

READERS' GUIDE for
SEE YOURSELF THROUGH GOD'S EYES:

52 Meditations To Grow in Self-Esteem

For individual and group use.

by Marie Paul Curley, fsp

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You may obtain print or e-book copies of *See Yourself Through God's Eyes: 52 Meditations To Grow in Self-Esteem* from Pauline Books & Media or visit: www.pauline.org.

See Yourself Through God's Eyes: 52 Meditations To Grow in Self-Esteem offers hand-picked Scripture passages and reflections that have helped me on my journey of discovering the Lord's faithful and unfathomable love. My hope is that these personal Scriptural meditations become a springboard for each reader to discover that God's love for us is real, faithful, and transformative.

In this Readers' Guide, you will find additional material to help you:

- * to reflect on your own life experiences in the light of God's love
- * to build or strengthen the spiritual foundations for a healthy self-esteem
- * to share your insights and journey with a group if you so desire

The guide is divided into the same four sections which the book uses, and each section provides questions for both individual reflection and for group sharing:

- A. *Introductory Material*
- B. *Part 1 The God Who Loves Me*
- C. *Part 2 Shaping My Identity in Christ*
- D. *Part 3 God's Beloved in the World*

The individual questions conclude with *One Step Further*—which offers additional resources or suggestions for ways to further grow in our belief and acceptance of God's love.



Using the Book and Guide in a Group

Since one of the greatest supports we can have in developing a positive self-esteem is the affirmation of good friends, you may wish to use the guide in a supportive group atmosphere. This guide offers resources for four group-sharing sessions. You might wish to consider a simple format like the following, depending on available time.

Preparation for the Group

Pick a convenient time and place to meet.

Choose a meditation to begin your meeting with.

Encourage the members of the group to:

- * read at least several meditations from the part of the book that you will be reflecting on.
- * reflect on the personal reflection questions from the *Readers' Guide*, jotting down notes and insights if that's helpful.
- * look over the questions for group sharing in the guide and be prepared to discuss them.

If possible, invite group members to arrive 20-30 minutes early for personal reflection time—especially for those who didn't have a chance to reflect on the questions at home.

Group Meeting

1. Begin with a short prayer.

Start the get-together by asking a volunteer from the group to read aloud the meditation that you chose ahead of time. At the end, re-read the Scripture passage. Allow some time for silence. Next, invite group members in a spirit of freedom to share what arose in them during the reading—their insights, feelings, reflections. (No one is obliged to share. One easy way to begin sharing if one is shy or new to faith-sharing is to simply repeat the word or phrase that touched them in the reading.) Wrap up the prayer-time by praying the "Our Father" together.

2. Share on the group reflection questions.

In an atmosphere of freedom and respect, read through the questions for group reflection one at a time, inviting people to talk about each. (The last question invites people to share an insight from one of the personal reflection questions, if they desire.)

3. Conclude with a prayer.

As a closing prayer at the end, you may wish to re-read the Scripture passage that you opened with, and pray the short one-line prayer at the end.

Section A: Introductory Material

The Introduction *describes the author's painful experience of low self-esteem, and how her experience of God's unconditional love helped her to grow spiritually and in a positive view of herself. In this introduction, we are invited to reflect on our understanding of God and of ourselves, and to deepen our awareness of God's love for us.*

For Personal Reflection

1. In the introduction, Sr. Marie Paul describes how she experienced low self-esteem:

“Ever since I could remember, I felt inadequate to life's challenges, ashamed of revealing anything about myself because someone would find out how shallow and unworthy of being loved I really was. The simple challenges of everyday life were enough to cue up taunting voices of self-doubt or even self-hate. I was rarely at ease with myself. Trying something new was incredibly anxiety-provoking. By the time I was a teenager, low self-esteem had become a distorted mirror which prevented me from being able to see myself honestly...”

Which of these effects of low self-esteem have you experienced? In what other ways does low self-esteem affect your life?

2. Self-esteem can be defined in many ways, but one simple definition is believing that we are lovable. How would you define self-esteem? How could a positive self-esteem help you to grow as a person? as a disciple of Christ?

3. Sister says that she was able to discover the truth about herself only in the light of God's love. The journey to discover the deepest truth about ourselves may be one of the most important journeys that we can ever make. When have you been able to see yourself in the light of God's love?

4. In the introduction, Sr. Marie Paul describes how she began to recognize the effects that low self-esteem had in her life: “I gradually came to identify the root of my lack of self-confidence as poor self-esteem. I also became aware of how low self-esteem prevented me from being at peace with myself and caused me to live in a state of high anxiety.”

Other ways low self-esteem affects people are:

- feeling incompetent
- feeling unworthy
- being afraid to take risks
- always talking negatively about one's self
- frequently apologizing, even if one isn't to blame
- feeling over-responsible for others
- depression
- self-hatred
- warped perceptions of God and others
- disproportionate emotional responses to small events in daily life

Which of these ways resonate with you? Put a check mark next to them. Circle the top three ways that low self-esteem affects you in your day-to-day life. (If something from this list is missing, feel free to add it in.)

5. God's love is the light of our lives, but sometimes we put a filter over that light when we think about ourselves. What "filters" do you use when you think about yourself? (Some of these filters might include perfectionism, the "good" child or the "bad" child, the outsider, the underachiever, the overachiever, the "stupid" one, the family clown, etc.) Which filter do you use the most? Are the filters you've identified valid, or just familiar?

6. How will you use this book (or the suggestions/examples it offers) to grow in your awareness of God's love for you?

One Step Further

* Pick one way to focus on God's love in your life for the next week or month.

* Visit www.fathersloveletter.com, and download/read the letter, or watch the video. You may wish to use some of the cited Scripture passages in your prayer.

For Group Sharing

1. Some people would say that in our self-centered society, self-esteem is just jargon for the sin of pride—an excessive regard for one's self. Instead, throughout the meditations, Sr. Marie Paul points out that positive self-esteem is based on humility—the truth of who we are as we stand before God (Meditations 13, 22, 39, 50). The Church consistently teaches the dignity of the human person as created by God out of love, in God's own image. How are a positive self-esteem and the sin of pride different?

2. The introduction lists several ways that Sr. Marie Paul received help to open her eyes to the light of God's love: prayer as a relationship with God, spiritual direction, counseling, faith, loving family and friends, and meditation on the Scriptures. Which of these ways might be helpful for you? What else might help you to deepen your belief in and acceptance of God's love for you?

3. Share one story of how God's love has touched your life, or one Scripture passage that reminds you of God's love for you.

4. The meditations in this book use stories about the difficulties of life to show that God's love is present even in the "dark places" in our lives. But faith isn't easy. How do you relate to the passage from Isaiah on page 5 (Isaiah 45:2-3)?

5. Is there anything you'd like to share from the personal reflection questions?

*Section B: Part 1 The God Who Loves Me
(Meditations 1-18)*

Part 1—The God Who Loves Me *is the foundation of the rest of the book, focusing on how God reveals himself to us through the Bible, and what God reveals to us about ourselves. In this section, we are invited to confront our assumptions about God with the images that the Scriptures offer us, and to renew our relationship with God in the light of his loving gaze.*

For Personal Reflection

1. “Our image of the infinite God is always limited and inadequate” (Meditation 3). The phrase “image of God” refers to the way that we think about God spontaneously. As children, we often think of God as an omnipotent parent figure—with all our parents’ merits and faults. What assumptions do we still carry about God from our childhood? How do they compare with how Jesus describes the Father, the Spirit, or himself, in the Gospels? (You may find it helpful to check out several of these passages: Mt. 5:43-48, Mt. 10:29-31, Mt. 18:10-14, Lk. 10:21-22, Lk. 11:9-13, Lk. 15:11-32, Jn. 8:12, Jn. 11:25-26, Jn. 14:1-7, 15-21, Jn. 15:9-11.)
2. Just as we grow physically and intellectually, we are invited to grow spiritually. A childhood instruction in the Faith is not enough on which to base a mature understanding of God. How is our image of God rooted in how God has revealed himself through the Bible and the Church’s teaching?
3. Meditation 8 begins with the words: “God wants my deepest happiness.” God, who is infinite Goodness, always wants what is best for us. Even when we are going through something challenging or painful, God wants to use it to bring us to new or fuller life. How has God worked in your life when things weren’t easy? How might God be inviting you now to a fuller life?
4. “God wants us to share everything with him” (Meditation 9). How would you describe your prayer: praise? formal? conversational? one-sided? a series of 911 calls? or _____? Knowing how much God wants to be close to you, how can you make your prayer life more relational?
5. “No matter what challenge we face, God is lovingly present with us *in* that challenge” (Meditation 18). Take a moment to think of something painful that you are facing right now. Acknowledge your fear, pain, or concern about the situation.

Now, take a mental step back.

How might God be inviting you to live this challenge? How is God giving you the grace or strength or peace to go forward?

Even if you can’t feel God’s invitation or grace at this moment, you can still use this difficulty as a reminder and opportunity to grow in trust, to “lean” on God. In your prayer this evening, entrust your feelings about this situation to the Lord by praying Psalm 23 and asking the Good Shepherd to shepherd you past this challenge.

6. The title of Meditation 14 is “God calls me to live in love.” We are called to live in loving relationship with ourselves, with God, and with others. All these relationships are interconnected. How can your journey towards loving and respecting yourself help you to be more loving towards others?

One Step Further

* The prayer from Meditation 13 can be very powerful: “Jesus, in your love, reassure me today that I am more than just my faults.” How do you see yourself? Without reading ahead, stop now and make a list of ten adjectives or qualities to describe yourself.

- | | |
|----|-----|
| 1. | 6. |
| 2. | 7. |
| 3. | 8. |
| 4. | 9. |
| 5. | 10. |

After you have your list, go back and re-read it. How do you list your qualities: positively or negatively? A quality is usually both a gift and a challenge. For example, a sensitive person is likely to notice and appreciate beauty more often than others, but is also more likely to be irritated more easily than others.

--If you listed your qualities more negatively than positively, go back now and list those qualities positively.

--If you already listed your qualities positively, try adding something to your list every day for the next week:

- | | |
|----|----|
| 1. | 5. |
| 2. | 6. |
| 3. | 7. |
| 4. | |

* The Scriptures repeat over and over again that God is faithful. It's easy to acknowledge this in theory, but it's not easy for us to trust God when we face something painful or difficult. How has God been faithful to you? What words or image would you use to describe God's fidelity? Using those words or images (or both), write your own prayer or "personal psalm" of trust in God's faithful love.



For Group Sharing

1. What images of God did you grow up with? What images of God does the Church present to us now? How are they helpful? How are they limiting?

2. Share one of your favorite Scriptural images of God.

3. How would you describe the ways that you pray when you are with others—e.g., at church, in prayer groups, in your family, etc. (Some ways to describe prayer include: adoration, thanksgiving/praise, intercession, familiar conversation, _____.) How does “community prayer” nurture your relationship with God?

4. “To be humble means: 1) to know and accept who we really are, 2) to acknowledge our utter dependence on God, and 3) to be responsible for our choices and actions, striving to be fair and kind both to ourselves and to others. In essence, humility is to be in right relationship with ourselves, God, and others” (Meditation 13).

How are humility and a healthy self-esteem related? How might humility help in developing a healthy self-esteem? How might a healthy self-esteem help us to grow in humility?

5. We all face situations in our daily lives that challenge our belief in God’s love for us. What insights in this section have helped you to hold fast to God’s love? What “strategies” or reminders do you use to continue to root your life in God’s love?

6. Is there anything you’d like to share from the personal reflection questions or from your prayer with one of the meditations?

This question can be helpful if the group has a history and the members know each other fairly well; it’s also a wonderful way to end the group session:

7. All of us are affected by what others reflect back to us about ourselves. Go around the group and thank each person for one gift that he or she brings to the group.

*Section C: Part 2 Shaping My Identity in Christ
(Meditations 19-37)*

Part Two—Shaping My Identity in Christ *offers insights to help us accept the truth about ourselves in the light of our relationship with God. God created us as human beings who are gifted and limited, but always beloved. The meditations in Part Two also encourage us to pay attention to how God delights in working in and through our humanness: our gifts, our feelings, our limitations, our desires and hopes, our relationships with others, our weaknesses.*

For Personal Reflection

1. Meditation 20 explores our struggle to reconcile our inconsistencies: that we are God's beloved, and yet sometimes we choose to sin; that we have the dignity of being created in God's image and being blessed by his grace, but we don't always act accordingly. How are you moving closer to accepting the whole truth about yourself? What do you focus on more: the shadows or the lights of grace?
2. Learning to accept our sinfulness and limitations is fundamental to growing in a healthy self-esteem. What parts of yourself are you still struggling to accept? How can you allow God to love *the whole you*?
2. Desires and longings that we cannot immediately fulfill can make us feel bad, empty, or disappointed, but they are part of being human. In one of the beatitudes, Jesus speaks about unfulfilled longings: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied" (Mt. 5:6). How can we learn to cope better with disappointment? How can we entrust the emptiness of our unfulfilled longings to God?
3. "Our God who has no limitations seems to *rejoice* in working through the very limits and weaknesses we would cast aside" (Meditation 26). What weaknesses or limitations do you struggle to accept in yourself? Have you been able to discover God at work in them?
4. We can choose to see time as a gift or as a limitation. How do you see time? How can you take advantage of the gift of time, using it to focus your efforts and energies on what is most important to you, and letting go of what is less important?
5. Meditation 27, "God's mercy is greater than my sinfulness," offers the apostle Peter as a wonderful example when we are discouraged by our own sinfulness. A healthy self-esteem enables us to humbly acknowledge our sins, *and* to trust in God's mercy. How have you experienced divine mercy in your life? What in your life might you want to entrust to God's mercy?
6. Many of the meditations offer stories about experiences that can plant seeds of doubt in God's love for us—experiences that lead us to feel disappointment, fear, loneliness, worry, and grief. What makes you wonder about (or doubt) God's love? How can you "root yourself" more deeply in God's love?



One Step Further

* Write down three things that you wish you could change about yourself.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Can you think of a time when any of these things were helpful? Can you see a positive side to any of these qualities? Bring that quality to prayer and ask God to transform it into a gift. (For example, ask God to transform your anger into strength to stand against injustice.) You may discover that what you've always thought of as a flaw is actually a gift or a path to lead you in some way.

* Several meditations (28, 32, 37) help us to reflect on our uniqueness: our history, our hang-ups, our gifts, our relationships, our struggles, our situation in *this* time and *this* place. How are you unique? How can your uniqueness be a gift for someone in your life: a family member, a friend, a co-worker, or neighbor?

* Ask a friend to share with you what he or she finds unique about you, and then share with your friend your reflections on your uniqueness.



For Group Sharing

1. Comparing ourselves to other people, or seeing everything from a competitive point of view, can be very destructive in the spiritual life. Yet, competition and comparisons are often part of school and the workplace. When are comparisons helpful, and when have you experienced comparisons as destructive? How can we avoid a comparing or competitive attitude from taking over our lives?

2. Our feelings are a part of being human and can give us important information about ourselves and about the way we perceive the world. While we don't want to blindly give in to our feelings nor act on them without thinking, consistently ignoring our feelings is not only unhealthy but can close off valid options.

No feeling is bad in itself; it's what we choose to do with the feeling that is important. Which feelings do we typically classify as "bad"? Why? How can these "bad" feelings actually help us to understand ourselves and our situation better, so that we can make wiser choices?

3. In Meditation 26, we reflect on Jesus' words to St. Paul when he was struggling: "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9). The most profound example of "power at work in weakness" is Jesus' suffering and death on the cross. How have you witnessed God's grace working through weakness?

4. Meditation 28 points to Jesus as our model for sanctifying our feelings—that is, using our feelings to better understand and respond to what is going on around us. How can we acknowledge our feelings and allow them to inform our choices but not dictate them?

5. Meditations 25 and 30 propose silence and solitude as ways of becoming more aware of our rich inner life. How do you make time for solitude in your life? How can silence and solitude enrich your life?

6. Is there anything you'd like to share from the personal reflection questions or from your prayer with one of the meditations?

*Section D: Part 3 God's Beloved in the World
(Meditations 38-52)*

Part Three—God's Beloved in the World *explores how trust in God's love and presence in our lives can empower us to offer our unique gift to the world. Being who God calls us to be means making intentional choices and living with conviction. In choosing to love and daring to act with integrity, we can become a reflection of God's love in the world.*

For Personal Reflection

1. "God blesses each of us with unique identities and gifts that he wants us to share with the world" (Meditation 38). What is "your unique voice" that you bring to the people you love, live with, and work with? How is God inviting you today to share yourself more fully with the world?
2. Taking responsibility for our own choices—and only for our own choices—is deeply affirming and helps us to live our call in the world. What do you blame yourself for that is beyond your control? How can you let go of that blame?
3. Today, how can you live the truth of who you are and accept the consequences of the choices that you make?
4. Sometimes people can be so afraid of failure that they refuse to take necessary risks. This can lead to a bigger failure: that of not living up to one's potential, or ignoring the gifts God has given us. What kinds of risks have you taken? How does your trust in God help you to decide whether or not to take a risk?
5. "Forgiveness empowers and frees me" (Meditation 45). This is true whether we need to forgive or we need to ask for forgiveness. Sometimes the first person we need to forgive is ourselves. Who in your life needs forgiveness? How might you take the next step towards authentic reconciliation?
6. "God renews our life every morning, presenting each new day to us as a gift" (Meditation 43). How is God renewing you today? How is today a gift?
7. When we question how to live our identity as God's beloved in the world, we have someone we can turn to. Jesus Christ lived the perfect human life not because he was "successful" in the eyes of the world, but because at every moment he sought to do the will of his Father.

Jesus is our Way not only because he teaches us how to live with his word and example, but because he is with us in our lives and struggles, inspiring us even in the greatest difficulties. What moment of distress or suffering in the life of Jesus touches you? Re-read that event from Jesus' life in the Gospel. Then try to put into your own words what you think Jesus might have gone through, and why you connect with this moment.

8. How has the journey through this book helped you, and how can you continue growing in self-esteem and rooting yourself in God's love? Choose one concrete way to continue the journey that you have begun.



One Step Further

* List five people whom you admire. What do you admire about each person? How would you consider each of them a success? How can you learn from them to redefine your own ideas of success?

* Now that you have finished reading *See Yourself Through God's Eyes*, you may find it helpful later on if you take a few moments now to write down your insights and desires. Take some time to reflect and journal about:

- + new insights into who God is and wants to be for you
- + your deeper self-awareness
- + any new habits or patterns you have discovered that might be helpful, such as:
 - ~ committing to daily or weekly prayer that focuses on God's love for you
 - ~ praying with Scripture
 - ~ challenging negative assumptions about yourself or your situation
- + anything that has made a difference on your journey of growing in a positive self-esteem

The next time you are struggling with low self-esteem, re-read what you have written.

For Group Sharing

1. Societal pressures—to fit in or to be popular—can challenge our identity and values. What kinds of negative pressure are hardest to resist? (Pressure from friends, co-workers, family, school, church, media, etc.?) When or how do you “draw the line” so that you can hold on to your values and be your best self?
2. How are you able to live the truth of who you are? How do you want to live more authentically?
3. If you can, share with the group something about yourself that makes you unique or gives you a unique perspective. How does this uniqueness enable you to reflect the love of God to others in your life?
4. The world defines “success” and “failure” very differently than a follower of Jesus Christ would. Define “success” and “failure” in your own words. What might God's definitions be?
5. When suffering touches our lives personally, it can be hard to cling to faith in God's love for us. How do Jesus' suffering and death on the cross shed light on the mystery of suffering?

If you have a story when God allowed suffering to bring you to deeper life, share it.

6. Our attitudes and our lives can be transformed by what we choose to pay attention to. We can be nonselective and take in any and all messages we receive. Out of habit, we can repeat to ourselves the negative comments we have received in the past. Or we can choose to focus our attention in a particular direction that we know can help us to grow. This focused attention often gives us the ability to recognize and follow our dreams.

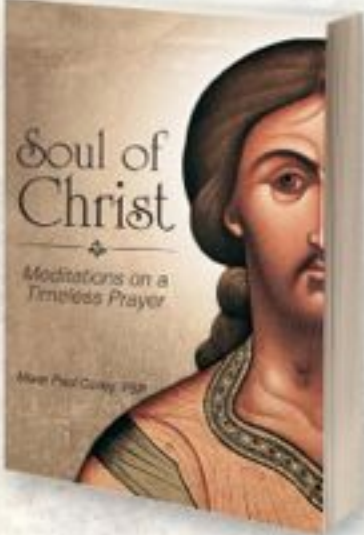
Jesus invites us to “remain in him”—in a real relationship with him as his beloved one. In the midst of our busy lives, full of distractions and contradictory messages, how can we “pay attention” to the signs of God's love? How can we live our call to love more fully?



7. Share how one of the Scripture passages or reflections touched you, or anything else you'd like to share from the personal reflection questions.

8. You've come to the end of reading *See Yourself Through God's Eyes*. Share how you want to continue on your journey of growing in self-esteem and living in the embrace of God's love. What's next for you?

READ MORE FROM AUTHOR SR. MARIE PAUL CURLEY, FSP, about God's saving love for us:



Soul of Christ
Meditations on a Timeless Prayer
by Marie Paul Curley, FSP

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