

THE JESUS-CENTERED  
LIFE



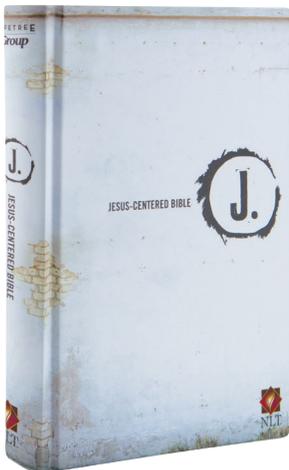
*Sermon Series*

# Overview

In this four-sermon series, you'll explore the basic foundation and key truths of living the Jesus-centered life. This series was created by Rick Lawrence, general editor of the *Jesus-Centered Bible*. These four sermons explore two central questions in our lives, buried in a single interaction Jesus has with Simon Peter, early in his ministry. The questions are: 1) “Who do I say that Jesus is?” (Luke 9:20) and 2) “Who does Jesus say that I am?” (Matthew 16:18).

In addition to suggested “Say” sections, you'll also find boxed tips for making your sermon more interactive—involving your congregation in the conversation in simple, easy-to-pull-off ways. The series is designed to be progressive, but with a little adaptation, you can use any of them as one-offs. You'll also find some sections of these sermons translate well to slides—simply cut and paste them into your presentation software.

At the beginning of your sermon series, you might want to hold up a copy of the *Jesus-Centered Bible* to reference the “guide” for this adventure in the next few weeks. If you'd like your congregation to have a copy of the Bible to reference during this series, visit [group.com](http://group.com) or contact Group at 800-447-1070 or [info@group.com](mailto:info@group.com) to get bulk pricing. And if you have questions, or need clarity around something during your sermon preparation, please feel free to email Rick Lawrence at: [rlawrence@group.com](mailto:rlawrence@group.com). He'll personally respond to your questions.



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# Sermon 1

## “THE FIRST-AND-ONLY QUESTION THAT REALLY MATTERS”

**KEY SCRIPTURES:** JOHN 6:53-69; JOHN 15:5; AND ROMANS 11:17-18

### PREACHER PREP

Read through the sermon and decide how you want to adapt it based on your preferences. Check out the “Preacher Point” boxes for ideas on how to involve your congregation in the message, or to personalize the message to your own life.

**Say:** Jesus is the most-known, least-known person in human history. There’s never been a more widely recognizable name on earth. But, in turn, there’s never been a more widely misunderstood, misquoted, mischaracterized, mis-everything-ed person than the homeless rabbi from Nazareth.

Every year since 1927 *Time* magazine names a “Person of the Year” on its January cover. In 2013 *Time*’s editors decided to one-up themselves and name the most significant person in history. So, after an exhaustive analysis that ranked historical figures just as Google ranks web pages, Jesus won out—it wasn’t even close.

Of course, Jesus is the single most influential person in history—it doesn’t matter whether you worship him as God or mark your birthday by the year of his death or repeat something he said without even realizing he said it (“Do to others whatever you would like them to do to you” (Matthew 7:12, NLT) or “He sends rain on the just and the unjust” (Matthew 5:45, NLT) or “Tomorrow will bring its own worries” (Matthew 6:34, NLT), for example). His words and his deeds have done more to shape our world, and our everyday lives, than any other single force.

So it’s a little ironic that just before *Time* put Jesus on its “Most Significant Person In History” cover, editors at *Newsweek* recruited the University of North Carolina’s resident Jesus-skeptic Bart Ehrman to write a cover article titled “Who was Jesus?” In it, the religious studies professor skewers a handful of contradictory

details surrounding Jesus’ birth, and soft-peddles the historical reality of Jesus with this summation of the Gospel accounts of his life, death, and resurrection: “These are books that meant to declare religious truths, not historical facts.”

Sure, we know Jesus. But the way we’re still wrangling over the details of his existence exposes a blunt reality: We don’t *know* Jesus. ***Jesus is the most-known, least-known person in human history.***

### PREACHER POINT

**Ask your congregation:** What are some misconceptions about Jesus that you hear a lot? Just call them out, real loud... Misconceptions about Jesus—stuff you hear or read about him that doesn’t match the biblical reality of Jesus. Just call a few out... (*After three or four people respond, continue...*)

**Say:** C.S. Lewis says: “A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God, but let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.”

**Say:** And author Brennan Manning says: “It must be noted that Jesus alone reveals who God is...We cannot deduce anything about Jesus from what we think we know about God; however, we must deduce everything about God from what we know about Jesus.”

**Say:** Jesus is the key to everything we know about God. But we generally don’t understand or describe

Jesus very accurately in our culture. And it's not just the wider culture. Those who identify themselves as Christians often seem just as confused. Well over a third of church people (39 percent) believe there's a good possibility that Jesus sinned when he walked the earth. More than half (58 percent) say the Holy Spirit, who's identified in Scripture as "the Spirit of Jesus" is merely a symbol, not a living entity. A Jesus who sins, and a Jesus who concocts elaborate lies about the Spirit, is a scam artist, not the Son of God, worthy of worship. Posers and fakers and liars do not meet the stringent job requirements for "God." *In one way or another, a lot of us believe in a Jesus who's not Jesus at all.*

**Say:** The U.S. is a "Christian nation"—95 percent of Americans believe in God. But the most generous estimate regular church attenders is 40 percent, and the real weekly attendance figure is almost certainly closer to 17 percent.

#### PREACHER POINT

**Ask people to quickly find one person to be their partner, then discuss this question briefly:** What are some reasons we've commonly accepted for this slide in church attendance? Why do you think fewer people are going to church these days? *(After two minutes for a pair conversation, continue...)*

**Say:** Call out some of the reasons you just discussed—call them out so everyone can hear... *(Pause for four or five respondents.)*

**Say:** These are all common and reasonable explanations, but let me suggest another, bigger reason that sort of captures all the other reasons. **People are leaving the church BECAUSE THEY CAN...** Let me say that again: **People are leaving the church because they can.**

**Say:** To understand what I'm getting at, let's focus on one of the most important scenes in the New Testament. It happens in John 6, when Jesus tells the crowds, including his disciples, that they must "eat His body and drink His blood if they want any part of Him." He says this over and over, until the crowds are angry and confused and offended by him—so they all leave. Thousands and thousands of angry people shouting and grumbling and kicking up dust as they leave. And then Jesus is left alone with his disciples, and he asks them maybe the most vulnerable question ever asked, because God is

asking it: "Are you also going to leave?" In the awkward silence that follows his question, Peter speaks up: "Lord, to whom would we go? You have the words that give eternal life. We believe, and we know you are the Holy One of God."

**Say:** Peter is *not* saying that he understands Jesus, or "gets" that whole eating and drinking thing. He's saying that he's been captured by the heart of Jesus, and even if he wanted to leave him, he can't. That's what happens when you get *infected* by the heart of Jesus. The problem we're facing today in the church is that we don't know the heart of Jesus as well as we think we do. We have a head understanding of him, but not a heart understanding.

**Say:** Jesus defined discipleship and growth in botanical terms—we are dying branches in desperate need of attaching ourselves to a growing vine, and the vine is himself—this is what he tells us in John 15:5, NIV. He says: "I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing." Transformation in our life—the kind that makes us ask "to whom would we go?"—happens when we sink into the presence of Jesus, when we attach ourselves to him in an intimate way. Later, in Romans 11:17-18, NIV, the Apostle Paul says: "If some of the branches have been broken off, and you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root, do not consider yourself to be superior to those other branches. If you do, consider this: You do not support the root, but the root supports you."

#### PREACHER POINT

**If you would like to show a real-life example of how grafting works, get our free download video called "Grafting Fruit Trees"—just click on this link: [www.refreshthechurch.com/grafting](http://www.refreshthechurch.com/grafting)** *(If you like, after the video, ask your congregation to call out aspects of this grafting video that are metaphors for our relationship with Jesus.)*

**Say:** *Original sin* breaks us off from fellowship with God, from his family. When we repent, we return and are grafted into that vine, into God's own family. And how do we attach ourselves to Jesus in this way? Well, two questions can help us. 1) "Who do I say that Jesus is?" (Luke 9:20) and 2) "Who does Jesus say that I am?"

(Matthew 16:18). When Jesus asks his disciples who the crowds think he really is, they answer that the people think he's one of the prophets, come back to life. And then Jesus asks his closest friends who they think he is. And Simon, once again, is the first to boldly proclaim: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." As Simon names Jesus, then Jesus names Peter soon after this declaration: "You are Peter, the rock, and upon this rock I will build my church" (Matthew 16:18, NASB). As we name Jesus, he names us—and tells us what we were created to do in life.

**Say:** When we get closer to Jesus, we find life, and the life will literally transform us, and our transformation will produce fruit, which will look a lot like the fruit of the Spirit. In the next three parts of this series, we'll explore how we can answer both of these crucial questions—"Who do we say that Jesus is?" and "Who does Jesus say we are?"—in our everyday lives.

Close in prayer.

# Sermon 2

## “RECONSIDERING JESUS”

**KEY SCRIPTURES:** MATTHEW 16:13-23 AND LUKE 10:38-42

### PREACHER PREP

Read through the sermon and decide how you want to adapt it based on your preferences. Check out the “Preacher Point” boxes for ideas on how to involve your congregation in the message, or to personalize the message to your own life.

**Say:** Jesus has just fed a crowd of thousands with a few loaves and fish. The thousands who were there, and experienced this miracle firsthand, are buzzing with excitement and flabbergasted by what Jesus has done. Jesus retreats with his closest friends to debrief the experience. And he asks them a vulnerable question: “Who do people say that I am?” (Mark 8:27, NLT). You can imagine his disciples shuffling their feet a little, glancing at each other to see who’s going to speak up. Finally, they report to Jesus that the crowd believes he’s a prophet come back from the dead—John the Baptist or Elijah or Jeremiah. Then Jesus fixes his gaze on them and asks: “Who do *you* say that I am?” It’s a big question. A dangerous question. An intimate question. The first-and-only question that really matters in life. And Peter speaks up: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

**Say:** When Peter speaks, he’s the first to publicly proclaim this truth—on the face of it, he’s speaking blasphemy, because he’s describing Jesus the Nazarene, a man who grew up as a carpenter’s apprentice, as God himself. This would be an even more incredible moment for Peter if, a few minutes later, Jesus wasn’t calling him “Satan” and telling him to “get behind me.” Soon after he names Jesus as the Messiah, Peter argues with Jesus about his purpose, insisting that he won’t have to suffer and die in Jerusalem as Jesus has already predicted. Peter knows Jesus is the Messiah, but he doesn’t understand who he really is, why he really came, or what he’s really about to do. He knows Jesus, but he doesn’t

really know Jesus. And we have a lot in common with Peter.

**Say:** The general editor of the *Jesus-Centered Bible*, Rick Lawrence, reveals the research his team did to understand how people in our culture describe Jesus. It turns out, our favorite word to describe him is “nice.” And there’s nothing wrong with “nice,” except it completely misses the ferocious and disruptive impact Jesus had on almost everyone he met. He’s the original bull in a china shop. Is Jesus nice? Yes, of course, but when he is, he’s *scandalously nice*. He’s nice to all the wrong people, and he’s offensive to all the wrong people. Jesus is nice to the people he heals or feeds or rescues. But he’s definitely un-nice when he’s blasting (over and over) religious leaders or calling his lead disciple “Satan” or an innocent Canaanite woman a “dog” or telling the rich young ruler to sell all his possessions and follow him if he intends to inherit eternal life. In Matthew 23, Jesus tells the Pharisees they are “hopeless”—not once, but *seven times* in a row—and then he plants three exclamation marks at the end of that diatribe, calling them “manicured grave plots,” “total frauds,” and “snakes.”

### PREACHER POINT

**Have people turn to one person next to them to discuss the following question:** What’s an example of Jesus saying or doing something that doesn’t fit our normal definition of “nice,” and what are possible explanations for what he said or did?

**Say:** Jesus is many things, but “nice” doesn’t capture his heart. And why is that such a big deal? Well, we can’t have an intimate, growing relationship with someone we fundamentally misunderstand. Most of us in contemporary culture are generally comfortable describing Jesus as a good person, a great teacher, and

even a prophet. Some will call him God, but they will mean “alien” when they say it. Are we so comfortable with our response to “Who do I say that Jesus is?” that we’ve stopped asking ourselves the question? Slowing down and paying attention to Jesus—the real Jesus, not the one we assume we already know well—is the key to our growth and transformation.

**Say:** In Romans 1 Paul tells us a startling truth—that everything in the created world is a metaphor for God’s “invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature” (Romans 1:20, NASB). Well, consider black holes—their overwhelming mass creates a gravitational pull so strong that even light cannot escape it. If you get close to one, crossing what scientists call the “event horizon,” you will be pulled into the black hole’s magnetic presence. Maybe black holes are a metaphor that can help us understand why Peter answered, “Lord, to whom shall we go?” (John 6:67-68, NLT) when Jesus asked if his friends were going to leave him. As we draw nearer and nearer to Jesus, we cross the event horizon of his heart, and we are captured forever. Let’s explore how we can get so close to Jesus that we can’t leave him...

### PREACHER POINT

This is a good spot to tell your own story of crossing the “event horizon” with Jesus—tell a specific story that illustrates how the heart of Jesus captured you.

**Say:** We live in an over-stimulated culture that prioritizes distraction. And it’s not going away anytime soon. So, to pay better attention to Jesus (and one another), we’ll have to find everyday ways to slow down and find margin for ourselves. We’ll have to stand out a little, be a little different. Kind of like Mary, when Jesus comes to visit her and Martha.

**Read aloud:** <sup>38</sup> “As Jesus and the disciples continued on their way to Jerusalem, they came to a certain village where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. <sup>39</sup> Her sister, Mary, sat at the Lord’s feet, listening to what he taught. <sup>40</sup> But Martha was distracted by the big dinner she was preparing. She came to Jesus and said, ‘Lord, doesn’t it seem unfair to you that my sister just sits here while I do all the work? Tell her to come and help me.’ <sup>41</sup> But the Lord said to her, ‘My dear Martha, you are worried and upset over all these details! <sup>42</sup> There is only one thing worth being concerned about. Mary has

discovered it, and it will not be taken away from her” (Luke 10:38-42, NLT).

**Say:** There’s a lot going on around Mary—so many details to take care of, and so much work to do. So many distractions. But Mary has crossed her event horizon with Jesus, so she clears some mental and emotional space to give Jesus her full attention. Jesus says this is the “one thing worth being concerned about.” Let’s be “one thing” people, who create space to give Jesus our full attention every now and then. You know what could help?

### PREACHER POINT

For any of the ideas that follow, think of real examples from your own life, where you have done something similar. Tell how you did it, and how it impacted you.

- Switch off the lights in your home and light a candle—then sit and pray, read the Bible, or a good book that leads you to the heart of Jesus.
- Turn off the radio or the podcast you’re listening to on your way to work or school and pray out loud in the silence.
- Turn off the TV or streaming on your laptop and play worship music as the background to chores at home.
- Drive less and walk more. As you walk, pray. Or take one verse from a section you’ve read in the Bible about Jesus and chew on it as you walk.
- Create “Sabbath moments” in your day by treating slow-downs—waiting in line, bad traffic, or interruptions—as moments you can take a big, deep breath and reconnect with Jesus.
- In your everyday “gaps,” ask questions like these:
  - *What is troubling me right now, Jesus?*
  - *Where do I feel fear in my life right now, Jesus?*
  - *What have I forgotten to thank you for, Jesus?*
  - *What do you want me to know about you, Jesus?*
  - *What do you want me to know about myself, Jesus?*
  - *What’s going on in my heart right now, Jesus?*
  - *Who or what do I need to pay attention to right now, Jesus?*

## PREACHER POINT

**Have your congregation “practice what you’re preaching right now:** Ask them to choose one of the above questions (projected on a screen) and ask Jesus that question, right now. Take two whole minutes of silence for this—you’re modeling creating “gap space,” and what it feels like. Afterward, you could ask if anyone would like to share what that experience was like for them, then have them use a loud voice when they speak.

**Say:** To close today, remember what Jesus said: “If you want to be my disciple, you must hate everyone else by comparison—your father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even your own life. Otherwise, you cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:26, NLT). Wow, he’s inviting us all to cross our own event horizon and know his heart so well that we are captured forever by it. When we do, our lives will never be the same...

Close in prayer.

# Sermon 3

## “THE BEELINE PRACTICES”

**KEY SCRIPTURES:** MATTHEW 15; JOHN 4:1-30; AND MATTHEW 15:21-28

### PREACHER PREP

Read through the sermon and decide how you want to adapt it based on your preferences. Check out the “Preacher Point” boxes for ideas on how to involve your congregation in the message, or to personalize the message to your own life.

**Say:** Remember the two questions embedded in Peter’s engagement with Jesus that we are pursuing: 1) Who do I say that Jesus is? 2) Who does Jesus say that I am? Today we’ll conclude our exploration of the first question, and next week we’ll tackle the second question.

**Say:** Charles Haddon Spurgeon was known as “the prince of preachers” in Victorian England. At the time, he was one of the most well-known people in the world. He pastored the “it” church of his day—New Park Street Chapel in London. At just 22 he was already famous for his remarkable and captivating sermons. Every Sunday he’d preach twice, to congregations of 6,000 people, before the days of microphones and amplification. Today, he still has more books in print than any pastor in history, including more than 2,500 published sermons. Spurgeon lived by a simple burning conviction: to “beeline” everything in his life and ministry to Jesus. That means that no matter what he was preaching or teaching or talking about, Spurgeon was always headed toward Jesus.

**Say:** Once, a young pastor asked Spurgeon (at that time an older man) to critique his preaching, and the great man was blunt: “That was a poor sermon.” When the young man asked for an explanation, Spurgeon replied: “Because there was no Christ in it.” The young man protested that his chosen Scripture verse had nothing to do with Jesus. And Spurgeon responded: “Don’t you know, young man, that from every town, and every village, and every little

hamlet in England, wherever it may be, there is a road to London? And so from every text in Scripture there is a road to the metropolis of the Scriptures, that is Christ.”

**Say:** Spurgeon’s passion for Jesus, and his determination to track everything he said and did back to the metropolis of Christ, describes a Jesus-centered orbit. And we can get caught in that orbit when we beeline everything in our life to Jesus—when we live what *Jesus-Centered Bible* general editor Rick Lawrence calls “the beeline practices.” And once we “achieve orbit” around Jesus, we’re caught in that orbit forever.

**Say:** Let’s practice paying ridiculous attention to Jesus (also the name of a podcast inspired by the *Jesus-Centered Bible*, by the way).

**Say:** First, **Ask More and Better Questions When We Read the Bible.** For example, when you read the Bible (anywhere in the Bible), ask yourself one of these beeline questions:

- *What does this story or truth tell me about the heart of Jesus (whether or not it seems focused on Jesus)?*
- *What about this story or truth reveals something Jesus highly values or highly despises?*
- *How does this story or truth match, or not match, my experience of Jesus?*
- *If I was going to teach someone the meaning of this story or truth, how would I point to the heart of Jesus?*

### PREACHER POINT

**Have people try this out right now:** Put a section of Matthew 15 up on your screen, with these four bulleted questions underneath it (or have people turn to Matthew 15 in their own Bible or Bible app). Have them read the section you’ve chosen, then turn quickly to a partner to discuss one of the bulleted questions.

**Say:** Second, **Ask the Oprah Question.** Near the back of every *O* magazine, and near the end of the popular talk show she once hosted, Oprah asks her celebrity guests this brilliant question: “What’s one thing you know for sure?” Oprah believed so deeply in this question that she published *What I Know For Sure*, a collection of columns extracted and edited from her magazine. Oprah’s question is a fantastic interview question. And we can morph it into this: “*Based on this Scripture passage alone, what’s one thing I know for sure about Jesus?*”

### PREACHER POINT

With the same section of Matthew 15 on your screen, include the Oprah question underneath it: “*Based on this Scripture passage alone, what’s one thing I know for sure about Jesus?*” Then ask your congregation to simply call out their answers to the question in a loud voice.

**Say:** Third, **We Treat Everything We Read About Jesus as if It’s the First Time We’ve Ever Experienced It.** What do you notice about Jesus when you treat stories about him with fresh eyes and ears? For example, let’s take a quick look at a story many of us have heard before—the story of his encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well.

### PREACHER POINT

Quickly re-tell the story of the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4:1-30—relate your common understanding of the theme of this story, how you’ve always seen it or preached about it. Then reveal something about the story you never saw before, because you approached it as if you’d never read it before. For example, maybe Jesus knew a lot about the woman’s hidden life not because of his supernatural abilities, but because he paid much, much closer attention to people than we do.

**Say:** Fourth, **We Slow Down to Wallow in Mud Puddles.** A mud puddle is something adults stop and jump over; unlike children, who are likely to jump into the puddle and wallow there a little. When we come to a story in the Bible about Jesus—something he said or did—that we don’t really understand, that’s a mud puddle. What we typically do is jump over these stories, or ignore them, or step around them. What if we, instead, jumped into them and wallowed a little? For example, in the Matthew 15 section we’ve already

looked at, there’s a huge mud puddle story.

### PREACHER POINT

**Quickly read aloud Matthew 15:21-28, which tells the story of Jesus’ encounter with the “Canaanite woman.”** Then ask people to turn to a partner next to them and discuss this question: If you assume that everything Jesus does is motivated by love, what are possible explanations for Jesus’ behavior? After two minutes, ask if anyone wants to throw out an explanation—take one or two.

**Say:** When it comes to Jesus, beauty is always in the details. When we slow down and pay better attention to him, we discover the depths of his heart. And the truth about him obliterates the shallow, partial, diminished way we’ve always understood him. When that happens, our whole life starts to orbit around him, and we’re transformed.

Close in prayer.

# Sermon 4

## “THE SECOND-AND-ONLY QUESTION THAT REALLY MATTERS”

**KEY SCRIPTURES:** MATTHEW 16:18-19 AND EPHESIANS 1:1

### PREACHER PREP

Read through the sermon and decide how you want to adapt it based on your preferences. Check out the “Preacher Point” boxes for ideas on how to involve your congregation in the message, or to personalize the message to your own life.

**Say:** Simon answers Jesus’ question—“Who do you say that I am?”—when no one else will. His attachment to Jesus is already deep. But close relationships are always mutually generous—we consider the truth about who Jesus really is and “name” him, and Jesus considers the truth about who we are and “names” us. Yes, his close friend, the fisherman with the flashing eyes, is the first to publicly proclaim him as Messiah and the Son of God. But then Jesus fires back with this:

*“You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven” (Matthew 16:18-19, NASB).*

**Say:** As we have the courage to name Jesus, he is just as determined to name us, as he does with Simon by revealing his true name. “Petros” had never before been used as a name—it literally means “rock,” so it would be like naming your newborn “Spandex” or “Lathe.” Jesus is the first to give anyone, anywhere the name “Peter.” When we narrow our focus on Jesus, pay better attention to him, and even feed on all the surprising things he says and does, we also invite him to identify who we really are and what we’re made to do in life. Author William Paul Young asks: “How are you going to know the truth of your being unless somebody tells you what the truth

of your being is?” And the “somebody” we trust to tell us the “truth of our being” had better be Jesus, because he’s the only trustworthy mirror we have.

**Say:** Yes, as the Psalmist wrote, we’ve been created “fearfully and wonderfully,” but sin’s fundamental effect has shattered and distorted the mirror we have embedded in our souls. It’s a mirror designed to reflect back to us who we really are, but it’s not describing the truth about who we are. That voice you have inside, the one that speaks to you with a tone that is dismissive and dripping in cynicism, is your shattered mirror. Every person you know has one, including me...

### PREACHER POINT

**Consider what the “negative, cynical voice” inside you has tried to get you to believe about yourself over the years, then tell a story from your own life about the impact of that voice.** You want a story from your life that is vulnerable, and recent. Stories from your distant past don’t carry the leverage of vulnerability. Don’t aim for an epic story—it’s better and more relatable to tell a story from your everyday life.

**Say:** You can see why I depend on Jesus as my only trustworthy mirror. We’re all wired to discover who we are by looking at mirrors outside ourselves, but the only safe mirror is Jesus. The rest are just as flawed and shattered as our own. In Jesus we have a mirror we can trust—he will reflect our true identity back to us directly. And Jesus will also identify our true self *indirectly* through the body of Christ, when its corporate reflection dovetails with what he’s already revealing about us. I mean, Jesus has chosen to move through his body, and that means he can artfully piece together the shattered mirrors of his people to give us a reflection of our soul that matches his own direct reflection. What Jesus says about us, and how he sees us, is our only

sure foundation—all other reflections will either build on that foundation or tear it down.

**Say:** In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul tells us a bedrock truth: “It’s in Christ that we find out who we are and what we are living for” (Ephesians 1:11, The Message). Brennan Manning—author and speaker and pied-piper for the “ragamuffin Christian” movement—echoes Paul’s declaration in his book *Abba’s Child*: “Define yourself radically as one beloved of God. This is the true self. Every other identity is an illusion.”

**Say:** How can we begin to trust the mirror of Jesus more in our lives, and how can we learn to be a more accurate, life-giving, mirror for those we love? Let’s explore three options...

**Say:** First, **Learn to Fearlessly Engage Others.** We pay ridiculous attention to Jesus to understand his heart more deeply, and we pay ridiculous attention to others to offer them a more accurate and beautiful mirror. When we are relating to others, this means we focus better than we typically do, always thinking about the Oprah question relative to the person we’re encountering: *What’s one thing I know for sure about this person’s heart, based on this encounter with them?* And when you notice something, you learn how to reflect it back to the person—always depending on the Holy Spirit within you to help you see and reflect the truth.

### PREACHER POINT

**Have people pair-up and practice this skill.** Ask each person to share a one-minute version of something important that happened to them in high school. After the first person shares, have the second person quickly reflect their answer to the Oprah question about their partner’s story: *What’s one thing I know for sure about this person’s heart, based on this story?* Then have partners switch roles and repeat the process—the whole thing should only take three minutes, as long as partners keep their stories to just one minute.

**Say:** Another way to fearlessly engage others is to ask them better questions. The kinds of questions Jesus asked were always 1) Surprising, 2) Personal, and 3) Specific. I mean, he asked questions that took people a little off-guard, that leaned toward vulnerability, and were very targeted. Here’s what this might look like for us...

- From “How was your day?” to “What happened today that made you want to pray?”

- From “Do you like your pet?” to “What’s one way your pet has changed your life for the better, and one way they’ve made it harder?”

You’re simply pausing to consider more creative, engaging questions. And the point is to “unlock” the people you’re with—to get a better glimpse of their hearts, for your sake and for their sake. And one more hint: You’ll get better at unlocking hearts if you decide to ask better follow-up questions—a good rule of thumb when someone answers a question is to always ask one more follow-up question than you normally would.

### PREACHER POINT

**Ask someone from your congregation to quickly join you—to stand next to you at the front. Your goal is to model “asking the next question” with a random person.** Ask the person a simple question: “What’s something you’ve felt grateful to God about this week, and why?” Or: “What’s something you wish you could have a “do-over” for this week, and why?” After the person answers, ask at least two additional follow-up questions.

**Say:** You can see how slowing down just a little and asking more follow-up questions than you normally would starts to get at the heart. People throw out little clues to their deeper story all the time, we just don’t pursue them very often. For example, whenever you hear someone say the following phrases, treat them as invitations to ask more questions:

- “That’s another story...”
- “But we don’t need to talk about that...”
- “I’ve been better...” (in answer to “How are you?”)
- “That’s a long story...”
- “You don’t want to know...”

**Say:** Second, **Counter the Warped Mirrors in Others’ Lives.** We’re surrounded by mirrors in our lives—people and circumstances that are trying to tell us who we really are. Almost all of them are giving us a false reflection—distorted, like a fun-house mirror. Let’s list some of the false mirrors in our culture...

### PREACHER POINT

**Ask your congregation to simply call out some of the sources of “distorted mirrors” in our culture.**

If they have trouble thinking of any, you can “prime the pump” by suggesting these: celebrity culture, beauty magazines, social media, Facebook updates about fabulous vacations, and so on.

**Say:** Jesus came to set captives free—that’s his job description. When we join him in this mission, we relate to others with a passion for setting them free from whatever has imprisoned them in life. And there’s no more brutal captivity than the captivity of a false identity. This is why Jesus told Nicodemus the Pharisee: “You must be born again” (John 3:7). Jesus wants to give us a new identity that requires a new birth—“of the Spirit.” Of course, the enemy of God, whose name is Satan, also knows that if he can poison our identity, his work is done. A person who deeply believes lies about himself or herself eventually self-destructs.

**Say:** To help set others free in our everyday interactions with them, we can practice two habits:

- 1) Notice what we notice about people—listen to the nudge of Jesus as we interact, open to letting him show us what is true and good about that person.
- 2) Find a way to express what we notice.

### PREACHER POINT

**Tell a story from your own life when you did this with someone.** Think about an interaction where you experienced something “true and good” about the person, then found a way to express what you experienced.

**Say:** When we engage people this way, we must decide to be more persistent than we normally are. We see this persistence in Jesus, who pursued the Samaritan woman of Sychar, Nicodemus, Peter, the Canaanite woman who asked him to eject a demon from her daughter, Zacchaeus, and on and on...

### PREACHER POINT

**Tell a favorite story of Jesus’ persistence with someone right here, if you would like to.**

**Say:** Finally, **Offer Others Your Inexplicable Belief.** Bob Goff, author of *Love Does*, says: “The film *Finding Nemo* gives us our mission in life. We want to help people get home.” When we offer others our inexplicable belief, I don’t mean we reflect something about them that is ridiculous or overblown. Inexplicable belief communicates something so deep that it transcends affirmation, and speaks to the core of the person.

Again, Bob Goff says: “What if, when people meet us, they feel like they have just met heaven? I mean, we tell people who they are turning into. We see people as who they can be. We recognize that they don’t want to be told what they want—instead, we tell them who they are...and who they are turning into.”

**Read aloud:** We find this powerful habit embedded in Jesus’ Parable of the Weeds, in Matthew 13:24-30, NIV: “The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared. The owner’s servants came to him and said, ‘Sir, didn’t you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?’ ‘An enemy did this,’ he replied. The servants asked him, ‘Do you want us to go and pull them up?’ ‘No,’ he answered, ‘because while you are pulling the weeds, you may uproot the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.’”

**Say:** One way to interpret this parable is this: Pay less attention to the “weeds” in people, and way more attention to the “wheat” you see growing in them. I mean, you don’t discount the ugly or sinful things you experience in others, but you decide, instead, to focus on the beauty that’s growing in them. Here are a few ways to do that...

### PREACHER POINT

**For any of the bulleted ideas that follow, think of a personal example when you lived it out and tell that story.**

- Use stronger language than you normally would to recognize their courage.
- Mark their gifts, not their achievements—reflect back the fruits of the Spirit you see in their path to achievement

(love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control), instead of the end result.

- Make extraordinary events rich with expressions of inexplicable belief (*birthdays, graduations, end of season, baptism, award ceremonies, milestones*). Don't let these big moments pass without communicating something deeper and more meaningful about the person being honored.
- Look for “cloud of witnesses” moments—when you can “brag on” people with others around.

**Say:** We are not merely helping people move toward reconciliation with the Father through the invitation of the Son, but we are helping them reconcile themselves to their true, created beauty.

Close in prayer.