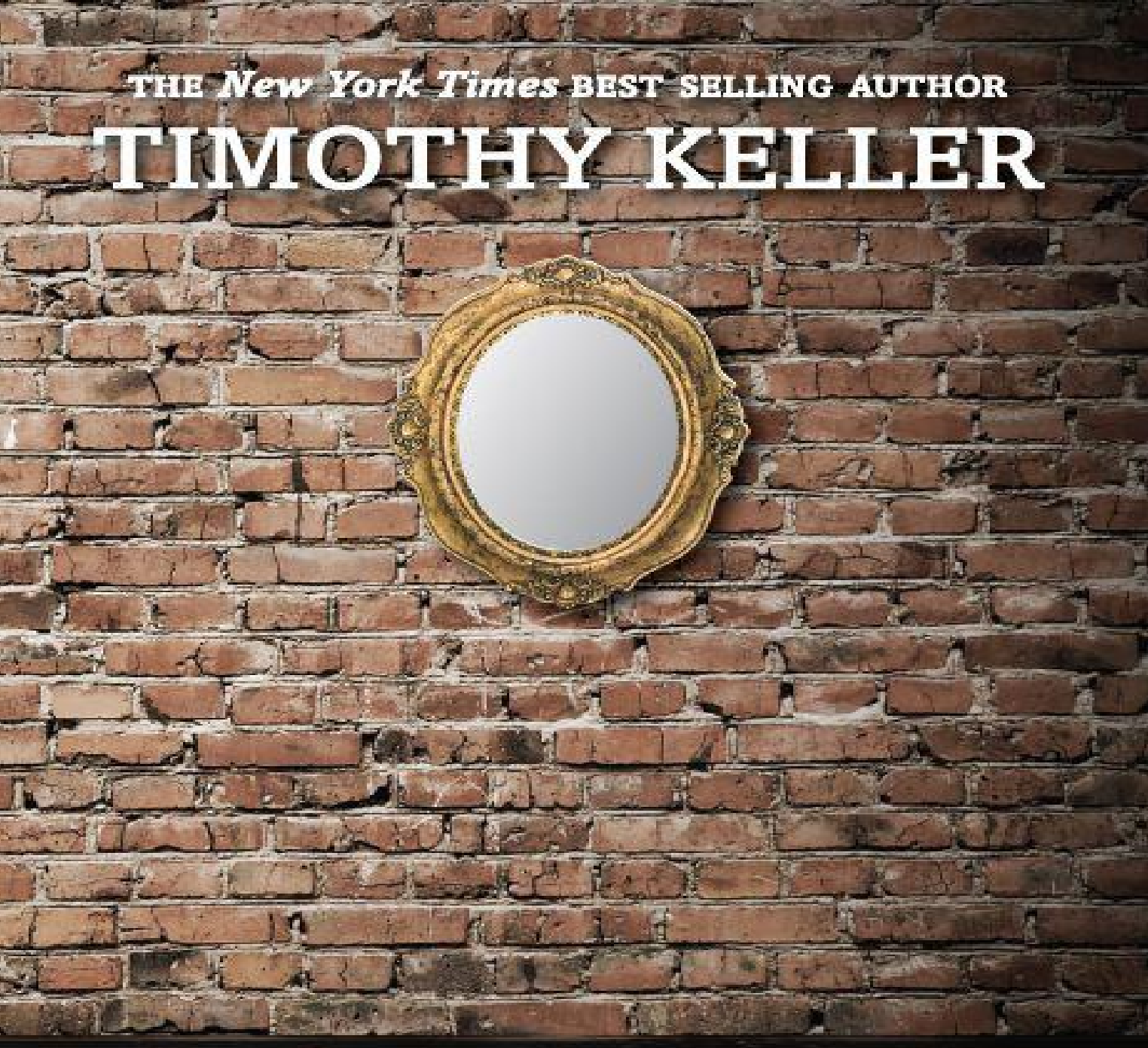
THE *New York Times* BEST SELLING AUTHOR

TIMOTHY KELLER



The Freedom Of *Self-Forgetfulness*

THE PATH TO TRUE CHRISTIAN JOY

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TIMOTHY KELLER

The Freedom Of Self-Forgetfulness
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Contents

The Freedom Of Self-Forgetfulness

1

The Natural Condition Of The Human Ego

2

The Transformed View Of Self

3

How To Get That Transformed View Of Self

The Freedom Of *Self-Forgetfulness*

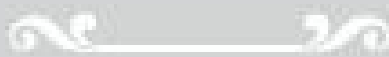


What are the marks of a heart that has been radically changed by the grace of God? If we trust in Christ, what should our hearts be like? It is not simply a matter of morally virtuous behaviour. It is quite possible to do all sorts of morally virtuous things when our hearts are filled with fear, with pride or with a desire for power. We are talking about hearts that have been changed, at the root, by the grace of God – and what that looks like in real life.

We will be focusing on a section of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians – 1 Corinthians 3:21 – 4:7.

So then, no more boasting about men! All things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, and you are of Christ, and Christ is of God. So then, men ought to regard us as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the secret things of God. Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful. I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. My conscience is clear, but that does not make me

innocent. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts. At that time each will receive his praise from God. Now, brothers, I have applied these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, so that you may learn from us the meaning of the saying, "Do not go beyond what is written." Then you will not take pride in one man over against another. For who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not? 1 Corinthians 3:21 – 4:7



The Corinthian church was filled with division. It had originally been planted by Paul. But, as we see from the references to Apollos and Cephas, other evangelists had come to Corinth later on. As a result, different people had connections with different prominent ministers. So one person was mentored and discipled by Paul, another was mentored and appointed in leadership by Apollos (another great teacher) and so forth. Instead of everybody being happy that they had a relationship with Paul or with Apollos, these relationships are now the basis for power-play. Parties have arisen and divisions are tearing the church up. One person argues that he should be the leader because he was discipled by Paul, *the* Saint Paul. And another lays claim to a particular relationship with some

other prominent minister. And so on.

In this passage, Paul shows that the root cause for the division is *pride* and *boasting*. That is the reason we cannot get along, the reason there is no peace in the world and the reason we cannot live at peace with one another. Have a look. Verse 21 starts off 'no more boasting'; chapter 4:7 says 'why do you boast...?'; and note verse 6 especially where he urges them not to 'take pride in one man over against another'.

'No pride, no boasting,' says Paul. So we are after the trait of humility. And that means we get into the very interesting subject of self-esteem.

Up until the twentieth century, traditional cultures (and this is still true of most cultures in the world) always believed that too *high* a view of yourself was the root cause of all the evil in the world. What is the reason for most of the crime and violence in the world? Why are people abused? Why are people cruel? Why do people do the bad things they do? Traditionally, the answer was *hubris* - the Greek word meaning pride or too high a view of yourself. Traditionally, that was the reason given for why people misbehave.

But, in our modern western culture, we have developed an utterly opposite cultural consensus. The basis of contemporary education, the way we treat incarcerated prisoners, the foundation of most modern legislation and the starting point for modern counselling is exactly the opposite of the traditional consensus. Our belief today – and it is deeply

rooted in everything – is that people misbehave for *lack* of self-esteem and because they have too *low* a view of themselves. For example, the reason husbands beat their wives and the reason people are criminals is because they have too *low* a view of themselves. People used to think it was because they had too high a view of themselves and had too much self-esteem. Now we say it because we have too little self-esteem.

A few years ago, there was an article in the *New York Times* magazine by psychologist Lauren Slater called 'The Trouble with Self-Esteem'. It wasn't a ground-breaking article or a bolt out of the blue. She was simply beginning to report what experts have known for years. The significant thing she says is that there is no evidence that low self-esteem is a big problem in society. She quotes three current studies into the subject of self-esteem, all of which reach this conclusion and she states that 'people with high self-esteem pose a greater threat to those around them than people with low self-esteem and feeling bad about yourself is not the source of our country's biggest, most expensive social problems.'[1]

It would be fun to explain how that works and why that works and so on. But, for now, let's just say she is right when she says it will take years and years for us to accept this. It is so deeply rooted in our psyche that *lack* of self-esteem is the reason why there is drug addiction, the reason why there is crime, wife beating and so forth. Slater says it is going to take forever for this view to change.

You see, the thing about the 'low self-esteem theory of misbehaviour' is that it is very attractive. You do not have to make any moral judgements in order to deal with society's problems. All you have to do is support people and build them up. In traditional cultures, the way you dealt with these problems was that you clamped down on people and convicted them and called them bad!

What is intriguing about this passage in 1 Corinthians is that it gives us an approach to self-regard, an approach to the self and a way of seeing ourselves that is absolutely different from both traditional and modern/postmodern contemporary cultures. Utterly different.

The three things that Paul shows us here are:

1. The natural condition of the human ego.
2. The transformed sense of self *(which Paul had discovered and which can be brought about through the gospel).*
3. How to get that transformed sense of self.

1

The Natural Condition Of The Human Ego



In verse 6, Paul urges the Corinthians to have no more pride in one person over another. Nothing new, we may think. Of course pride is inappropriate. But we need to realize that the word Paul uses here for pride is not the normal *hubris* word for pride, but *physioõ*. It is an unusual word. Paul uses it here and another five times in this particular book and once in Colossians 2. You will not find it anywhere else in the Bible as it is used only by Paul. Many commentators now realize it is a special theme of Paul.

By using this particular word, Paul is trying to teach these Corinthians something about the human ego. This word used here for pride literally means to be overinflated, swollen, distended beyond its proper size. It is related to the word for 'bellows'. It is very evocative. It brings to mind a rather painful image of an organ in the human body, an organ that is distended because so much air has been pumped into it. So much air, that it is overinflated and ready to burst. It is swollen, inflamed and extended past its proper size. And that, says Paul, is the condition of the natural human ego.

Because it is such an evocative and interesting metaphor, I think we are supposed to reflect on the image and on what Paul is trying to say. Perhaps I can put it this way: I think the image suggests four things about the natural condition of the human ego: that it is empty, painful, busy and fragile.

Firstly, *empty*. The image points to the fact that there is emptiness at the centre of the human ego. The ego that is puffed up and overinflated has nothing at its centre. It is empty.

In his book *Sickness Unto Death*, Søren Kierkegaard says, it is the normal state of the human heart to try to build its identity around something besides God.[2] Spiritual pride is the illusion that we are competent to run our own lives, achieve our own sense of self-worth and find a purpose big enough to give us meaning in life without God. Søren Kierkegaard says that the normal human ego is built on something besides God. It searches for something that will give it a sense of worth, a sense of specialness and a sense of purpose and builds itself on that. And, of course, as we are often reminded, if you try to put anything in the middle of the place that was originally made for God, it is going to be too small. It is going to rattle around in there. So, the first thing about the human ego is that it is empty.

And, secondly, it is also *painful*. A distended and overinflated ego is painful.

Have you ever thought about the fact that you do not notice

your body until there is something wrong with it? When we are walking around, we are not usually thinking how fantastic our toes are feeling. Or how brilliantly our elbows are working today. We would only think like that if there had previously been something wrong with them. That is because the parts of our body only draw attention to themselves if there is something wrong with them.

The ego often hurts. That is because it has something incredibly wrong with it. Something unbelievably wrong with it. It is *always* drawing attention to itself – it does so every single day. It is always making us think about how we look and how we are treated. People sometimes say their feelings are hurt. But our *feelings* can't be hurt! It is the *ego* that hurts – my sense of self, my identity. Our feelings are fine! It is my ego that hurts.

Walking around does not hurt my toes unless there is already something wrong with them. My ego would not hurt unless there was something terribly wrong with it. Think about it. It is very hard to get through a whole day without feeling snubbed or ignored or feeling stupid or getting down on ourselves. That is because there is something wrong with my ego. There is something wrong with my identity. There is something wrong with my sense of self. It is never happy. It is always drawing attention to itself.

So, first of all, it is empty. Secondly, because it is like a bloated stomach that is distended, it is also painful. And,

thirdly, the ego is incredibly *busy* – in other words, it is always drawing attention to itself. It is incredibly busy trying to fill the emptiness. And it is incredibly busy doing two things in particular – comparing and boasting. You can see them both in the passage. First of all, notice in verse 6 that there is no full stop after the word pride. Paul does not say 'Then you will not take pride.' No, he says 'Then you will not take pride in one man over against another.' That is the very essence of what it means to have a normal human ego. The way the normal human ego tries to fill its emptiness and deal with its discomfort is by comparing itself to other people. All the time.

In his famous chapter on pride in *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis points out that pride is by nature competitive. It is competitiveness that is at the very heart of pride.

'*Pride gets no pleasure out of having something, only out of having more of it than the next person. We say that people are proud of being rich, or clever, or good-looking, but they are not. They are proud of being richer, or cleverer, or better-looking than others. If everyone else became equally rich, or clever, or good-looking there would be nothing to be proud about.*'[3]

In other words, we are only proud of being *more* successful, *more* intelligent or *more* good-looking than the next person, and when we are in the presence of someone who is more successful, intelligent and good-looking than we are, we lose all pleasure in what we had. That is because we really had no

pleasure in it. We were *proud* of it. As Lewis says, pride is the pleasure of having more than the next person. Pride is the pleasure of being more than the next person. Lust may drive a man to sleep with a beautiful woman – but at least lust makes him want *her*. Pride drives a man to sleep with a beautiful woman just to prove he can do it and to prove he can do it above the others. Pride destroys the ability to have any real pleasure from her.

When I was at school, my mother kept saying things like, 'You know, honey, you ought to join the chess club.' I would say, 'Mum, I hate chess.' 'Yes, I know,' she would say, 'but it will look so good on your college application.' She would try again. 'Don't they feed the homeless and hungry downtown, every Saturday morning? Why don't you volunteer for that?' 'Mum,' I'd say, 'I hate that kind of thing.' I would get the same response, 'I know, honey, but it would look so good on your college application.' So, at school, I did all kinds of things that I had absolutely no interest in doing for themselves. I was simply putting together a résumé. That is what our egos are doing all the time. Doing jobs we have no pleasure in, doing diets we take no pleasure in. Doing all kinds of things, not for the pleasure of doing them, but because we are trying to put together an impressive curriculum vitae. By comparing ourselves to other people and trying to make ourselves look better than others, we are boasting. Trying to recommend ourselves, trying to create a self-esteem résumé because we are desperate to fill our sense of inadequacy and emptiness. The ego is so busy. So busy all the time.

And lastly, as well as empty and painful and busy, the ego is *fragile*. That is because anything that is overinflated is in imminent danger of being deflated – like an overinflated balloon.

If we are puffed up by air and not filled up with something solid, then to be overinflated or deflated comes down to the same thing. A superiority complex and an inferiority complex are basically the same. They are both results of being overinflated. The person with the superiority complex is overinflated and in danger of being deflated; the person with an inferiority complex is deflated already. Someone with an inferiority complex will tell you they hate themselves and they will tell themselves they hate themselves. They are deflated. To be deflated means you were previously inflated. Deflated or in imminent danger of being deflated – it is all the same thing. And it makes the ego fragile.

Empty, painful, busy and, therefore, fragile. Let me give you a perfect example of this. I am not trying to lift her up as being worse than other people at all. She actually shows a tremendous amount of self-awareness and I have a lot of admiration for her. But, if you want a perfect example of what I am talking about, here is an excerpt from an interview with Madonna in *Vogue* Magazine some time ago where she is talking about her career.

This is what she says:

'*My drive in life comes from a fear of being mediocre. That is always pushing me. I push past one spell of it and discover*

myself as a special human being but then I feel I am still mediocre and uninteresting unless I do something else. Because even though I have become somebody, I still have to prove that I am somebody. My struggle has never ended and I guess it never will.'

I will tell you one thing: Madonna knows herself better than most of us know ourselves. Every time she accomplishes something, these are the kind of thoughts she has: 'Now I have got the verdict that I am somebody. But the next day, I realize that unless I keep going, I am not. My ego cannot be satisfied. My sense of self, my desire for self-worth, my need to be sure I am somebody – it is not fulfilled. I keep thinking I have won it from what people have said about me and what the magazines and newspapers have written. But the next day, I have to go and look somewhere else. Why? Because my ego is insatiable. It's a black hole. It doesn't matter how much I throw into it, the cupboard is bare. I keep putting all sorts of things into it every morning, feeding it, and the next night it is bare. I have become somebody – but I still need to become somebody.' We might be tempted to think she is neurotic. No, she knows herself. She is ahead of most of us.

That is the normal state of the human self. It is what Paul is talking about to the Corinthians. All these people who are fighting over him and claiming a special relationship with him are showing tremendous amounts of pride. They are unable to enjoy the fact they know Paul. They have to use their relationship with him for one-upmanship over each other in the

church.

Paul wants them to know the difference the gospel makes and how the gospel has transformed things for him. Look at verses 3 and 4. He shows them how the gospel has transformed his sense of self-worth, his sense of self-regard and his identity. His ego operates in a completely different way now.

2

The Transformed View Of Self



See what he says. In verses 1 and 2, he reminds them that he is a minister and that he has a job to do. But then he tells them that, with regard to that role, he cares very little if he is judged by them or any human court (vv. 3,4). The word translated 'judge' here has the same meaning as the word 'verdict'. It is the thing that Madonna craves – that elusive verdict or stamp of approval. Paul does not look to the Corinthians – or to any human court – for the verdict that he is a somebody.

So Paul is saying to the Corinthians that he does not care what they think about him. He does not care what *anybody* thinks about him. In fact, his identity owes nothing to what people say. It is as if he is saying, 'I don't care what you think. I don't care what anybody thinks.' Paul's self-worth, his self-regard, his identity is not tied in any way to their verdict and their evaluation of him.

Paul's identity may not be tied to other people's opinion of him – but how do we reach the point where we are not controlled by what people think about us? How do you think we get there? Most people would say that it is very obvious. Practically every counsellor I know would say that it should

not matter what other people think of us. They tell us that we should not be living according to what other people say. It should not be *their* standards that count. It should not matter what they think about us. The only thing that should concern me is what I think about me. It is not about other people's standards. I should only mind about what I think my standards should be. I should choose my own standards. So the counsellors' advice is 'Decide who you want to be and then be it' because it only matters what you think about yourself.

If someone has a problem with low self-esteem we, in our modern world, seem to have only one way of dealing with it. That is remedying it with high self-esteem. We tell someone that they need to see that they are a great person, they need to see how wonderful they are. We tell them to look at all the great things they have accomplished. We tell them they just need to stop worrying about what people say about them. We tell them they need to set their own standards and accomplish them – and then make their *own* evaluation of themselves.

Paul's approach could not be more different. He cares very little if he is judged by the Corinthians or by any human court. And then he goes one step further: he will not even judge himself. It is as if he says, 'I don't care what you think – but I don't care what *I* think. I have a very low opinion of your opinion of me – but I have a very low opinion of *my* opinion of me.' The fact that he has a clear conscience makes no difference. Look carefully at what he says in verse 4. 'My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent.' His

conscience may be clear – but he knows that even if he does have a clear conscience, that does not necessarily mean he is innocent. Hitler might have had a clear conscience, but it does not mean he was innocent.

What would Paul say to those who tell him to set his own standards? He would say it is a trap. A trap he will not fall into. You see, it is a trap to say that we should not worry about everyone else's standards, just set our own. That's not an answer. Boosting our self-esteem by living up to our own standards or someone else's sounds like a great solution. But it does not deliver. It cannot deliver. I cannot live up to my parents' standards – and that makes me feel terrible. I cannot live up to your standards – and that makes me feel terrible. I cannot live up to society's standards – and that makes me feel terrible. I cannot live up to other societies' standards – that makes me feel terrible. Perhaps the solution is to set my own standards? But I cannot keep them either – and that makes me feel terrible, unless I set incredibly *low* standards. Are low standards a solution? Not at all. That makes me feel terrible because I realize I am the type of person who has low standards. Trying to boost our self-esteem by trying to live up to our own standards or someone else's is a trap. It is not an answer.

So Paul does not look to the Corinthians for his identity. He does not go to them for the verdict that he is a 'somebody'. He does not get that sense of identity from them. But he does not get it from himself either. He knows that trying to find self-

esteem by living up to a certain set of standards is a trap. Now we start to discover where Paul finds that sense of self, that sense of identity. Be warned! At this point, he moves right off our map. He moves into territory that we know nothing about.

Paul was a man of incredible stature. I think it would be hard to disagree with the view that he is one of the six or seven most influential leaders in the history of the human race. One of the most influential people in history. He had enormous ballast, tremendous influence, incredible confidence. He moved ahead and nothing fazed him. And yet, in 1 Timothy, he says 'Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief' (1 Tim. 1:15 NKJV). Not I *was* chief, but I *am* chief. Or 'I am the worst'. This is off our maps. We are not used to someone who has incredible confidence volunteering the opinion that they are one of the worst people. We are not used to someone who is totally honest and totally aware of all sorts of moral flaws – yet has incredible poise and confidence.

We cannot do that. Do you know why? Because we are judging ourselves. But Paul will not do that. When he says that he does not let the Corinthians judge him nor will he judge himself, he is saying that he knows about his sins but he does not connect them to himself and his identity. His sins and his identity are not connected. He refuses to play that game. He does not see a sin and let it destroy his sense of identity. He will not make a connection. Neither does he see an accomplishment and congratulate himself. He sees all kinds of sins in himself – and all kinds of accomplishments too – but he

refuses to connect them with himself or his identity. So, although he knows himself to be the chief of sinners, that fact is not going to stop him from doing the things that he is called to do.

We could not be more different from Paul. If I think of myself as a bad person, I do not have any confidence. If I think of myself as a sinner, as someone who is filled with pride, someone filled with lust and anger and greed and all the things that Paul says he is filled with, I have no confidence. No, because we are judging ourselves. We set our standards and then we condemn ourselves. The ego will never be satisfied that way. Never!

Paul is saying something astounding. 'I don't care what you think and I don't care what I think.' He is bringing us into new territory that we know nothing about. His ego is not puffed up, it is filled up. He is talking about humility – although I hate using the word 'humility' because this is nothing like our idea of humility. Paul is saying that he has reached a place where his ego draws no more attention to itself than any other part of his body. He has reached the place where he is not thinking about himself anymore. When he does something wrong or something good, he does not connect it to himself any more.

C.S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity* makes a brilliant observation about gospel-humility at the very end of his chapter on pride. If we were to meet a truly humble person, Lewis says, we would never come away from meeting them thinking they were humble. They would not be always telling us they were a

nobody (because a person who keeps saying they are a nobody is actually a self-obsessed person). The thing we would remember from meeting a truly gospel-humble person is how much they seemed to be totally interested in us. Because the essence of gospel-humility is not thinking more of myself or thinking less of myself, it is thinking of myself less.

Gospel-humility is not needing to think about myself. Not needing to connect things with myself. It is an end to thoughts such as, 'I'm in this room with these people, does that make me look good? Do I want to be here?' True gospel-humility means I stop connecting every experience, every conversation, with myself. In fact, I stop thinking about myself. The freedom of self-forgetfulness. The blessed rest that only self-forgetfulness brings.

True gospel-humility means an ego that is not puffed up but filled up. This is totally unique. Are we talking about high self-esteem? No. So is it low self-esteem? Certainly not. It is not about self-esteem. Paul simply refuses to play that game. He says 'I don't care about your opinion but, I don't care that much about my opinion' – and that is the secret.

A truly gospel-humble person is not a self-hating person or a self-loving person, but a gospel-humble person. The truly gospel-humble person is a self-forgetful person whose ego is just like his or her toes. It just works. It does not draw attention to itself. The toes just work; the ego just works. Neither draws attention to itself.

Here is one little test. The self-forgetful person would never be hurt particularly badly by criticism. It would not devastate them, it would not keep them up late, it would not bother them. Why? Because a person who is devastated by criticism is putting too much value on what other people think, on other people's opinions. The world tells the person who is thin-skinned and devastated by criticism to deal with it by saying, 'Who cares what *they* think? I know what I think. Who cares what the rabble thinks? It doesn't bother me.' People are either devastated by criticism – or they are not devastated by criticism because they do not listen to it. They will not listen to it or learn from it because they do not care about it. They know who they are and what they think. In other words, our only solution to low self-esteem is pride. But that is no solution. Both low self-esteem and pride are horrible nuisances to our own future and to everyone around us.

The person who is self-forgetful is the complete opposite. When someone whose ego is not puffed up but filled up gets criticism, it does not devastate them. They listen to it and see it as an opportunity to change. Sounds idealistic? The more we get to understand the gospel, the more we want to change. Friends, wouldn't you want to be a person who does not need honour – nor is afraid of it? Someone who does not lust for recognition – nor, on the other hand, is frightened to death of it? Don't you want to be the kind of person who, when they see themselves in a mirror or reflected in a shop window, does not admire what they see but does not cringe either? Wouldn't you like to be the type of person who, in their imaginary life,

does not sit around fantasizing about hitting self-esteem home-runs, daydreaming about successes that gives them the edge over others? Or perhaps you tend to beat yourself up and to be tormented by regrets. Wouldn't you like to be free of them? Wouldn't you like to be the skater who wins the silver, and yet is thrilled about those three triple jumps that the gold medal winner did? To love it the way you love a sunrise? Just to love the fact that it was done? For it not to matter whether it was their success or your success. Not to care if they did it or you did it. You are as happy that they did it as if you had done it yourself – because you are just so happy to see it.

You will probably say that you do not know anybody like that. But this is the possibility for you and me if we keep on going where Paul is going. I can start to enjoy things that are not about me. My work is not about me, my skating is not about me, my romance is not about me, my dating is not about me. I can actually enjoy things for what they are. They are not just for my résumé. They are not just to look good on my college or job application. They are not just a way of filling up the emptiness. Wouldn't you want that? This is off our map. This is gospel-humility, blessed self-forgetfulness. Not thinking more of myself as in modern cultures, or less of myself as in traditional cultures. Simply thinking of myself less.

3

How To Get That Transformed View Of Self



How did Paul get this blessed self-forgetfulness? He does tell us – but we have to look carefully. First he says, 'I don't care what you think; but I don't care what I think.' In other words, he does not look to them for the verdict nor, does he look to himself for the verdict. Then he says 'My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent'. The word translated 'innocent' comes from the word 'justify'. The word for 'justify' is the same one he uses throughout Romans and Galatians. Here Paul is saying that even if his conscience is clear, that does not *justify* him.

What Paul is looking for, what Madonna is looking for, what we are all looking for, is an *ultimate* verdict that we are important and valuable. We look for that ultimate verdict every day in all the situations and people around us. And that means that every single day, we are on trial. Every day, we put ourselves back in a courtroom. But do you notice how Paul says that he does not care what the Corinthians think of him or what any human court thinks? It is odd that he is talking about courts – after all, the Corinthians are not a court. He is talking

metaphorically, I think. And he is saying that the problem with self-esteem – whether it is high or low – is that, every single day, we are in the courtroom. Every single day, we are on trial. That is the way that everyone's identity works. In the courtroom, you have the prosecution and the defence. And everything we do is providing evidence for the prosecution or evidence for the defence. Some days we feel we are winning the trial and other days we feel we are losing it. But Paul says that he has found the secret. The trial is over for him. He is out of the courtroom. It is gone. It is over. Because the *ultimate* verdict is in.

Now how could that be? Paul puts it very simply. He knows that they cannot justify him. He knows he cannot justify himself. And what does he say? He says that it is *the Lord* who judges him. It is only *His* opinion that counts.

Do you realize that it is only in the gospel of Jesus Christ that you get the verdict before the performance? The atheist might say that they get their self-image from being a good person. They are a good person and they hope that eventually they will get a verdict that confirms that they are a good person. Performance leads to the verdict. For the Buddhist too, performance leads to the verdict. If you are a Muslim, performance leads to the verdict. All this means that every day, you are in the courtroom, every day you are on trial. That is the problem. But Paul is saying that in Christianity, the verdict leads to performance. It is not the performance that leads to the verdict. In Christianity, the moment we believe, God says 'This

is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased.'[4] Or take Romans 8:1 which says 'Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus'. In Christianity, the moment we believe, God imputes Christ's perfect performance to us as if it were our own, and adopts us into His family. In other words, God can say to us just as He once said to Christ, 'You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.'[5]

You see, the verdict is in. And now I perform on the basis of the verdict. Because He loves me and He accepts me, I do not have to do things just to build up my résumé. I do not have to do things to make me look good. I can do things for the joy of doing them. I can help people to help people – not so I can feel better about myself, not so I can fill up the emptiness.

With every other form of identity and every other 'badge' or accolade we might award ourselves, it is always a case of the verdict coming from the performance. We might find security in labelling ourselves a good person, a free person, a religious person, a moral person. Whatever it is, it is always the same: the performance leads to the verdict. But the verdict never comes. Madonna said so, and she should know. Madonna has done things that you and I are never going to do – and it is still not enough. Madonna has heaps of talent, she has tremendous guts. But even Madonna, despite everything she has done, says that she has still not found the ultimate verdict she is looking for. The performance never gets the ultimate verdict.

But in Christianity, the verdict can give you the performance.

Yes, the verdict can give you the performance. How can that be? Here is Paul's answer: he is out of the courtroom, he is out of the trial. How? Because Jesus Christ went on trial instead. Jesus went into the courtroom. He was on trial. It was an unjust trial in a kangaroo court – but He did not complain. Like the lamb before the shearers, He was silent. He was struck, beaten, put to death. Why? As our substitute. He took the condemnation we deserve; He faced the trial that should be ours so that we do not have to face any more trials. So I simply need to ask God to accept me because of what the Lord Jesus has done. Then, the only person whose opinion counts looks at me and He finds me more valuable than all the jewels in the earth.

How can we worry about being snubbed now? How can we worry about being ignored now? How can we care that much about what we look like in the mirror?

Let me say a word to those for whom this is all new. You may wish you believed this. Here is what I would say – some people have never understood the difference between Christian identity and any other kind of identity. They would call themselves a Christian, they consider their behaviour to be on the upper end of the scale, they go to church and they hope that one day God will take them home. Let me say that true Christian identity operates totally differently from any other kind of identity. Self-forgetfulness takes you *out* of the courtroom. The trial is over. The verdict is in. Perhaps that is new. Keep looking. Keep digging. Keep asking questions.

There is a lot to discover. I have covered a lot of ground in a short space. There are lots of pieces of the jigsaw to put together – why did Jesus have to die? Why did He rise from the dead? Was He really the Son of God? Keep looking until you understand the whole picture.

But maybe you are in a different position – you believe the gospel; maybe you have done so for years. But ... and it is a big 'but'... every day you find yourself being sucked back into the courtroom. You do not feel you are living like Paul says. You are getting sucked back in. All I can tell you is that we have to re-live the gospel every time we pray. We have to re-live it every time we go to church. We have to re-live the gospel on the spot and ask ourselves what we are doing in the courtroom. We should not be there. The court is adjourned.

Like Paul, we can say, 'I don't care what you think. I don't even care what I think. I only care about what the Lord thinks.' And he has said, 'Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus', and 'You are my beloved child in whom I am well pleased'.[6] Live out of that.

Thoughts & Questions For Reflection



• If you are new to Christianity, why not read the Gospel of Mark and ask God to show you the truth about Jesus – particularly His death on the cross. If you know any Christians, perhaps you could ask them to talk to you about it.

• You could use the words of Psalm 139 in prayer. Ask God to show you your heart. Ask Him to show you the places you look for self-worth and the ways you try to find your sense of identity.

> *Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts.*
>
> *See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.*
>
> Psalm 139:23,24

• Could you explain to someone else how the gospel can (and should) transform our sense of identity? How much do you experience that transformed sense of identity?

• In what ways has God's Word encouraged you or challenged you? Pray about it.

• Pray that God would give you what you need to enable you to develop true gospel-humility and the freedom of self-forgetfulness.

End Notes



1 Lauren Slater, *The Trouble with Self-Esteem*, *The New York Times* magazine, Feb 03, 2002

2 Søren Kierkegaard, *Sickness Unto Death*, New York: Penguin, 1989

3 C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001

4 See Matthew 3:17

5 Mark 1:11

6 Romans 8:1 and see Mark 1:11

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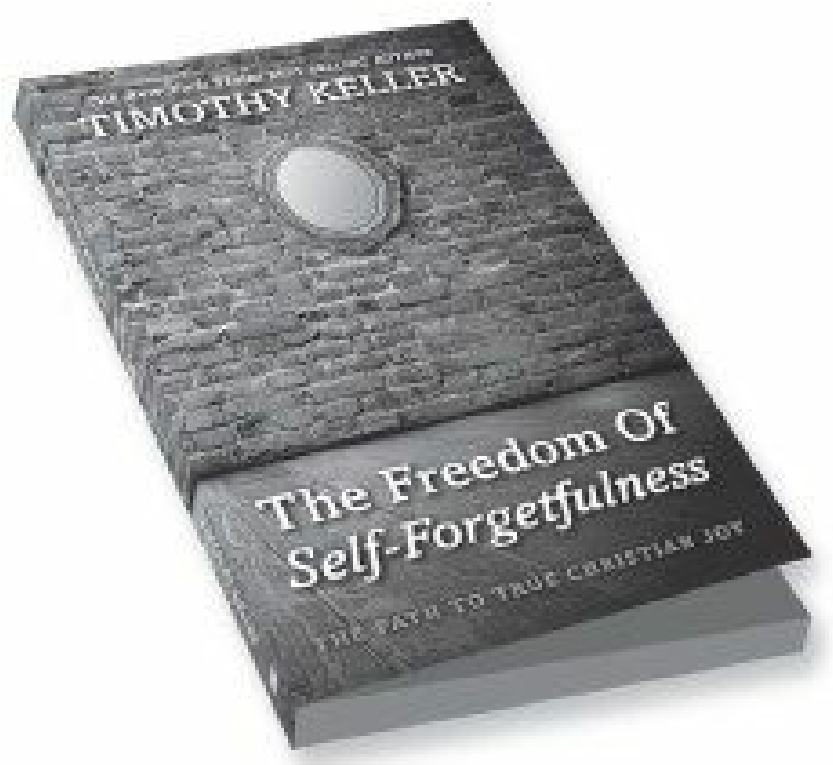
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