DISTORTED IMAGES of SELF
Restoring our Vision

8 studies for individuals or groups

Dale & Juanita Ryan

With Notes for Leaders
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Getting the Most Out of Distorted Images of Self

The way we think and feel about ourselves is one of the most important things about us. Our self-images have an enormous impact on our lives. Among other things, our sense of self affects our peace of mind, our creativity and our ability to engage meaningfully in the world. Perhaps most important, it affects our relationships with others, including our relationship with God.

Self-image is not a simple thing. Our ideas about ourselves tend to be complex and even conflicting, to the point that it is not uncommon for us to present one version of ourselves to the outside world and struggle with another version in private.

Our self-images tend to be constructed from our complicated emotional and relational histories. All of our relationships and experiences throughout our lives are woven into our self-concept, but our most foundational self-images, both positive and negative, take root in early life.

As children we come to conclusions about ourselves based on the mosaic of experiences we have with others. These conclusions are not logical, rational deductions. They are more like impressions of ourselves in the context of life events and interactions with others. They are interpretations made at a time when we had a very limited maturity or understanding. As a result, some of the most foundational aspects of our self-image are constructed from our limited childhood perspectives.

Unfortunately, many of us have experiences in early life that
lead us to see ourselves in negative ways. These conclusions can develop into ongoing distortions in our sense of self.

Because we do not simply outgrow our distorted images of self, and because these distortions tend to be hidden from others and often from ourselves, these components of our self-image are capable of having a significant impact on what we do and think in all aspects of our lives. They can form a kind of grid through which we see ourselves well into our adulthood and potentially all the days of our lives.

Our distorted self-images are based in deep-seated fears. These fears are almost always too uncomfortable or too painful to expose to other people and often too uncomfortable or too painful to stay fully aware of ourselves. For that reason we develop ways to protect ourselves from our fears. If, for example, we live with a distorted self-image that we are unlovable, we may drive ourselves to the point of exhaustion to earn the love we fear can never be ours. Similarly, if we see ourselves as worthless, we might either do all we can to prove to others that we are valuable, or we might despair of being valued and settle for depressed, secluded lives.

Probably the most important thing to emphasize about distorted self-images is that they are not really who we are. Under all of our pretense and defensiveness, and deeper than our worst fears and distortions about ourselves, is a self that God created in God’s own image. We are God’s children, loved beyond our wildest imaginings, valued beyond telling, made to live in joyful reliance on our Maker, freely forgiven, fully repairable, always remembered and seen, significant in our capacity to be part of God’s presence in this world, and made to live in loving community with others.

The purpose of this LifeGuide is to help you see yourself through God’s eyes of love. Thomas Merton once described the important healing work we have to do in order to live in the
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truth of who we really are: “We must cast off our false, exterior self like the cheap and showy garment that it is. We must find our real self in its very great and very simple dignity: created to be a child of God, and capable of loving with something of God’s own sincerity.”

Because our distorted images of self are often rooted in painful emotional experiences, identifying them and pursuing healing can be an emotionally challenging experience. If you find this to be the case, we encourage you to seek out the support of a trusted friend, pastor, spiritual director or counselor. It is also important to remember that healing deeply from distorted images of self will likely mean healing slowly. None of us can change our distorted images of self simply by an act of our will or by our own effort. What we can do is invite God to heal us and seek the support we need in the process. Our prayer is that these studies will be used by the Spirit to encourage you on your journey of identifying some of your distorted images of self and in gradually displacing these distortions with biblically accurate images of yourself.

As you study these texts it is our prayer that you will learn to think and feel about yourself in ways that are consistent with the ways God thinks and feels about you. Our prayer is that you will hear God saying to you: “I love you. I value you. You are my very own, dearly loved child. This is who you are.”

May your vision or who you are be renewed as you come to see yourself through God’s eyes of love.

Suggestions for Individual Study

1. As you begin each study, pray that God will speak to you through his Word.

2. Read the introduction to the study and respond to the personal reflection question or exercise. This is designed to help

you focus on God and on the theme of the study.

3. Each study deals with a particular passage so that you can delve into the author’s meaning in that context. Read and reread the passage to be studied. The questions are written using the language of the New International Version, so you may wish to use that version of the Bible. The New Revised Standard Version is also recommended.

4. This is an inductive Bible study, designed to help you discover for yourself what Scripture is saying. The study includes three types of questions. Observation questions ask about the basic facts: who, what, when, where and how. Interpretation questions delve into the meaning of the passage. Application questions help you discover the implications of the text for growing in Christ. These three keys unlock the treasures of Scripture.

Write your answers to the questions in the spaces provided or in a personal journal. Writing can bring clarity and deeper understanding of yourself and of God’s Word.

5. It might be good to have a Bible dictionary handy. Use it to look up any unfamiliar words, names or places.

6. Use the prayer suggestion to guide you in thanking God for what you have learned and to pray about the applications that have come to mind.

7. You may want to go on to the suggestion under “Now or Later,” or you may want to use that idea for your next study.

Suggestions for Members of a Group Study

1. Come to the study prepared. Follow the suggestions for individual study mentioned above. You will find that careful preparation will greatly enrich your time spent in group discussion.

2. Be willing to participate in the discussion. The leader of your group will not be lecturing. Instead, he or she will be en-
couraging the members of the group to discuss what they have learned. The leader will be asking the questions that are found in this guide.

3. Stick to the topic being discussed. Your answers should be based on the verses which are the focus of the discussion and not on outside authorities such as commentaries or speakers. These studies focus on a particular passage of Scripture. Only rarely should you refer to other portions of the Bible. This allows for everyone to participate in in-depth study on equal ground.

4. Be sensitive to the other members of the group. Listen attentively when they describe what they have learned. You may be surprised by their insights! Each question assumes a variety of answers. Many questions do not have “right” answers, particularly questions that aim at meaning or application. Instead the questions push us to explore the passage more thoroughly.

When possible, link what you say to the comments of others. Also, be affirming whenever you can. This will encourage some of the more hesitant members of the group to participate.

5. Be careful not to dominate the discussion. We are sometimes so eager to express our thoughts that we leave too little opportunity for others to respond. By all means participate! But allow others to also.

6. Expect God to teach you through the passage being discussed and through the other members of the group. Pray that you will have an enjoyable and profitable time together, but also that as a result of the study you will find ways that you can take action individually and/or as a group.

7. Remember that anything said in the group is considered confidential and should not be discussed outside the group unless specific permission is given to do so.

8. If you are the group leader, you will find additional suggestions at the back of the guide.
We are creatures. We are created in love by God who is love. We are the much-loved children of God. Scripture teaches us that all that love is, God is toward us—patient, kind, respectful, self-giving, keeping no record of wrongs, protective, hopeful. God’s love for us is a love that is steadfast and unshakable. It is a love that endures forever.

Yet we struggle to trust that this is true. We may believe that God is loving, but we may not be able to live in the joy and peace of this reality because we see ourselves as unlovable. We may have constructed a self-image that assumes that something is so wrong with us that no one who knows us fully could possibly love us. Each of us has a unique story of how these false images come to take on the force of a foundational truth in our lives. But whatever our story—and however much we believe these distortions—they are not the truth about who we are.

God, who is love, loves us. This is good news. It is powerful news—powerful enough to compete with the distorted images of ourselves which seem to exercise control over our lives. It is
the good news that can set us free to be the much loved children our Creator made us to be.

**GROUP DISCUSSION.** What negative things have you heard other people say about themselves—things which you could tell they believed—but which you could see were not true?

**PERSONAL REFLECTION.** What negative things do you find yourself saying to yourself about yourself?

Write a more grace-full message to replace each of the negative things you say about yourself. (This might be difficult, but give it a try.)

The text for this study is a prayer on behalf of the people at the church in Ephesus. It is a prayer that they would come to know deeply and fully the powerful truth of God’s great love for them as expressed in Christ. Read Ephesians 3:14-21.

1. This prayer is directed to God the Father. What do verses 14-15 and 20 say about God?

2. Make a list of all the specific requests expressed in this prayer.

3. What thoughts do you have about this list of requests?
4. What is your thought about what verse 20 states on the heels of making all these requests?

5. What might it mean for God to strengthen us with power through the Spirit in our inner being as a way to make us ready for Christ to dwell in our hearts?

6. What might it mean for Christ to dwell in our hearts through faith, in the context of all that is being prayed here?

7. How is the love of God in Christ described in verses 18 and 19?

8. How do these words which describe God’s love affect you?
9. What might it mean to be “filled to the measure of all the fullness of God”?

10. Sit for a few minutes of quiet and meditate on the image found in verse 17: “And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love . . .” As you can, see yourself as a parched plant being transplanted into the soil of God’s rich, vast love for you. You are parched and dying because you have believed yourself unlovable in some way. But now you are being planted in the heart of God’s love. Slowly, let your roots relax, and begin to take in the nourishment available in the amazing soil of love. Drink it in. Let it strengthen you with new life, new hope, new joy. Write about your experience of meditating on this image.

11. What do you imagine it would be like for you to be filled with God’s love?

*Use the prayer in this text as the basis of a prayer for yourself to know God’s love.*

**Now or Later**

Sit with the image in question 10 for a few minutes each day this week. Continue to write about your experience of letting your roots sink deeply into the soil of God’s rich, vast love.
We are treasured by God. We are held in high esteem by our Maker. The sweeping narrative of Scripture is that God made us in God’s image and seeks to live in close relationship with us. Scripture shows us a God who freely gives to us, not only good gifts but also God’s very self.

We came from God. We are a part of God. We are valued by God. This value is not something we earn. It is not part of an “if-then” clause—if we do this or that, then God will value us. It is a given. It is part of the structure of the universe. We are valued.

Yet a large number of us spend our lives chasing the hope that maybe if we accomplish certain things, then we will be valued. If we are smart enough, knowledgeable enough, good looking enough, rich enough, thin enough, spiritual enough, caring enough, giving enough, then maybe we will earn some sense of worth. We strive to earn what is already ours. We are valuable. We are valued. This gift is ours to receive with humility, wonder and joy. It is ours to live in—freeing us to abandon all competition and comparison with others who are equally