

Where a Man Finds His Worth

I could bench nearly 400 pounds, but I couldn't lift the weight of low self-esteem off my back ... until I discovered that only what God says about me really matters.

How would you respond if someone asked you that question? You might answer with your name, but that's just what people call you.

Come on, who are you? You might tell me your profession, but that's just what you do, not who you are. Finally frustrated, you might start saying you're kind, funny and generous—but those are just personality characteristics. Who are you? Do you really know?

We're talking about identity. It's the question of who you are when everything is stripped away. If you get this one wrong—or base your identity on the wrong foundation—you'll be in for a string of disasters. You certainly won't be able to find success with any fitness program. It will sabotage your efforts every time.

I haven't always had my identity built on bedrock. Mine was a combination of things at different times. During my early years, my identity was found in my popularity, athletic ability and physical appearance. Then at age 16, I was ripped from my old environment (a U.S. military base in Japan) and thrown into a new school in the United States.

I coped by throwing myself into what had always helped me: sports. Through that I did make some friends and soon things weren't so bad. I played soccer and earned a spot as goalie. It was during this first year that my soccer coach wanted me to sign up for weight lifting class to improve my vertical

jump.

OK, don't laugh, but in my first days of weight lifting class I had to start on the bench press with no weights at all. All I could lift was the bar, a mere 45 pounds. I knew there were plenty of girls who could lift much more than I could. But I stayed with it. In a few months something began to happen: I felt stronger, I could lift more and I was getting bigger!

I remember the moment I threw myself into this heart and soul. There was this one senior at our school. He was Mr. Popularity. Everyone in school knew his name. Girls would practically trip over themselves to go out with him at a moment's notice. This guy was built, too.

Well, one day during our lunch break my friends and I were working out in the gym when this guy came in with some buddies. They weren't even working out; they would just come in sometimes to show off. The big event that would turn heads was when someone would put three plates on each side of the bar for the bench press—putting the total weight at 315 pounds. Mr. Popularity did about five lifts of this weight, bouncing the bar off his chest like it was a trampoline and arching his back so high I swear you could have driven a truck under the bridge he made. Everyone stood and watched.

Then it happened. A minute later he came over to the bench where I had just finished benching 95 pounds (the bar plus 25 pounds on each side). I had come a long way from my early days of struggling with just the bar, and I was feeling my confidence grow.

Well, this guy came up and asked if he could work in really quick and do some lifts of my bar. "Sure," I said. Who was I to say no? Plus I was just honored he was speaking to me. He then proceeded to stand facing the bar and began curling the weight a few times using his biceps. What I needed my whole chest, shoulders and triceps to press up, he was curling. The

weight I could barely lift with my whole upper body, he played with like a toy.

His friends got a good laugh at my expense, and I'm sure he must have felt pretty proud. I just stood there embarrassed. But I felt a fire come to life in the pit of my stomach like never before. As I walked home that day after school, I remember saying these exact words: "My time will come."

I began to work out extra hard in gym class, and I'd go during my lunch breaks on the days I didn't have class. I'd do push-ups and sit-ups in my room before bed almost each night. I started eating two lunches (as unhealthy as cafeteria food was; good thing I was young). I ate any protein I could get my hands on. By the time my sophomore year came I had gotten considerably bigger. I was benching 285 toward the end of that year and was quickly making my way toward 300.

I began to get more attention. Here I was, only a sophomore, yet I was one of the strongest guys in school. I made a lot more friends in that weight lifting circle, and during class the coach moved me up to the highest bench where the strongest guys were. All the guys at that bench were at least juniors, and most were seniors.

So you can see how I might begin to find my identity in this. Who was I? I was the sophomore who could bench press 285. Then I was the senior who could bench 330.

In college I took two New York State records for the bench press in the 165-pound weight class. For competitions and records you cannot bounce the bar on your chest; it has to come to a dead stop with three judges standing around you. The highest weight I ever got up to was 395 pounds. I always wanted to break into the 400-pound club, but I injured my shoulders and never got close to it again.

But during my sophomore year of college I came to know the Lord. That's when I finally began to discover where my

identity really should have been found. There's nothing wrong with caring for your body or competing in athletics, but we can't allow our identities to be found in it. Where do you draw your identity from?

I once saw a pastor hold up a \$100 bill and ask his congregation who would like it. Of course lots of hands shot up. He said, "I'll give it to one of you, but first let me do something." He then crumpled the bill in his hands until it disappeared into his fist. "OK," he said, "now who still wants it?" The people looked at each other and chuckled, and hands shot up again.

"All right, what if I do this to it?" He threw the bill on the ground and stomped on it, grinding his heel into the floor. "Now who still wants this hundred dollar bill?" Everyone's hand still shot up.

What he said next really made me think. "My beloved" he said, "why is it that no matter what happened to this bill—whatever it had gone through, wherever it had been—you still would take it? I'll tell you. It's because you still recognized the value. Nothing it had been through could change its value one bit."

You've got to get this or you won't be able to see lasting success in true health. If you think you're worthless, you'll find it all but impossible to find the strength to find true health: physical, emotional and spiritual.

Your mirror may say you're ugly. The world may say you're undesirable. But none of that can influence you if you are convinced that you have immense worth no matter what you've been through—not because the world or anyone else says so, but because the One who made you says it.

Galatians 4:7 says, "So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir" (NIV). Try that on for what it means to have value. You're royalty.

How would your life be different if you really embraced that truth? You would stop letting other people tell you whether or not you're attractive enough. You would find all your truth about yourself in what your royal Father said about you.

To know what your Father says about you, you've got to spend time in His presence. We tend to spend more time, money and thought on our physical appearance than we spend with God and in His Word. It's no wonder our perception of what makes up our identity is skewed. How could we possibly know who we are if we aren't spending time with the One who made us?

The next time you feel attacked about your body image or self-esteem, remember that the enemy's goal is to take you out of the battle and keep you from serving with all the wonderful talents and gifts the Lord has given each and every one of us. Think, What does the enemy stand to gain if I believe this to be true about who I am? Then answer back with what God says about you.

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