Sunday, February 1, 1998
I'M ONLY
Jeremiah 1:4-10

One of the most difficult tasks we face in dealing with ourselves, with God, and with others is self-assessment. How do you see yourself? Do you think of yourself as not being very good, or do you have a high opinion of yourself? When asked to take on an important assignment, do you try to excuse yourself by saying, "But I'm only an ordinary person and do not have the necessary skills"?

Do you think of yourself as a free human being with personal responsibility for your decisions and actions, or do you see yourself as being controlled by those around you and by past influences in your life? When you make a mistake, do you tend to blame someone else or God, or do you accept at least some responsibility for your actions?

There's a strong tendency in our time to avoid accepting personal responsibility for mistakes and errors. People say, "I was abused as a child, so I'm not responsible for my actions." Or, "I am an adult child of an alcoholic, and that's why I can't do as well as others."

A young man was arrested for stealing a car. He said, "It wasn't my fault. Someone left the keys in the car, and pretty soon, I found myself driving along. After all, I'm only human."

In the Old Testament, we can hear King David excusing his rendezvous with Bathsheba in a similar way: "She was a beautiful woman, Lord, and I saw her bathing on the roof from my window. She shouldn't have bathed in the open where someone might see her. After all, I'm only human."

Blaming God is also popular. A young woman wrote to James Dobson: "Four years ago, I was dating a man and became pregnant. I was devastated. I asked God, 'Why have you allowed this to happen to me?'"

In a professional boxing match, Ray "Boom-Boom" Mancini slammed his Korean opponent with a hard right, causing a massive cerebral hemorrhage. At a press conference after the Korean's death, Mancini said, "Sometimes I wonder why God does the things He does."

Susan Smith, who pushed her two sons into a lake to drown them and then blamed a black carjacker for the deed, wrote in her official confession: "I dropped to the lowest point when I allowed my children to go down that ramp into the water without me. I took off running and screaming, 'O God! O God, no! What have I done? Why did you let this happen?'"

In all of these instances, there was a flawed self-assessment: "It's not my fault. I'm only human. I don't have control over my actions. It's someone else's fault, or it's God's fault for allowing such things to happen."

Another kind of faulty self-assessment occurs when we excuse ourselves from accepting responsibility by claiming we are not fit for the job. That was the prophet Jeremiah's problem, but God would not accept his excuse. Listen as Jeremiah describes what happened:

"Now the word of the Lord came to me, saying, 'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.' Then I

said, ‘Ah, Lord God! Truly, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.’ But the Lord said to me, ‘Do not say, “I am only a boy,” for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you.'"

Jeremiah quickly discovered that this “I’m only” excuse didn’t work with God. It was an alibi God had heard many times before — and still hears.

When God told Moses that he had been chosen to lead the Israelites, Moses said, “But I am only a shepherd and not a good speaker.” But God said, “You have more skills than you want to admit. Go, and I will be with you.”

Gideon said to God, “I am the least in my family. Choose someone else.” But God wouldn’t let him get away with that excuse either.

Self-assessment is difficult. Many individuals have a very low opinion of themselves. Maybe you are one of them. You put yourself down. You are convinced that you are no good, that you have little value. Some people who appear successful on the outside are deeply convinced that they lack talent. They say to themselves, “I don’t deserve my success. I haven’t really earned it. I’ve been fooling people into thinking I’m a lot smarter and more talented than I really am.”

Like Jeremiah, we all have self-images — some are true, and some are false. Someone may say, “I can write poetry, but I don’t draw very well. I am good at math, but not so good at economics. I can swim well, but my golf is not very good. I’m good at judging people, but I have a poor sense of direction.”

Where do these self-assessments and self-images come from? What convinced Jeremiah that he was only a boy rather than an adult, or that he was a poor public speaker? Most people answer the question by saying we get our self-images from parents, teachers, and experiences, but that’s only partially true.

Here’s an example: two young people are shooting baskets in the gym for 30 minutes but haven’t scored a single basket or even hit the backboard. The coach comes over and says, “I don’t mind your playing here, but I think you’re wasting your time. You’ll never make it in basketball. Why don’t you go upstairs and join the glee club or the yearbook staff?”

One youngster thinks, “The coach is right. In 30 minutes, I haven’t scored a basket. I think I’ll join the yearbook staff,” and goes on to become the editor.

But the other youngster thinks, “No, coach, you’re wrong. I am going to be good at this,” and one day, they make the varsity basketball team.

What is the difference? It’s not what the coach said — it’s what they said to themselves. We build many of our own self-images by what we accept from our experiences, by what others say to us, and by what we say to ourselves in response.

As a child, when you drew your first picture, if an older sibling scoffed and said, “That dog has no ears,” you may have told yourself you can’t draw very well. On the other hand, if your mom proudly put it on the refrigerator for all to see, you may have said just the opposite to yourself. Either way, what is important is what you said to yourself.

Since childhood, people have been telling you what you can or can't do, what you have or lack in ability. People have been encouraging or discouraging you. But remember, it's not what they say to you — it's what you say to yourself that matters. The good news is, since you are primarily responsible for building your self-images, you have the power to change them.

A woman said to me, "When I was in the first grade, my teacher looked over my shoulder at my writing and said, 'That's not very good.' I looked down and said to myself, 'She's right. I don't write very well.' That negative self-talk was the start of my poor self-image: Jean doesn't write very well. My subconscious believed me, and the next time I picked up a pencil, it reminded me to write poorly. Of course, I did. Then I looked at my writing and thought, 'Yes, that's just like me. I don't write clearly.' This reinforced my self-image, and the next time, my writing was even worse."

"One day, I said to myself, 'This is silly. I can become a good writer, at least a better writer than I am,' and over time, I have done so."

So the first step in gaining an accurate self-assessment or self-image is to pay attention to what you're saying to yourself. If your self-talk is filled with too many "I'm onlys" or phrases that convince you that you're not very good, your self-assessment is likely to be inaccurate.

There's one "I'm only" that can be especially limiting when interpreted in the wrong way: "I'm only human."

Earlier, I used the example of the young man who stole a car and excused his actions by saying the owner shouldn't have left the keys in the car, and then he said, "After all, I'm only human." But what he did was not the only human alternative. He made a choice. He could have reasoned — which only we humans can do — about the consequences of his actions, or better, he could have acknowledged that the car belonged to someone else and determined that stealing it was wrong.

If he knew the Bible and the content of the Christian faith, he could have said to himself, "God created me in God's image, and that's the highest that can be created. I'm going to live up to the image in which I was created." This is a large part of what salvation means as Jesus described it: realizing your fullest potential as someone created in the image of God. It is living up to the best that God has in mind for us. To be fully human, according to the Bible, is a high calling, an exalted role where much is expected. You are putting yourself down when you say, "I'm only human," defining yourself as something less than God intends you to be.

The first step in gaining an accurate self-assessment is to pay attention to what you are saying to yourself. If you find yourself saying, "I'm only," too often, you can be sure you are not getting an accurate self-assessment.

The second step is to pay attention to what God wants you to be. God wants you to be the best you can be. That's what God was saying to Jeremiah: "Don't say, 'I am only a boy,' for you shall go to all to whom I send you."

Listen carefully to your self-talk. Whenever you hear yourself say, "I'm only," and put yourself down, it means you're trying to evade where God might be leading you. God speaks to you through positive self-talk, not negative self-talk.

Lest you misunderstand, positive self-talk isn't saying to yourself, "I'm number one because I'm better than other people." It's not about comparing yourself to others. I don't want to be a better preacher than Pastor Jones; I want to be the best preacher I can be.

If you're a mechanic, you don't want to be the best mechanic in the shop. That may be setting a standard too low for your gifts and talents. If you want to compare yourself to something, compare yourself to your finest vision of what you might possibly be.

You are created in the image of God. Tell yourself that each day, then live up to that image, and you will have the correct self-image. Amen.