

Life in the Rearview Mirror: Antidotes to Regret *Fully Present*

We move on to another topic this morning in our series – *Life in the Rearview Mirror: Antidotes to Regret*. The next two weeks we are going to talk about relationships.

The essence of life is relationships. It is a theme in the Bible from the book of Genesis to the book of Revelation. Facets of this theme are discussed every week on television talk show.

Some years ago, Rutgers sociology professor David Popenoe wrote: “With all the pessimism and economic drift, people are looking around and asking what, after all, is most important in their lives.” Increasingly, he said, the answer is personal relationships. It seems even more true today.

We know that relationships are important, even critical, to a healthy life. But it is also an area in which we so often struggle, and often fail. If we are to reach the end of our lives and look back, without regret, this is a crucial element that needs our attention.

We were created for relationships. Turn in your Bible to the very first book. Genesis, chapter one, gives us the sequence of the creative work of God. The crowning moment comes on the sixth day:

Genesis 1:26-27

The fact of being created in God’s image is, to me, the only reasonable explanation for our understanding of the concepts of goodness, pleasure, justice, etc. We know and experience these things because God is good; he is just. These things are present in the human race because they are sourced in a God who created man in his image.

Now – Genesis 2:18

Adam was created with the need for human relationship. God created him with a sense of aloneness. In one sense, Adam had everything that was ideal: a personal relationship with God, living in a perfect environment God specifically prepared for him, and yet there was aloneness.

God then fashioned a woman and brought her to the man. And we have the first human relationship. It is fascinating to read what people are writing on the subject

of the importance of relationships. John Bradshaw, in his book *Bradshaw: On the Family*, writes:

Having a good identity means having a good sense of worth and having a significant other or others who affirm that sense of worth. We cannot have an identity all alone. We need at least one significant other who verifies our sense of worth...Our identity is the difference about us that makes a difference. It must always be grounded in a social context – in a relationship.

Dr. Larry Crabb writes in *The Marriage Builder*:

Why is the theme of relationship so prominent in the Word of God? Because only within the context of relationship can the deepest needs of human personality be met.

We see in Adam and Eve a relationship with physical transparency, emotional transparency, and psychological transparency – in a word, intimacy. There is tremendous freedom and security in this relationship: nothing hidden or masked in relationship, communication or intimacy. No walls; just unthreatened, total acceptance of each other.

Every one of us longs for that sense of identity, security and self worth that must be derived from relationships. And yet is really difficult to experience meaningful relationships. This week and next, we are going to talk about relationships with a view to being *Fully Present*.

What we should hope to develop in our lives is the experience of being fully present with family and friends. This morning I am going to explore the need to be authentic. Next week, Chris is going to tackle two more ingredients of being fully present: available and engaged.

There is a cliché from years ago that goes like this: “Get Real!” If we are going to be fully present in relationships, we must be real, authentic. One synonym of *authentic* is “genuine.” Being the genuine thing, the real thing.

What’s the opposite of genuine? Fake. We see it in the art world; we see it in the entertainment world; we see it in the world of gems. We see it in the lives of people. Sometimes it stands out like a sore thumb. Other times, you really need to look closely to spot the fake.

One of the most well-used strategies in our desire to appear acceptable before others is to wear a mask, to camouflage who we really are.

Let me suggest some reasons why we wear masks, why we pretend, why we fake it. Two major ones are shame and fear. Go back to Genesis, chapter 3. We need to see how these two things are rooted in human history and why.

Adam and Eve deliberately chose to disobey God's command. And when they did, the effects, the consequences, were immediate – just what God had warned them of beforehand.

Genesis 3:7-13

The first consequence was shame. This went to the core of their personal identity – a deep sense of unacceptability: with each other – covering themselves with fig leaves, and with God. Two effects: fear and hiding.

The significance of this is astounding! Adam and Eve, created in a state of innocence, experiencing transparency and full acceptance on the horizontal level in relationship and on the vertical level, living in a perfect environment. And in a moment, it was all gone; it was all different.

There was a sense of flaw, of failure, a loss of innocence, the acquisition of an operational conscience which shouted: “shame, loss, unacceptable.” It wasn't just physical shame, but also emotion and spiritual shame. Their eyes were opened to right and wrong. They knew they had done wrong.

It wasn't just that things were different; they were different. For the first time there was an awareness of a profoundly unacceptable condition. They were afraid. So they hid.

Today, on a human level, we still hide from others for fear of rejection, fear of being known. We sense that if people knew what we were really like, they wouldn't like us.

There is a fear of unacceptability; we fear exposure. Larry Crabb and Dan Allender wrote an excellent book titled *Encouragement: The Key to Caring*. It is about the subject of encouragement. But in it there are many things that I think relate to the subject of being authentic. So I am going to share several of their thoughts throughout our time today. They write:

We come to fear exposure, knowing almost intuitively that beneath the make-up of decency, kindness, generosity, and stylish clothing, is someone who, if truly known, would provoke disapproval and criticism.

And so, we do what logically seems right: we hide. We pretend. We put on a mask that we think makes us acceptable, appreciated, included, and liked.

Some do it with the mask of being indestructible: nothing bothers you; you are immovable; you can stand on your own. You can get along yourself just fine.

The words of the song *I Am A Rock*, written by Paul Simon in the early 1960's and popularized by Simon and Garfunkel, sort of epitomize this mask.

A winter's day
In a deep and dark December;
I am alone,
Gazing from my window to the streets below
On a freshly fallen silent shroud of snow.
I am a rock,
I am an island.

I've built walls,
A fortress deep and mighty,
That none may penetrate.
I have no need of friendship; friendship causes pain.
It's laughter and it's loving I disdain.
I am a rock,
I am an island.

Don't talk of love,
But I've heard the words before;
It's sleeping in my memory.
I won't disturb the slumber of feelings that have died.
If I never loved I never would have cried.
I am a rock,
I am an island.

I have my books
And my poetry to protect me;
I am shielded in my armor,
Hiding in my room, safe within my womb.
I touch no one and no one touches me.
I am a rock,
I am an island.

And a rock feels no pain;
And an island never cries.

There are other masks. We, as Christians, play this game of hiding behind masks, don't we? We put on the mask of pious spirituality when we walk in the door of church, or when we sit down at a table with others for Bible study.

Crabb and Allender talk about how we encase ourselves in defensive layers. We hide just like Adam and Eve did. Then we come together each with our layers and the outcome is predictable. They write:

We meet at the level of our layers, determined to remain safely hidden behind our protective maneuvers. Our primary commitment is to avoid exposure, to appear acceptable, to deal from a position of strength.

One of my favorite rides at the amusement park growing up was bumper cars. You would get to the far end of the rink, turn and then go as fast as you could until you rammed some unsuspecting person. You didn't cause any damage because you just bounced off them. The cars had this huge rubber bumper all around the car. You would hit them, bounce off, and hit again.

This is a good picture of how Christians often relate to one another. The two counselors/authors write:

Christians in conversation sometimes represent nothing more than self-interested, anxious people bumping politely into each other's layers. Nothing is very encouraging in that.

To be authentic means to risk being real – who we really are. But that can only come when you build a strong foundation through a clear picture of who you are in Christ. When you come to faith in Christ, God forgives all your sins. In Christ, he accepts you completely, without reservation.

It has nothing to do with your acceptability; it has everything to do with what God has done for you in Christ. You are born into his eternal family; you become his beloved child.

We really struggle with accepting this, don't we? We know ourselves, what is inside: what we think, what we feel. We are still dealing with the consequences that Adam and Eve did: shame, fear, hiding, feeling unacceptable.

But God says, “Listen, I love you. You are my child. I love you with an everlasting love. I am going to change you on the inside. I am going to help you become a whole person.”

So, the first thing we need to do as we grow and mature in authenticity is to get a real understanding of how God sees us, how he loves us, how he accepts us. And, then we have to believe it! We have to become secure in who we are in Christ, before we will be secure in our relationship with others.

Then, we have to take the risk of being real, genuine, authentic. Getting beyond the fear of being unacceptable, rejected, we take the risk of just being “us.”

But this takes time. And it sometimes is painful; it’s scary. But, it’s real. There is a wonderful book for children, a book that has a very important message for adults. It’s called *The Velveteen Rabbit*.

In the book is a nursery dialogue between a new toy rabbit and an old skin horse. As they are lying side by side one day, Rabbit asks Horse:

“What is REAL? Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle?”

“Real isn’t how you are made,” said the Skin Horse. “It’s a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become REAL.”

“Does it hurt?” asked the Rabbit.

“Sometimes,” said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. “When you are REAL you don’t mind being hurt.”

“Does it happen all at once, like being wound up,” he asked, “or bit by bit?”

“It doesn’t happen all at once,” said the Skin Horse. “You become. It takes a long time. That’s why it doesn’t often happen to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don’t matter at all because once you are Real you can’t be ugly, except to people who don’t understand.”

To be real means taking a risk at being real. It means to dare to be you, even with your faults and foibles, your weaknesses and vulnerabilities. But because you know you are secure in Christ, you can risk being real with others.

We struggle mightily with this because our basic nature is flawed, selfish, self-protective, concerned most about how others view us. We fear rejection, and so we hide behind our defensive layers, believing ourselves to be safe and acceptable behind the mask.

But you can never be authentic if you don't risk being who you are. Harry Hein put it this way:

Be who you is, cause if you ain't who you is, then you is who you ain't.

Let me share a word of caution here, a necessary word. Because, you see, the process of being authentic in relationships isn't just to share more about who you really are in the hope that others will accept you.

There's a danger of just sharing to exhibit ourselves rather than to demonstrate Christ to one another. Being authentic, being real, genuine, doesn't mean that we now go around and pour out all the gunk within us because we don't want to pretend to be spiritual. Being authentic doesn't mean that we place "gut-sharing" as the highest value in a relationship. You know – just let it all hang out! Maturity in Christ calls for genuineness that involves a restrained surrender to God's work in our lives.

Last thought from Crabb and Allender: they write about the way we should relate to others believers in being real:

The basis of our fellowship is our *shared life in Christ*. Relationships must be regarded as opportunities to promote a fuller appreciation of Christ through mirroring Christ to one another, treating each other as valuable bearers of the image of God, and accepting one another in spite of shortcomings.

And so, we strive to be honest about who we are, to be genuine in our relationship with others, knowing that we are a sinful person, but fully accepted by God. In relationships with others, we encourage one another towards maturity in Christ, knowing that he is working within us so that what he declares to be true of us will be more and more evident as time passes.