Maybe it is our old concept of self, the one we have learned from the precepts of men. Is it possible that the pursuit of self-esteem might delay this mighty change? Indeed, what if one ceased defining self-esteem or justifying one’s pursuit of it, and just ignored it? What if, instead, one just began to obey whatever divine instruction he was not

obeying, to sacrifice whatever needed sacrificing, and to consecrate whatever he was holding back? What if he just set out to “seek this Jesus” (Ether 12:41)?

So many issues that revolve around the subject of self fade like the dew in the sun as one cultivates faith in the Savior. Without him, nothing else matters. No amount of self-esteem or anything else can adequately fill the void.

I’ll close with some thoughts of Robert Browning, quoted by President David O. McKay:

*There is an answer to the passionate longings of the heart for fullness. . . : Live in all things outside yourself by love, and you will have joy. That is the life of God; it ought to be our life. In him it is accomplished and perfect; but in all created things it is a lesson learned slowly and through difficulty. [David O. McKay, *Cherished Experiences*, comp. Clare Middlemiss (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1976), p. 161]*

One who practices faith in the Lord Jesus Christ will find relief from the stresses and anxieties of the pursuit of self-esteem. In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.