Book 35

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

One of the most difficult tasks we have 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 much good or do you have a high opinion of yourself?

When you are 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

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and actions or do you see yourself as being controlled by those around you in addition to 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 for not accepting personal responsibility for our mistakes and errors. People say, "I was abused as a child therefore I'm not responsible for my actions." "I am an adult child of an alcoholic and that's the reason I can't do as well as others."

A young man was arrested for stealing an automobile. 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 rendevous 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 James Dobson this letter: "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, boxer 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, 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

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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 takes place when we excuse ourselves from accepting a 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,

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'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 also 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 I'm 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 by with that excuse.

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. There are those who are successful by all outward appearances but deep down inside are convinced they have little talent. Some people say to themselves, "I don't deserve my success. I haven't really earned it. I've been

fooling other people into thinking I'm a lot smarter and more talented than I really am."

Like Jeremiah, we all have self-images, many of them. Some are true and some are false. Someone will say, "I can write poetry, but I don't draw very well. I am good at math, but not so good in 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. I get lost easily when I'm driving."

Where do our self-assessments and our self-images come from? What convinced Jeremiah that he only a boy rather than an adult and was a poor public speaker? Most people

answer the question: where did these self-images come from? by saying we get them from our parents, our teachers and our experiences. But that is only partially true.

Here's an example. Two young people are shooting baskets in the gym. They have been doing so for 30 minutes. They haven't yet scored a single basket, in fact, they haven't yet even hit the backboard. The coach comes over and says: I don't mind your playing here, but I think that 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

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minutes I haven't scored a basket. I haven't even hit the backboard. I think I'll join the yearbook staff," and goes on to become the editor.

On the other hand, we all know people like the other youngster who thinks--"No, coach. You're wrong. I am going to be good at this," and one day is playing on the varsity basketball team.

What is the difference? It is not what the coach said, for he said the same thing to both young people. No, it is what they said to themselves. We build many of our own self- images by what we accept from our experiences and by what we believe when others speak to us and then what we say to ourselves as a result.

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As a child when you drew your first picture, if you made the mistake of showing it to an older sibling who scoffed and said, "That dog has no ears," or "The sky isn't purple," you may have told yourself that you can't draw very well. On the other hand if you brought it to mom and she 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 that you can or can't do certain things, that you have or lack certain abilities. People have been encouraging you to succeed, or discouraging you from even trying. "Don't try that, you'll only get

hurt or fail." Remember it's not what they say to you, it is what you say to you that matters.

The good news is, since you are primarily responsible for building your self-images in the first place, then if you want to change them you have the power to do so.

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 building a self-image. Jean doesn't write very well. My subconscious believed me, and the next time I picked up a pencil it automatically reminded me to act like I knew myself to be, that

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is, to write poorly. Of course I did so. Then I looked at my writing and thought, 'Yes, that's just like me. I don't write clearly.' This enforced my self- image so that the next time my writing was even more difficult to read. I repeated this many, many times over the years. Each time I accepted that I was a poor writer, I re-enforced my negative self-image."

"One day I said to myself, 'This is silly. I can become a good writer, a least a much 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 only's," or phrases that convince you that you are not very good, then your self-assessment is likely to be inaccurate.

There's one "I'm only," that can be especially limiting of our self-image 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 that the owner shouldn't have left the keys in the car and then he said, "After all, I'm only human." What he did was not the only human alternative. He made a choice. He could have reasoned--which only we human beings can do--what the consequences of his action would be; or better, he

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could have acknowledged that the car belonged to someone else and determined that to steal it was wrong. Then he could've said to himself. "I didn't steal the car because I'm a human being. God has given me the ability to choose right or wrong and God has even shown me what is right or wrong."

If he knew the Bible and the content of the Christian faith he could've gone to say to himself, "God created me in God's image and that's the highest that can be created. I'm going to live up 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 that God intends you to be.

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

This leads to the second step in gaining an accurate self-image or self-assessment which is really a continuation of the first and that is to pay

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attention to what God wants you to be. God wants you to be the best that 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 to yourself or to someone else or to God as Jeremiah did, "I'm only," and then put yourself down, it means you are trying to evade where God might be leading you. God's speaks to you through positive self-talk, not negative self-talk.

Lest you misunderstand what I mean by positive self-talk, it's not saying to yourself, "I'm number

one because I'm better than other people." Or "God loves me more than others because I'm better." Or "I'm better because God loves me more than others."

The fact is we are all number one as far as God is concerned. With God there are no winners and losers in life. True positive self-talk, the kind through which God speaks to you, is an affirmation that pertains only to you. Avoid comparisons. I don't want to be a better preacher than Pastor Jones. I want to be the best preacher that 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 which is much too low for your gifts and talents. If you want to compare yourself to something, try comparing yourself to your finest vision of what you might possibly be.

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

Amen.