

The New You

At the beginning of each new year resolutions are made and broken. Fresh beginnings are attempted and fail, because no matter where we go or what we may try to do, there we are. We cannot escape ourselves. God calls us to live in community, with him and with one another. This can be one of the most powerful aspects of our journey, and one of the most difficult. Before we embark on any relationship with another, we must first examine ourselves.

Through this series, we will look at many of the ways we interact with the others around us and the challenges we may face. Through all of these challenges we will examine how keeping God at the center of everything we do can affect our relationships.

Critic

Ecclesiastes 7:5, Matthew 7:4, Proverbs 15:31-32,
Judges 8:1-2a, Matthew 15:13-14 & 1Thessalonians 2:4

Ecclesiastes 7:5 (New Living Translation)

*⁵ Better to be criticized by a wise person
than to be praised by a fool.*

- Whose approval do you find yourself seeking? Why?
- For whose approval should we be seeking?
- What about when you are doing something that you know God would not approve? Do you alter your actions or do you look elsewhere for approval?
- If you don't know God's position on a situation in which you find yourself, where can you find wise counsel?
- Do you avoid criticism? Why? Whose criticism is the most painful to accept? Is it criticism based on scripture? Would that make a difference in how it affects you?

Matthew 7:4 (New Living Translation)

⁴ How can you think of saying to your friend, [a] 'Let me help you get rid of that speck in your eye,' when you can't see past the log in your own eye?

- Why is it easier for us to see the shortcomings/mistakes of others instead of those of our own?
- What do you think might be the log you don't want to see in your own eye?
- Has it ever been lovingly pointed out to you? What was/has been your reaction?
- Does the way in which a shortcoming is pointed out make a difference in how you react to it?
- How can you find out what the log in your own eye may be?
- What can you do to "get rid" of it?
- How do you avoid being hypocritical in confronting another? From where do you seek wisdom?

Proverbs 15:31-32 (New Living Translation)

³¹ If you listen to constructive criticism,
you will be at home among the wise.

³² If you reject discipline, you only harm yourself;
but if you listen to correction, you grow in understanding.

- Why is listening the key to unraveling criticism that comes your way? What about when you are in a position where you must offer criticism. How is listening important in this situation, and to whom should you be listening?
- What role does discernment play in both receiving and giving criticism?
- Why do we react so strongly to the idea of being disciplined by another?

- In what areas have you personally reacted strongly to discipline?
- Could your reaction be considered a fight or flight reaction? Why do you think that you reacted the way you did?
- How does this verse from Proverbs call us to react?

Judges 8:1-2 (New Living Translation)

¹ Then the people of Ephraim asked Gideon, "Why have you treated us this way? Why didn't you send for us when you first went out to fight the Midianites?" And they argued heatedly with Gideon.

² But Gideon replied, "What have I accomplished compared to you? Aren't even the leftover grapes of Ephraim's harvest better than the entire crop of my little clan of Abiezer?"

Note:

Ephraim's leaders felt left out because Gideon had not called them to join the battle but had left them in place to "clean up" the escaping Midianites ("leftover grapes"), and so they angrily confronted him. Gideon assured the leaders of Ephraim that their accomplishment was even greater than his own clan's. His diplomatic explanation pointed out that this rear guard had managed to capture the enemy's generals, thus cutting off the leaders from their army. Not every necessary job is a highly visible leadership role. Much of the necessary labor of any effective enterprise is considered by many to be dirty work. But such work is vital to getting any big task done. Engineers and millionaires may design and finance an elegant building, but it is the bricklayers who get the work done. Pride causes us to want recognition. (Taken from Life Application Study Bible)

- Has there been a time when you were driven to play a certain role and then criticized for it? What was your reaction?
- What was initially driving you to seek the role you played? Approval of someone? Glory? Pride? Looking back, do you think that it was the role God was calling you to play or was it a "fight" response based on the drive to obtain approval of another, glory or pride?

Matthew 15:13-14 (New Living Translation)

¹³ Jesus replied, "Every plant not planted by my heavenly Father will be uprooted, ¹⁴ so ignore them. They are blind guides leading the blind, and if one blind person guides another, they will both fall into a ditch."

- Why might it be vitally important to God's Kingdom to play the role He has set out for you? Think back to the verses from Judges.
- Have you ever questioned a correction you have received? What made you question it? How did it play out, rejection or acceptance?

- How will you know if the principle on which you are being criticized or offering criticism is Biblical? Why is playing your unique role so important to this?
- How much time do you spend each day/week in reading/studying scripture? Why does this matter as we look at the roles we play in both giving and reacting to criticism/discipline?

1 Thessalonians 2:4 (New Living Translation)

⁴ For we speak as messengers approved by God to be entrusted with the Good News. Our purpose is to please God, not people. He alone examines the motives of our hearts.

1 Thessalonians 2:4 (The Message)

No Hidden Agendas

³⁻⁵ God tested us thoroughly to make sure we were qualified to be trusted with this Message. Be assured that when we speak to you we're not after crowd approval—only God approval. Since we've been put through that battery of tests, you're guaranteed that both we and the Message are free of error, mixed motives, or hidden agendas. We never used words to butter you up. No one knows that better than you. And God knows we never used words as a smoke screen to take advantage of you.

- In speaking God's message and offering loving criticism, Paul never faltered. Have you ever been tempted to embroider God's message to make it more palatable? What do you think your motive was for this? How might it have been related to seeking approval of someone other than God Himself?
- How does altering God's Truth differ from altering the presentation of this Truth?

Needy

Matthew 9:36, Acts 3:6-7, Mark 1:35-37 & Galatians 6:7-8

Matthew 9:36 (New Living Translation)

³⁶ When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them because they were confused and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.

- How can you exercise this kind of compassion for people without trying to “fix” their problems?
- Sometimes you are in a position to help someone out of a bind. How do you discern when this is the appropriate action to take and when it is simply adding to their problem by enabling them to continue behavior that caused the problem in the first place?

- What might your motivation be for trying to help someone out other than compassion? Why is it so important to know the motives of your own heart?

Acts 3:6-7 (New Living Translation)

⁶ But Peter said, "I don't have any silver or gold for you. But I'll give you what I have. In the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, [a] get up and [b] walk!"

⁷ Then Peter took the lame man by the right hand and helped him up. And as he did, the man's feet and ankles were instantly healed and strengthened.

- What is significant about how Peter helps this lame man? What kind of help do you think he was accustomed to receiving?
- Why is what Peter did so much more help than giving him the money which he very likely needed?
- How does this translate to your own experience?
- Are there individuals put in front of you who genuinely need help? Is the help you offer really helping them the way in which Christ or Peter would help them or are you simply enabling their situation/behavior?
- To another person, describe a situation you may be facing where you will have difficulty saying "no" to the help that is requested of you or in which you don't know how best to help.
- What makes it so difficult to say "no" to someone? Is it compassion or does it have something to do with the condition of your own heart?
- The first week of this series we looked at praise and criticism, does our misplaced desire to be praised by others or not face criticism play a role in how we respond to those who may ask for our help?
- From where do you find the strength to respond the way Christ would respond to difficult request for help?

Mark 1:35-37 (New Living Translation)

Jesus Preaches in Galilee

³⁵ Before daybreak the next morning, Jesus got up and went out to an isolated place to pray. ³⁶ Later Simon and the others went out to find him. ³⁷ When they found him, they said, "Everyone is looking for you."

- What is your response when you feel the pressure of others "needing" something from you? Does it appeal to your sense of flattery? Does it give you a sense of fulfillment?
- Think of the last time someone asked you for help. Did you respond to them without first asking God for His guidance?
- What causes us to rush to help before consulting God or his word for direction? How often do you think that this rush causes you to offer the wrong kind of help?
- What kind of picture might you be painting to others about God's love if you rush to help every time someone comes to you? What different message may be portrayed if you ask for some time for prayer/reflection before giving a response?
- What is the message you are sending about God's love if in your compassion you take time to pray before offering a response and you are led to say "no" to another's request for help? Is it possible to help without giving someone exactly what they've requested?
- Why might remembering this verse be so critical in our daily interactions with others?
- What is Christ modeling for us?

Galatians 6:7-8 (New Living Translation)

⁷ Don't be misled—you cannot mock the justice of God. You will always harvest what you plant. ⁸ Those who live only to satisfy their own sinful nature will harvest decay and death from that sinful nature. But those who live to please the Spirit will harvest everlasting life from the Spirit.

- Every action we do has direct results. When you are asked by another for help, what is your thought process in terms of the results for the other person? What about for yourself? What about for God's Kingdom?

- Think of a recent situation in which you were asked for help. What were the specifics of the situation? In what way could you offer help that would please your own desires? What about help that would please the desires of God?
 - If the person requesting personal help is not a follower, how could you help in a way that would lead them to joy and life with God?
 - What about your own joy? How does the way in which you help in any particular situation give you joy? Is it a temporary joy or one that is everlasting?
-

Manipulator

Matthew 16:21-23, John 21:16 & Galatians 1:10

Matthew 16:21-23 (New Living Translation)

Jesus Predicts His Death

²¹ From then on Jesus[a] began to tell his disciples plainly that it was necessary for him to go to Jerusalem, and that he would suffer many terrible things at the hands of the elders, the leading priests, and the teachers of religious law. He would be killed, but on the third day he would be raised from the dead.

²² But Peter took him aside and began to reprimand him[b] for saying such things. "Heaven forbid, Lord," he said. "This will never happen to you!"

²³ Jesus turned to Peter and said, "Get away from me, Satan! You are a dangerous trap to me. You are seeing things merely from a human point of view, not from God's."

- How does Peter's reaction to what he heard parallel our own reaction to hearing that God's plan may not be what we want to hear?
- How is the key to our interactions with others held in what Jesus shares in this passage? What is the core of all genuine truths being revealed to us?
- How does this passage serve as the yardstick for all those who we may face or all directions to which we may be called?

- How does our culture cause us to be so easily manipulated?
- To what degree do you personally take part in this manipulation, or allow yourself to be manipulated by others?

John 21:16 (New Living Translation)

¹⁶ Jesus repeated the question: "Simon son of John, do you love me?"

"Yes, Lord," Peter said, "you know I love you."

"Then take care of my sheep," Jesus said.

- How do our actions tell the motives of our hearts?
- Can you describe a time when you were called to do something, and you did so unquestioningly, but later came to realize that you were manipulated by the illusion that it was the right thing to do?
- Looking at the context for this passage from John, what does Christ's repeated questioning tell you about examining your motives for the things you do?
- Are your motives easily identifiable all the time? Can you think of a situation in which you fell prey to the manipulation of another because of your motives being something other than carrying out God's plan for your life?
- Can you think of a time when you were glad to be manipulated into doing something because the cost of what you understood to be God's plan seemed too high?

Galatians 1:10 (New Living Translation)

¹⁰ Obviously, I'm not trying to win the approval of people, but of God. If pleasing people were my goal, I would not be Christ's servant.

- From where do you find the strength to not allow yourself to be manipulated?
- Do you find that community aids in your strength?
- How is it that desiring the approval of others and allowing ourselves to be manipulated prevents us from being the servants of God?

- What are some of the changes you might need to make in order to strengthen yourself against the manipulations of others?
- Think of a personal situation in which you think that you might be easily manipulated. How can you redefine the relationship/situation to prevent yourself from being manipulated?
- Why is letting others fail in circumstances over which they've tried to manipulate you so difficult?
- Why might we be so anxious to please others even in situations where we will be manipulated into doing something that goes against what God may want for us or them?

Hypocrite

Matthew 15:7-8, Mathew 23:23-24, Galatians 6:1-2,
James 5:19-20, Psalms 51:10-12 & Matthew 18:15-17

Matthew 15:7-8 (New Living Translation)

⁷ *You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you, for he wrote,*

⁸ *These people honor me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me.*

Matthew 23:23-24 (New Living Translation)

²³ *“What sorrow awaits you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees. Hypocrites! For you are careful to tithe even the tiniest income from your herb gardens, [a] but you ignore the more important aspects of the law—justice, mercy, and faith. You should tithe, yes, but do not neglect the more important things. ²⁴ Blind guides! You strain your water so you won’t accidentally swallow a gnat, but you swallow a camel! [b]*

- If you take some time for honest reflection, in what ways can you see that your worship in the recent past may have been empty and not a true reflection of the distance from Christ you may have been experiencing in being tied up in business?
- How can this particular state of our hearts be so dangerous as we reflect Christ’s love to those who may not yet believe?
- What about in our service to others? How can the very acts of service in which we engage become a detraction from truly serving Christ?

Psalm 51:10-12 (New Living Translation)

¹⁰ Create in me a clean heart, O God.

Renew a loyal spirit within me.

¹¹ Do not banish me from your presence,
and don't take your Holy Spirit[a] from me.

¹² Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and make me willing to obey you.

Matthew 18:15-17 (New Living Translation)

¹⁵ "If another believer[a] sins against you, [b] go privately and point out the offense. If the other person listens and confesses it, you have won that person back. ¹⁶ But if you are unsuccessful, take one or two others with you and go back again, so that everything you say may be confirmed by two or three witnesses. ¹⁷ If the person still refuses to listen, take your case to the church. Then if he or she won't accept the church's decision, treat that person as a pagan or a corrupt tax collector.

Galatians 6:1-2 (New Living Translation)

We Harvest What We Plant

¹ Dear brothers and sisters, if another believer[a] is overcome by some sin, you who are godly[b] should gently and humbly help that person back onto the right path. And be careful not to fall into the same temptation yourself. ² Share each other's burdens, and in this way obey the law of Christ.

James 5:19-20 (New Living Translation)

Restore Wandering Believers

¹⁹ My dear brothers and sisters, if someone among you wanders away from the truth and is brought back, ²⁰ you can be sure that whoever brings the sinner back will save that person from death and bring about the forgiveness of many sins.

- These three verses deal with how we interact with other believers when we see a problem that must be addressed. Why is the state of your own heart so critical in addressing another?
- From where can you gather the strength and direction for approaching another regarding something you perceive as a problem in their lives?
- What really should be the first step in looking at any other individual's behavior?
- How often is a problem you see in another's life really your problem? How do you react to these situations?
- For most of us seeing the problem is the easy part. The confrontation is much more difficult. What are your fears or discomforts in lovingly confronting another? Where do these fears come from?

- How does having restoration as the goal of any confrontation make the act of confronting different?
- Why would a commitment to the other person be so critical before even beginning the process of confronting another?
- How can you prepare yourself for the rejection of your efforts? Is there any comfort when you find yourself in this position?