

Managing Inferiority

A man made an appointment with a psychologist. During the visit he informed the psychologist that he felt inferior. The psychologist put him through a battery of tests and then gave him an new appointment. Before the next appointment the psychologist analyzed the data. When the appointment day arrived, the client sat before the psychologist who busily viewed his charts. Suddenly the psychologist gasped, looked up in alarm, and exclaimed, "My good man, you are inferior!"

It is unlikely there is a person alive who has not experienced feelings of inferiority of one type or another, and at one time or another. These feelings appear to be characteristic in human nature. In some, it has a minor effect; in others, it is a major problem. Success or failure in life is often determined by the ability to adjust to feelings of inferiority. When feelings of inferiority reach an abnormal state, they can lead to an inferiority complex. An inferiority complex causes one to completely belittle himself, or to become unduly sensitive, or to constantly seek for praise and approval, or to adopt an overcritical attitude toward others. Psychologists say that no one succeeds without some feelings of inferiority, and that most people who fail do so because of an inferiority complex. Normal development in maturing requires that one comes to recognize his limitations and capacities in order to achieve a proper balance in life. This is a goal that those with an inferiority complex generally fail to attain. For the Christian, the dangers resulting from an inferiority complex include the failure to develop latent talents, and/or inhibiting our full potential, and/or thwarting the most important goal of all-gaining eternal life in the Kingdom of God. A dictionary definition of the word inferior, as it relates to the human psyche, is that it is an idea or set of ideas bound emotionally that makes one feel less than his fellow man.

Psychologists are much more detailed in describing inferiority, and entire books have been written about it. But for our general interest let us consider two types of symptoms of inferiority. The first is the use of withdrawal tactics, and the second is aggressiveness. These manifest themselves in various ways. In the former, self-consciousness and sensitiveness, especially to criticism, lead to withdrawal from social contacts. In the latter, aggression leads to the excessive seeking of attention or approval, undue obedience, criticism of others, and worry. Psychologists could list many more nuances of these symptoms. For our general understanding, however, the above should suffice.

Causes of Inferiority

There are some external causes that may serve to provoke feelings of inferiority-causes that arouse our natural tendency to feel inferior. These are physical defects, parental attitudes, social disadvantages such as a lower economic status, and mental limitations. Those who suffer from what they consider to be physical defects are especially sensitive if these defects are called to their attention. They often try to conceal the defect, and if they cannot, will try to exaggerate other aspects of their appearance that are not defective. One who has been reared in a home where quarreling or alcoholism are rampant, or divorce or separation has occurred, or a blot has been placed upon the family name, there will be tendency to feel inferior. He or she will often feel humiliated in the presence of his peers. Considering social disadvantages, one in the lower income brackets will tend to feel inferior when comparing himself with the more successful. Other considerations of social disadvantage include living in a home with foreign parents who speak with an accent and maintain their old country ways. Also, a home where younger children are constantly compared with the success of an older sibling, or where there is a constant barrage of criticism directed toward the children. Aside from academic shortcomings, mental limitations may include the inability to handle or cope with various conditions or situations. In reality, though, this lack of ability to

handle or cope with problems may be due to a lack of experience rather than mental limitations.

How People Compensate

Most of us cannot adequately live in self-assurance if we are tolerating constant feelings of inferiority. Those who accept these feelings without compensating suffer from an inferiority complex. The vast majority of human beings rely on various methods of compensation in order to cope with the problem. These methods of compensation fall into five general categories. Psychologists would not necessarily refer to these categories and prefer to regard all the various defense mechanisms employed as the refusal on the part of those who feel inferior to accept the reality of feeling inferior.

The first to consider is apparent superiority. This does not refer to genuine superiority which results from cleverness or the easy accomplishment of difficult tasks. Over-compensation from feelings of inferiority may manifest itself in bluffing, but is often mistaken for genuine superiority. We have all encountered individuals who act so superior that their behavior and actions become obnoxious. This is often a cover for inferiority. People with true competence do not have to compensate, and everyone recognizes them by their bearing and abilities. This is not the case, however, with those who possess deep feelings of inferiority. Their artificial air becomes a burden to anyone who associates with them for any length of time and is often manifested in appearing knowledgeable in every field, or having an answer for everything, or arguing over every matter.

A second way of compensating is living in a fantasy. Psychologists regard this as evading reality. An important method of fantasizing is by the use of daydreams. We may recall the movie, "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty," where Danny Kaye portrayed a man who constantly imagined himself to be a strong, competent hero. Yet, it was only in his imagination. This is the way compensating by fantasy works. Another way is to spend hours and hours before the TV watching various characters vicariously act out the events in their lives. This method takes the mind off oneself by consuming the time and energy that is normally used to think about feeling inferior. This time could be used in a much more productive manner, for example, in striving to overcome one's weaknesses by developing one's strengths. The time spent fantasizing hinders the thought processes from being truly creative and developing one's talents.

A third way of compensating is by the use of fictitious goals. These goals are usually unattainable goals that a person is incapable of achieving. A number of reasons may contribute to this inability to achieve. These could be a lack of intellectual capacity, lack of education, lack of economic means, or even physical handicaps of one type or another. Reality is distorted by this method of compensation, and the person lives essentially in a dream world. Such a person is always working on some "big project," or some "big deal," or "some invention" which generates a feeling of importance and impresses others. When nothing ever materializes, observers begin to ask the question "Where's the beef?"

The fourth method of compensation is by use of the specialist approach. In such a case the sufferer becomes the absolute authority in one field. This approach hearkens back to the superiority syndrome as well as the fantasy syndrome, unless, of course, one has truly become a specialist. But even then specialists know their limitations, a factor not generally acknowledged by those who employ the specialist approach in compensating. The real problem with this approach is the tendency to become unbalanced. Many times the specialty will be abstract, of no practical purpose or value. There may be a lack of judgment and common sense. Everything is evaluated with such attention placed on the specialty that the time is spent on the twigs, not the trunk of the tree. Little of real value is accomplished. Many more worthwhile things could be accomplished if the specialty approach could be balanced with the practical

aspects of living. But those who use this for a method of compensating find this difficult to achieve.

The last method of compensating to be addressed here is identifying with a champion. Psychologists would be much more detailed in their analyses of the methods used in this kind of compensation, but for the laymen what is presented here should generally suffice. Identifying with a champion is so common that most people take it for granted. This can include not only identifying with some hero or team, but even identifying with and manifesting pride in one's company. As long as this does not interfere with one's goals in life, and does not deprive an individual of happiness and a satisfactory life, this kind of compensation is the least harmful to the individual because it can lead to better relationships. Some, however, tend to become so involved with the thing with which they identify that they become unbalanced. These unbalanced individuals, while defending their champion if he is criticized, have even killed others who disagreed with them. This may sound farfetched, but the facts say otherwise. We have all heard of parents attacking the coach, the parents of opposing teams, or even the players over what they consider to be some injustice. People who identify with a champion or a champion team, or take pride in their occupation, or in their company, credit themselves with their choices—a technique that compensates for their feelings of inferiority.

How Can the Christian

Achieve a Balance?

As noted, a major problem in compensating for feelings of inferiority is portraying an attitude of superiority. By and large everyone of the causes and compensations for coping with inferiority can be greatly subdued if one is converted. Conversion includes the process of coming to the realization that we are all inferior to God, and that the greatest of human abilities and accomplishments mean little unless they are in concert with His purpose. While it is true that a man or woman who is highly qualified in an expertise should be respected, such an accomplishment carries no real weight in the eyes of God if the individual has little or no righteousness. Character—the ability to distinguish right from wrong and to always follow the right in opposition to the wrong—is axiomatic to righteousness. Why? Because righteousness is determined by God's Law. "My tongue shall speak of thy word: for all thy commandments are righteousness" (Ps. 119:172). Right and wrong is not determined by men, except by those customs, or ethics, or laws and regulations that have their origin in the principles of the Ten Commandments. Today many laws of men are not based upon the Bible and are ungodly.

One of the most important principles we should understand is that it is wrong to compare ourselves with other men. It is indeed a mistake to compare ourselves with others. The Apostle Paul wrote: "For we dare not make ourselves of the number, or compare ourselves with some that commend themselves: but they measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise" (2 Cor. 10:12). It is too easy to look upon the outward appearance and accomplishments of others and then to feel either superior or inferior. ". . . For the LORD seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the LORD looketh on the heart" (1 Sam. 16:7). No matter how accomplished one may be, we must remember this: "For who maketh thee to differ from another? and what hast thou that thou didst not receive? now if thou didst receive it, why dost thou glory, as if thou hadst not received it?" (1 Cor. 4:7). The fact is: We are debtors to all men, and whatever we have, or whatever we are, came from others, even our capabilities, appearance and intelligence. Arrogance has no place in this physical life and certainly not in the Kingdom of God.

The Apostle Paul admonished that we are to ". . . Put on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him" (Col. 3: 10). Paul goes on to say: ". . . Put on therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness,

Bethel Church of God

Managing Inferiority

longsuffering” (v. 12). Those who aspire to be important, to be looked up to, and to acquire the recognition they feel may be due them should read James 3:1. While this text applies to those who endeavor to be Christian teachers, the advice James gave is applicable in all avenues of life. “My brethren, be not many masters [teachers] knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation.” Recognition of any value generally comes by means of sacrifice and experience, along with the mastery and skill required to command respect.

When it comes to the problem of fictitious goals, the basic problem with those who suffer from this syndrome is that they lack wisdom. This is why the Bible says: “Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom: and with all thy getting get understanding” (Prov. 4:7). Wisdom includes the ability to discern what is important and what is not. Often people who pursue fictitious goals do not recognize the difference between what is real and what is not. They live in a dream world. They have goals which are not attainable, and refuse to see that dreams of this nature are not real. Yet they labor on misdirected and misguided. Can we acquire wisdom? Yes, indeed! “If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him” (Jas. 1:5). There is much in the Bible about the importance of wisdom. Consider these texts: “For the LORD giveth wisdom: out of his mouth cometh knowledge and understanding” (Prov. 2:6). “For wisdom is better than rubies; and all the things that may be desired are not to be compared to it” (Prov. 8:11). “How much better is it to get wisdom than gold! and to get understanding rather to be chosen than silver!” (Prov. 16:16). “He that getteth wisdom loveth his own soul: he that keepeth understanding shall find good” (Prov. 19:8).

While many goals that people may seek in life may be necessary and a benefit for them at that time, the fact is: There is only one really worthwhile goal that is not temporary. Paul expressed it as follows. Referring to Christ, he wrote that he wished to “. . . know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death; If by any means I might attain unto the resurrection of the dead” (Phil. 3:10-11).

Then Paul went on to say:

Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect: but I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus. Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus. Let us therefore, as many as be perfect, be thus minded: and if in any thing ye be otherwise minded, God shall reveal even this unto you. (Phil. 3:12-15)

Next, let us consider fantasy, which in a sense is related to fictitious goals. The world of fantasy can also include entertainment. For many, entertainment has become a vicarious way of living in a dream world—a method of compensating so that one does not have to think about reality. Many people practically live in front of the TV. The world of drama engulfs them and takes them from time that could be spent in practical things. While many are able to handle TV wisely (though most of what is on it has no real value) some people would be better off without a TV as they do not have the will power to control their desire for entertainment. Television has become a primary method used by many today to fantasize. Consequently, they spend little time thinking about the really important issues that affect human life—why were they born, and what is the purpose and ultimate goal of man? The book of Psalms tells us: “I thought on my ways, and turned my feet unto thy testimonies” (Ps. 119:59). This beneficial advice is heeded by few today.

What about the specialist who compensates by becoming the absolute authority in one field? The solution to this problem is to achieve balance in one’s life. To limit one’s life to one area of knowledge can be a serious drawback to true success. A balanced life is one that is diversified, one that involves a number of wholesome and worthwhile experiences. While it may be good to be outstanding in one area of expertise,

Bethel Church of God

Managing Inferiority

one may find himself completely out of touch with everything else and can easily lack any social graces. A man is not an island to himself. Success in life includes balanced socializing, a practice that is certainly necessary in the Christian context.

A feeling of inferiority that produces the specialist can often lead him to feel superior. This is why Paul told the Romans: "For I say, through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think; but to think soberly [soundly], according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith" (Rom. 12:3). Paul adds: "Be of the same mind one toward another. Mind not high things, but condescend to men of low estate. Be not wise in your own conceits" (Rom. 12:16). If one brags about his accomplishments, the Bible instructs: "Let another man praise thee, and not thine own mouth; a stranger, and not thine own lips" (Prov. 27:2).

Another important necessity is developing love for others. The specialist, as well as those who compensate in other ways, are self-centered. One who has an outgoing love and concern for others will not be spending all his time thinking about himself and his accomplishments. Nor will he be constantly concentrating on how to compensate for feelings of inferiority. God does not instruct us to love others more than ourselves. He simply says we should love others as we love ourselves. Jesus said: ". . . Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself" (Matt. 22:39). If one loves his neighbor as much as he loves himself, he will be manifesting a great deal of love. When it comes to practicing Christianity, Peter wrote: "Seeing ye have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit unto unfeigned love of the brethren, see that ye love one another with a pure heart fervently" (1 Pet. 1:22).

Lastly, let us consider the final method of compensation addressed in this article-identifying with a champion. This approach has widespread application so that almost any kind of figure can be made into a champion-a sports figure, a successful businessman, a computer whiz, a movie star, or even a clergyman. Somehow this inclination helps people who feel inferior to overcome their feelings of inferiority because they feel their choice reflects superior judgment. Thus, they are not inferior after all. The problem with this approach is that it is too easy to idolize another human being, thus making a god out of him or her. The fact is: One's public image has no real bearing on what a champion is really like. When his or her flaws are revealed, as they often are, the one who has made an idol out of such a figure is shattered emotionally.

There is only one real champion-God. So, the key to choosing a champion is to select the right one. All human beings are flawed. One who places much confidence in any man is courting disappointment. The Bible warns: "Put not your trust in princes, nor in the son of man, in whom there is no help. His breath goeth forth, he returneth to his earth; in that very day his thoughts perish" (Ps. 146:3-4). The Apostle Paul did not hesitate to point out Christ as the One to be followed. He wrote: "Be ye therefore followers of God, as dear children" (Eph. 5:1). Paul even called attention to his own example by saying: "Be ye followers of me, even as I also am of Christ" (1 Cor. 11:1). If one centers his thoughts and affections on God, along with the desire to obey Him and do His will, he can learn to rely on the only worthwhile champion worthy of trust and confidence. Inferiority will have no place in the life of one who refuses to compensate for feelings of inferiority by human methods of reasoning that never come to an end. If one looks to God alone for the really important issues in life, inferiority can be managed.

A great deal of comfort in managing inferiority can be realized by applying the principles outlined in this article. Feelings of inferiority can be subjugated so that they no longer have a negative effect on one's life. May God help us all to understand and to truly receive the benefits that God's Word promises to those who believe.