

Dangers of Raising Kids with Worm Theology'

Paul Coughlin

Many believers have been given what's called worm theology. The name comes from the Isaac Watts hymn "Alas! And Did My Savior Bleed," one line of which says, "Would He devote that sacred head for such a worm as I?" Those who adhere to this view of life contend that low self-worth means God is more likely to show mercy and compassion upon them. *Worm theology convolutes low self-worth with humility.*

Many were told as kids that they are worthless in and of themselves--that they possess no inherent value, even though the Bible says that all people are created in God's image, endowing them with innate value and worth. Making matters worse is that people who come from tough childhood experiences such as abuse and neglect have what a counselor friend calls "shame Velcro." They are actually attracted to systems of belief that demean them.

After speaking to an audience in Boston, Dr. James Dobson was questioned by an elderly missionary. She said that God wants her to think of herself as being no better than a "worm," and that, by way of implication, Dobson was wrong to say children should grow up with a quiet self-respect and confidence in themselves. Dobson and others who work to correct this false view of human worth are fighting a mighty battle. "That teaching," writes Dobson of worm theology, "did not come from Scripture."

Worm theology pulls a child down, filling her with nagging insecurities about her value and significance. It's as if parents, genuinely concerned that their children will grow up prideful and arrogant, want to make sure that this won't happen, however, instead of helping their kids build self-respect and confidence in humility, their instruction and discipline ensure that life will pass them by, leading to bitterness and sometimes rage toward the Lord.

The apostle Paul wrote that we shouldn't think more about ourselves than we ought; rather, we should use "sober judgment" in our self-assessment (Romans 12:3). Sober judgment means being realistic. It doesn't mean we should pretend we don't have gifts when we do, or that we should pretend we have talents, gifts, and abilities when we don't. Paul is telling us to be honest and realistic, not to despise ourselves.

Telling children they're worthless is the rhetoric of despair--especially during adolescence when worries of inferiority often hit their peak. And it's especially damaging to children who already think they're defective, that something is deeply wrong inside of them, not because they sin, but because *they* are "bad" and not as valuable as other kids. They won't allow themselves to believe they're good at anything; they will ward off compliments, and if people kick them around...well, isn't that what happens to worthless objects?

One of the most common ways a child deals with feelings of worthlessness, writes Dr. Dobson, "is to surrender, completely and totally."

[This person withdraws into a] shell of silence and loneliness, choosing to take no chances or assume unnecessary emotional risks. This person would never initiate a conversation, speak in a group, enter a contest, ask for a date, run for election, or even

defend his honor when it is trampled...As comedian Jackie Vernon once said, "The meek shall inherit the earth, because they'll be too timid to refuse it."

Dale Ryan is CEO of Christian Recovery International, the parent organization of the National Association for Christian Recovery. Many of the people seeking help struggle with this understanding of God and are unable to live whole, God-glorifying lives. Ryan writes:

Does God avoid us because we are sinners? If you have any doubt, any hesitation, about the answer to this question, I urge you to go back to the Bible. Did God avoid us? Is it not just the opposite? Did not God come to us? When God saw our pain, our brokenness, our defects of character, our insanity, what did God do? God came. Here. To be with us. To save us. To make a new kind of life possible for us. God's holiness is not the fragile kind that would be tainted by contact with broken, bent, damaged people. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who did not hide himself from our hopeless situation. God saw. God came--not to punish, not to nag, not to shame. Thank God that we were not worthless "worms" to God! We were, and are, precious, valuable. Wanted, a source of delight to God. That's just basic Bible. It may take a long time for this truth to sink in, but it's not really fancy theology. It's Christianity 101...

We have learned very broken ways to think and feel about ourselves. In recovery we struggle not to just think better about ourselves, but to do an honest self-assessment...Part of this self-assessment involves doing a "fearless moral inventory." The content of our inventory can be a pretty discouraging and disturbing list. But the process of doing our inventory is to be characterized by fearlessness. What does "fearless" mean? Certainly it means that we will be courageous while working on our inventory. But more specifically it means that we will seek to be so secure in God's love for us that no matter what we find in our inventory, we will know that we are still loved, still valuable, still of infinite importance to our Higher Power. It is only love that can sustain us when we experience the fear that comes from shame, from rejection, from resentments and from guilt. We seek to do a fearless inventory because we want God to so fill us with love that little room remains for fear. May God grant you the grace this day to think and feel about yourself in ways that are consistent with how your loving and grace-full Father thinks and feels about you.

Jim, a talented artist, did not take a promotion at work that would have allowed his wife to stay home with their children, a dream of hers, because he didn't think he was good enough for the job, even when multiple supervisors assured him he was. "I was told as a kid in my Christian home that I shouldn't go around thinking I was better than other kids. But I was better at art than other kids. My teachers told me. But I pretended I wasn't."

Jim denied his gift instead of embracing it. Like so many Christian Nice Guys, Jim lives with one foot on the gas, the other on the brakes. He wastes tremendous amounts of energy trying to resolve inner dialogues that haunt him. He wants to be the best artist he can be, yet he thinks God doesn't want him to be successful. He has the tools necessary to provide well for his family, but he's waiting for God's permission to thrive. He's waiting for the green light, but his spiritual training says it's going to stay red.

Such struggles were told that believing you're good at something makes you "worldly." I remember one preacher's family that lived out this principle. When their son once told his ten-year-old sister, "I'm good at baseball," she scolded, "You're not supposed to say that--it's bragging."

Being a coach, that was especially sad for me to witness. As kids grow up and play at higher levels, they become pretty well physically matched and similarly skilled. What often makes the difference in an athlete is his belief in himself, which helps him approach his sport with confidence. This *can* spill into arrogance (as anyone who watches professional sports has seen), and arrogance isn't good. But false humility isn't good, either. Like arrogance, self-denigration is dishonesty about who we are, and it easily spills over into unfulfilled potential, leading to anguish and, if unchecked, bitterness.

This concern isn't limited to athletics. For instance, I am continually grateful that Clive Staples Lewis did not grow up in the kind of "nice" Christian home that teaches children to pretend their gifts are merely average. The world may well have been deprived of the blessings wrought through his phenomenal talents had fake humility and false piety been foisted upon him; these fallacies sink so many believers from being agents of true redemption. C.S. Lewis did notice these distortions within Christian circles, and he opposed them:

We may be content to remain what we call "ordinary people": but He is determined to carry out a quite different plan. To shrink back from that plan is not humility: it is laziness and cowardice. To submit to it is not conceit or megalomania; it is obedience.

More than a hundred biblical passages warn against pride, the sin of self-sufficiency. Yet we must take care to understand what we're actually being warned against: haughtiness, contempt, arrogance, self-aggrandizement, the idea that we need nothing and no one. This is *false* belief about ourselves--belief that we're something we're not. And that's pride.

Conversely, *believing, affirming, and embracing who we truly are, who God made us to be, and how He has gifted us, is not pride.* That is honesty, that is wisdom, and, as Lewis said, that is obedience.

Paul Coughlin is the author of numerous books, including *No More Christian Nice Guy* and *No More Jellyfish, Chickens or Wimps*. He also co-authored a book for married couples with his wife Sandy, titled *Married But Not Engaged*. His articles appear in Focus on the Family magazine, and he has been interviewed by Dr. James Dobson, FamilyLife Radio, HomeWord, Newsweek, C-SPAN, The New York Times, and the 700 Club among others. Paul is founder of The Protectors, the faith-based answer to adolescent bullying, which provides curriculum for Sunday Schools, private schools, retreats, and individuals that trains people of faith to be sources of light in the theater of bullying.

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