

Finding The New You

Several years ago, Whitney Houston rose to fame with a superhit entitled "*Learning to Love Yourself is the Greatest Love of All.*"

What a lot of people don't know is that the song she sang was originally entitled: "*Learning to Love the Lord is the Greatest Love of All.*"

Her producers knew that would be a non-starter with a secular audience, and so they changed the title and theme of the song from loving the Lord to loving yourself, and the rest is musical history.

Self-love is an extremely marketable commodity.

You see evidence of this everywhere.

People love to indulge themselves—a fact the advertising industry relies upon.

People love to hear, "*I'm worth it!*" and "*You deserve it!*"

That's why they are staples of consumer marketing.

Even Christians are not immune to this temptation.

The title of one book I saw advertised on a Christian website is, "*Falling in Love with Yourself.*"

The jacket cover promised that the book would show you how to "*...become satisfied with the inner you and turn it into great relationships and Christian success.*"

Not that this is anything new: one of the most popular Christian books ever published was Norman Vincent Peale's "*The Power of Positive Thinking*"—a "how-to" manual for achieving self confidence and inner peace and translating them into worldly success.

Many contemporary counselors—both secular and Christian—believe that the basis of mental health is "self esteem."

Their premise is that we have to first learn how to love ourselves and find peace within ourselves before we can love and find peace with other people.

The idea has enormous appeal.

Who wouldn't like to love yourself?

Who wouldn't like to have inner peace?

But before we travel too far down that road, let's examine all this "self-ology" in the light of what Scripture has to say about it.

The issue gets complicated right away, because the Bible makes it clear that we don't have just one self; we have two.

One is called our "flesh" or our "sinful nature."

This self is fairly easy to recognize: he is always striving to magnify himself by accumulating wealth and influence, manipulating situations to his own benefit, nursing resentment towards anyone who gets in the way, and using well-practiced deceptions to navigate his way through life.

Such practices are not only his stock in trade—they *are* what he *is*.

The other self is a new self who was not born of flesh and blood but born of the Holy Spirit through the water and the Word of baptism.

Created by God, this new self delights in the knowledge of the Lord and longs to be rid of his other self and united with God.

The Scripture calls him our new man.

Now as we all know, our sinful self is not hard to find.

All we have to do is scratch the surface of our personalities.

Paul calls him our "*earthly nature*" and adds that he is full of "*...lust, impurity, evil desires, greed, lies, anger, rage, malice and slander.*"

He secretly rejoices in his neighbor's distress and resents his success.

His motto is: don't ever tell other people your problems because half of them don't care and the other half are glad you have them.

We know this old self quite well because we spend most of our lives in his shoes.

But where do we go to find our new man—our new identity?

Well, the first thing that we have to get used to is the fact that we *will not find him within ourselves!*

Our new identity is not located in us, but in Christ Jesus.

That's right, our new identity is *IN* Jesus and is clothed *WITH* Jesus. And where is Jesus? He is in heaven at the right hand of God—as we will confess together in a few minutes: *“On the third day he rose again from the dead. He ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty.”*

Can we take this literally?

Are you as you sit in this sanctuary and listen to this sermon also seated with Jesus at the right hand of God in heaven?

Admittedly, it sounds strange.

But listen to what Paul says in the *Book of Romans*: *“For if we have been united with [Christ] in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection.”*

And again, *“Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.”*

And in *Ephesians 2:6*: *“...God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus.”*

Well, there it is: the clear and unambiguous testimony of Scripture is that whatever else our senses and sensibilities might lead us to believe, as far as God is concerned, your new man was raised up with him on the third day and ascended with him into heaven.

When we confront Scriptures like this we begin to understand just how radical the Gospel is—and the extent to which it challenges our worldly ways of thinking.

But the light of faith surpasses the light of reason; when God's word conflicts with what makes sense to you, believe God's word.

And so by faith we know that even now we are seated in the heavenly realms, reigning with Christ over all creation.

And this understanding of where our new identity—our new man—is located can have a profound impact upon our Christian lives.

First of all, it teaches us not to look for anything good within ourselves.

We don't go to the "internal me" that Whitney Houston was presumably still trying to learn how to love when she died of a drug overdose.

The solution to our problems doesn't lie in the internal "you": the internal "you" is where the problems lie.

When we honestly confront our deepest desires and inclinations, we find something distinctly UNloveable.

As the Scriptures say, *"The heart is deceitful above all things."*
Or, as Jesus told His disciples, *"...the things that...come from the heart...those defile the man. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders."*

C. S. Lewis put it this way: *"Look inside yourself and in the long run you will find only hatred, loneliness, despair, rage, ruin and decay."*

So don't look inside yourself to find your new identity.

It is not in you, it is in Christ.

And you don't have to look far to find Christ because He has not left us in doubt as to where He is.

As Moses said of Him: *"...the Word is very near you...."*

He is there whenever two or more are gathered in His Name—in worship and praise, in Scripture and prayer, in song and in sacrament!

He is never far from us, and once we have found Christ, we have found our true selves!

And unlike our sinful nature which is enslaved to sin and has no choice but to sin—our new man in Christ has a choice about how he lives his life, a choice as to how he directs his thoughts and words and actions.

Listen to Paul in *Colossians 3*: *"Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right*

hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things, for you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God."

So look up to heaven, Christian!

That's where your new home is!

Connect your mind to your new identity in Christ and you have dominion, power and freedom from sin!

You can follow Paul's advice in *Philippians 4*, "...whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and anything worthy of praise, let your mind dwell on these things."

You can do this! It is within your power, now that you live in Christ!

And just knowing that you have that choice empowers you to choose what is right.

The devil works furiously to persuade us that we are helpless victims before the power of sin, but since we live in Christ, we are no longer subject to the power of sin.

We are under grace!

You know, we Christians all have the same experience in our lives: we sin, we repent, we ask for forgiveness, we are forgiven, we rejoice, and we sin again.

That is the ongoing cycle of a Christian life.

We can choose to focus on the bottom side of the cycle, upon our failure to conquer sin our shame and despair over our own unworthiness.

If we focus on those things we are dancing with death: we're like the man Jesus described who tried to banish his demons by his own strength and ended up with more demons than he started out with.

Our alternative is to focus on the topside of the cycle.

To think about the rich and daily forgiveness of our sins which we have in Christ.

To remember our baptisms when God washed us clean from sin and made us His dear children.

To think about Christ's intercession with the Father on our behalf.

To know that the Holy Spirit dwells in us and continually prays to the Father on our behalf.

And finally to marvel at the infinite love of God which comes to us in Word and Sacrament every time we worship.

When we focus on these things, we bring this new identity we have in Christ down into this world and celebrate it in our relationships.

Paul wrote: "...be filled with the Spirit. Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs! Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ."

Do you have any idea how much power there is in living this way?

Just consider: Paul and Silas were thrown in jail at Philippi, after being flogged and placed in painful stocks.

And what did they do? They prayed and sang hymns to God.

And God answered their singing and praying by sending an earthquake to break their chains, spring open the prison doors and set them and the rest of the prisoners free.

That is power!

One of the great differences between believers and non-believers is that non-believers have no real choice as to how and where they live their lives.

They have only themselves to live in.

But believers have a choice.

We may not be able to control all of our circumstances, but we can have a lot to do with how we react to them!

We can allow ourselves to be gradually overcome by a sense of helplessness before our sins or we can be like Paul and Silas, who stirred up the power of the Holy Spirit of God with songs and praise and prayer and worship until the dungeon doors of helplessness and despair flew open and they went forth as free men.

The great hymn-writer Charles Wesley speaks of this in his hymn *And Can It Be: Long my imprisoned spirit lay, fastbound in sin and nature's night; Thine eye diffused the quickening ray, I woke—the dungeon flamed with light; My chains fell off, my heart was free; I rose, went forth, and followed thee.*"

There's an old saying in the real estate business that the three most important things that determine the value of a piece of property are location, location and location.

It's the same with our spiritual estate: the most important thing of all is where you are located.

You can look inside yourself and find your sin nature, or you can look to heaven and find yourself reigning with Jesus Christ.

It's your choice.

Amen