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LOVE TANKS WITH A LEAK

"FOR a long time, I didn't have any self-esteem," William began. "The only time I felt good was when I had $100 sneakers and a $60 sweatshirt. If I didn't have them, I didn't want to go to school."

Who would have thought that beneath William's tough, cool image was an ego that could be crushed simply by cheap shoes or a generic sweatshirt? Too bad some of his enemies didn't know. They could have avoided a number of bruises, courtesy of William's fists. Little did they realize that William was a modern day Samson: his strength was in his shoes. Steal his shoes and you conquered the man.

Of course, his shoes weren't exactly the problem. The problem was William's reputation. It was what other people *thought* about his shoes—and therefore, him. Call it what you like—reputation, peer pressure, people-pleasing, codependency—William's life was controlled by other people. In that, he was no different from most anyone else.

My personal awakening to this problem came when I was a high-school senior. I had always been shy and self-conscious, controlled by what my peers thought (or *might* have thought), but I never considered it seriously until the day of the awards assembly.

I was up for an award, and I was scared to death I would get it!

The auditorium was bulging with over two thousand high-school juniors and seniors. From the back, where I liked to sit, it seemed a good mile or two up to the platform. All I could think of was what my classmates would think of me while I walked to the front. Would I walk funny? Would I trip going up the stairs? Would one person—I prayed it wouldn't be a girl I liked—think I was a jerk? What about those who were also nominated or who thought they were deserving? What would they think of me if I won instead of them? What would I ever say for a brief acceptance speech?

God, please don't let me get this! I prayed.

After a number of lesser awards were announced, the vice principal went to the podium to introduce the winner. He began with a short, somewhat cryptic biographical sketch. It didn't sound *exactly* like me, but it was generic enough to fit. I was starting to sweat, but I sat motionless for fear that someone would think I was getting interested. Finally the announcement came: "And the winner of this year's senior award is ... Rick Wilson!"

Rick Wilson! I couldn't believe it! Of all people. No one even thought he was a candidate!

You can imagine my reaction. Relief? No way. I felt like a total failure. *Now* what would people think of me? They knew I was up for the award, and someone else was chosen. What a loser I was.

Immediately my mind began spinning out justifications. *If I had worked at all this year, I would have won. I certainly had the potential, I just didn't want to win. I'm a late bloomer; when I get to college, I will show them.* I was ashamed to go back to class.

Pitiful, isn't it?

Later that day the events replayed in my mind. *What a mess!* I reflected. *I live like a frightened kid. I am so controlled by what other people think or might possibly think.* But that was about it. I didn't

know where to go from there. I didn't have sufficient biblical resources to find any solutions to what I discovered about myself. As far as I could tell, there was no way out. This was my life. Self-consciousness, being controlled by the opinions of others, or whatever it was called, could only be managed, not cured. Perhaps future success would help. Or (and I thought this was quite clever) I could embellish one of the justifications that had crossed my mind earlier in the day. I could do well but never be wholeheartedly devoted to any particular task. Then when I wasn't successful and my self-esteem was in the Dumpster, I would rationalize that I *could* have been the best if I had worked harder. At least *I* could think I was okay, for what that was worth.

I had no answers, but the events of the day certainly brought these issues to the front of my mind. It was, at least, an awakening.

In college I tried to combat this beast with a few quasi-successes in academics and athletics, and I used the I-could-have-done-better-if-I-really-tried strategy, but this *thing* was ever-present. I was a Christian, but that didn't help me put up a fight. I still felt it. Every rejection, every perceived failure, every person I wanted to be noticed by who didn't notice me reminded me that I was still the kid sitting in the back of the high-school auditorium.

Okay in Christ

There were a few changes during my seminary days. They came during my first year when I had the opportunity to lead a Bible study on the book of Romans. I had already considered Romans' theme of justification by faith, but this time it seemed especially relevant because I made a connection between my dependence on the opinions of other people and justification by faith. My reasoning, certainly not original with me, was that I didn't have to measure up to the standards of others' opinions because God's opinion of

me was rooted in the finished work of Jesus. In other words, even though I was a sinner, God loved me and made me righteous in his sight, so *who cared what other people thought?!*

This seemed to be the freedom I needed. I felt as if I was converted again. I didn't have to be concerned about the opinions of others. I simply had to be aware of God's opinion of me. I was a beloved son. A saint. Okay in Christ. Great!

Over the next few years I was still over-concerned about the opinions of others, but I would quickly remind myself that I didn't have to measure up to what they might be thinking.

Who cares what they think? I tried to persuade myself. *So what if they don't think I'm great? I have already measured up because of what Jesus did.* I figured that if Jesus thought I was great, that should be enough.

I *thought* my treatment was working. There were only a few moments when I would have my doubts. Sometimes I would think, *Is it really Christ that I am standing on, or am I standing on my perceived successes and the favorable opinions of others?* After all, other people were usually very affirming. Maybe I felt good about myself because *they* felt good about me. Or maybe I felt good about myself because I had done respectably in athletics and had decent grades, *compared to other people.* Maybe I had taken pride in my ministry aspirations, *compared to other people* and their seemingly lower spiritual goals. Maybe I found an identity in being "nice," or at least nicer than most of the people I knew. But aren't all people-pleasers nice? In short, perhaps I was still being ruled by the opinions of others, but since I was feeling fine, I wasn't very motivated to investigate further. I certainly wasn't going to talk to anyone else about it—that would have been too embarrassing.

Then I got married.

A Great Awakening

Marriage has been a privilege and blessing to me. It has also been the context for a surprising discovery. I found that being okay in Christ was not quite enough for me. When I was first married, I knew that Jesus loved me, but I also wanted my new wife to be absolutely, forever smitten with me. I *needed* love from her. I could finally handle small amounts of rejection from other people, but I felt paralyzed if I didn't have the love I needed from her. I needed *unconditional* love. If she didn't think I was a great husband, I would be crushed (and, as you might guess, a little angry).

This led to a second awakening. I suddenly realized that I had mutated into a walking love tank, a person who was empty inside and looking for a person to fill me. My bride was, indeed, gifted in being able to love, but no one could have possibly filled me. I think I was a love tank with a leak.

I tried the old biblical answers that had worked before my marriage, but they were of no use. They didn't go far enough. In fact, they became almost irrelevant. They reminded me of times when, after I'd been politely dumped by a girl, my parents would try to cheer me up with "We love you no matter what." I always appreciated their attempt, but, as all parents and children know, it didn't help. Sure, it was nice that my parents loved me, and it would have been much worse if they did *not* love me, but I wanted *somebody else* to love me too.

Since those days I have spoken with hundreds of people who end up at this same place: they are fairly sure that God loves them, but they also want or *need* love from other people—or at least they need *something* from other people. As a result, they are in bondage, controlled by others and feeling empty. They are controlled by whoever or whatever they believe can give them what they think they need.

It *is* true: what or who you need will control you.

Facing the "Fear of Man"

Many of the people I've talked to also had an awakening when they saw the controlling power of other people. They awoke to an epidemic of the soul called, in biblical language, "the fear of man." Although they were avowed worshippers of the true God, below the surface they feared other people. That is not to say that they were terrified by or afraid of others (although sometimes they were). "Fear" in the biblical sense is a much broader word. It includes being afraid of someone, but it extends to holding someone in awe, being controlled or mastered by people, worshipping other people, putting your trust in people, or needing people.

One additional note: Just as "fear" in the biblical sense is broadly defined, so too is the word "man." As used in Scripture, it includes men, women, and children. When I use the biblical expression "fear of man" in this book, I am not limiting my focus to the male gender. I am assuming, as the Bible does, that every person in our lives has the potential to control us.

However you put it, the fear of man can be summarized this way: We replace God with people. Instead of a biblically guided fear of the Lord, we fear others.

Of course, the "fear of man" goes by other names. When we are in our teens, it is called "peer pressure." When we are older, it is called "people-pleasing." Recently, it has been called "codependency." With these labels in mind, we can spot the fear of man everywhere.

> ➤ Have you ever struggled with peer pressure? "Peer pressure" is simply a euphemism for the fear of man. If you experienced it when you were younger, believe me, it is still there.

It may be submerged and revealed in more adult ways, or it may be camouflaged by your impressive résumé (your perceived successes).

➤ Are you over-committed? Do you find that it is hard to say no even when wisdom indicates that you should? You are a "people-pleaser," another euphemism for the fear of man.

➤ Do you "need" something from your spouse? Do you "need" your spouse to listen to you? Respect you? Think carefully here. Certainly God is pleased when there is good communication and a mutual honor between spouses. But for many people, the desire for these things has roots in something that is far from God's design for his image-bearers. Unless you understand the biblical parameters of marital commitment, your spouse will become the one you fear. Your spouse will control you. Your spouse will quietly take the place of God in your life.

➤ Is self-esteem a critical concern for you? This, at least in the United States, is the most popular way that the fear of other people is expressed. If self-esteem is a recurring theme for you, chances are that your life revolves around what others think. You reverence or fear their opinions. You need them to buttress your sense of well-being and identity. You need them to fill you up.

➤ Do you ever feel as if you might be exposed as an impostor? Many business executives and apparently successful people do. The sense of being exposed is an expression of the fear of man. It means that the opinions of other people—

especially their possible opinion that you are a failure—are able to control you.

➤ Are you always second-guessing decisions because of what other people might think? Are you afraid of making mistakes that will make you look bad *in other people's eyes?*

➤ Do you feel empty or meaningless? Do you experience "love hunger"? Here again, if you need others to fill you, you are controlled by them.

➤ Do you get easily embarrassed? If so, people and their perceived opinions probably define you. Or, to use biblical language, you exalt the opinions of others to the point where you are ruled by them.

➤ Do you ever lie, especially the little white lies? What about cover-ups where you are not technically lying with your mouth? Lying and other forms of living in the dark are usually ways to make ourselves look better before other people. They also serve to cover our shame before them.

➤ Are you jealous of other people? You are controlled by them and their possessions.

➤ Do other people often make you angry or depressed? Are they making you crazy? If so, they are probably the controlling center of your life.

➤ Do you avoid people? If so, even though you might not say that you *need* people, you are still controlled by them. Isn't a hermit dominated by the fear of man?

➤ Aren't most diets, even when they are ostensibly under the

heading of "health," dedicated to impressing others? The desire for the "praise of men" is one of the ways we exalt people above God.

➤ Have all these descriptions missed the mark? When you compare yourself with other people, do you feel good about yourself? Perhaps the most dangerous form of the fear of man is the "successful" fear of man. Such people think they have made it. They have more than other people. They feel good about themselves. But their lives are still defined by other people rather than God.

A Universal Problem

Don't think that this is simply a problem for the shy, mousy types. Isn't the angry person or the person who tries to intimidate also controlled by others? Any form of one-upmanship qualifies. What about the business executive who is working to be more productive than an associate in order to get ahead? The endless jockeying of egos in the corporate board room is an aggressive version of fear of man. And do you think that the super-confident, superstar athlete is somehow above seeking the good opinions of fans and sports writers? Aggressively asserting that you don't need anyone is just as much an evidence of the fear of man as the more timid examples we have seen. Fear of man comes in these packages and many others.

Does it include you yet? If not, consider just one word: evangelism. Have you ever been too timid to share your faith in Christ because others might think you are an irrational fool?

Gotcha.

Fear of man is such a part of our human fabric that we should check for a pulse if someone denies it.

In the United States we are on the tail end of a revolution that included scores of books on codependency. For years every book that had the word "codependency" in the title was a guaranteed best seller. Melodie Beattie, for example, made millions with *Codependent No More*. She obviously hit on a topic that was important to many people, yet it was basically the fear of man in a secular garment. Melody Beattie talked about the problem in terms of being controlled by or dependent on other people, and her prescription was to love yourself more.

The Search for a Biblical Response

That approach sounded a little shallow to the evangelical world, so many Christians responded by saying that a better treatment for codependency is to know that *God* loves you more than you think. God can fill you with love, so you don't have to be filled by other people.

This certainly is better than the exhortation to love yourself more, but—and this might sound controversial—even this answer is incomplete. The love of God can be a profound answer to just about any human struggle, but sometimes we can use it in such a way that it becomes a watered down version of profoundly rich truth. For example, sometimes, because of shortcomings in us rather than Scripture, this answer misses the call to "consider others better than yourselves" (Phil. 2:3), or it ignores personal repentance. Sometimes it still allows us and our needs to be at the center of the world, and God becomes our psychic errand boy given the task of inflating our self-esteem.

We need to go further in searching the Scripture so that we can truly understand the nearly universal experience of the fear of man. The purpose of this book is to take that next step. Along the way we will meet people such as Abraham and Peter, who slipped into the chasm of the fear of man and brought others down with them. We

will look at the subtle ways in which that fear surfaces in our lives. We will see that the codependency writers were right—this *is* a national epidemic. Then we will find God's way out.

Here are some of the themes we will explore.

➤ To really understand the roots of the fear of man, we must begin to ask the right questions. For example, instead of "How can I feel better about myself and not be controlled by what people think?" a better question is "Why am I so concerned about self-esteem?" or "Why do I have to have someone—even Jesus—think that I am great?" These are topics we will look at from many angles throughout this book, but included in the answer is the fact that we need a way to think *less often* about ourselves. We'll talk about why—and how.

➤ The most radical treatment for the fear of man is the fear of the Lord. God must be bigger to you than people are. This antidote takes years to grasp; in fact, it will take all of our lives. But my hope is that the process can be accelerated and nurtured through what we will study in this book.

➤ Regarding other people, our problem is that we *need* them (for ourselves) more than we *love* them (for the glory of God). The task God sets for us is to need them *less* and love them *more*. Instead of looking for ways to manipulate others, we will ask God what our duty is toward them. This perspective does not come naturally to any of us, and many of us need to look at this truth from several angles before we can see it. But the conviction of this book is that this truth is another of Scripture's divine paradoxes—the path of service is the road to freedom.