

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church / June 19, 2022 / Pastor Jeff Harrison
Biblical Responses to Cultural Messaging (Building Faith at Home)
Look Inside, Be True, and Do What Makes You Happy? (Jeremiah 2, 17 and John 14)

Jesus addressed common cultural messages

Good morning. Thanks Gene and Heather for sharing. It's so great to hear from you and partner with you! And Happy Father's Day to all the Dads! As your Father's Day present, I've written a sermon for you ☺ As we come now to God's Word, let's pray...

Messages matter. It's why, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus addressed some common cultural messages. Jesus did this by saying, "You have heard it said..." and then sharing a common message from the Jewish, religious culture that Jesus lived in.

Next Jesus followed up each common cultural message by saying, "But I say to you..." after which Jesus would share God's better alternative for that cultural message.

With God's help, we're seeking to do something similar in our *Building Faith at Home* series. We're addressing four common messages from our culture and looking to the scriptures to see God's better alternative to these messages. We're calling this series *Biblical Responses to Cultural Messaging*.

Relevance: Evaluating cultural messages is part of living well

We're doing this series because messages matter. The messages we believe about God, the messages we believe about ourselves, the messages we believe about others and about life's purpose, these messages make a huge difference in how we live.

So we want to evaluate the messages we receive. Just because we hear something frequently, or just because something is assumed by many, that doesn't necessarily mean that it's a good and true message.

Here in the church, we want to live by God's messages, the ones that are loving and true and that lead to living well.

And speaking as a father, here on Father's Day, we want to encourage our children to live by God's messages. The ones that are loving, true, and lead to flourishing in Jesus.

As Pastor Dave and I share, we're not speaking to our culture about what messages our culture should believe. Rather, we're speaking to the church, calling the church to embrace God's perspective and messages for living.

And whether you're a follower of Jesus or just exploring things spiritually, please consider this the start of a conversation. If I say something that you disagree with or want to process further, let's talk, I'd be glad to get together.

Orienting to today's message: "Life is found in looking inside, being true to yourself, and doing what makes you happy"

The common cultural message we're looking at this morning is, "Life is found in looking inside, being true to yourself, and doing what makes you happy." It's a message often told through songs, TV shows, movies, advertisements, and on social media. A message to look inside yourself, figure out who you are, and live authentically from that. A message saying that the right way to live is to live out your truth.

As Pastor Tim Keller describes it, "Historically, truth is something "out there" and inside you are feelings. And when you find the truth, you are to bring your feelings in line with the truth. But we are the first culture in history... being told truth is actually inside you and everything "out there" is the culturally constructed feelings. So we're told, you go inside yourself and find truth and then come back out with your truth and tell everyone, 'you must accommodate me and my truth.'"¹

That's what we're talking about with this cultural message that life is found in looking inside, being true to yourself, and doing what makes you happy.

It's a message of license, one that says that the hero is the person who looks inside themselves, identifies their deepest desires, and then fulfills them no matter what others say. A message expressed in song in the movie *Frozen*: "It's time to see what I can do, to test the limits and break through. No right, no wrong, no rules for me. I'm free. Let it go."

I recently heard Pastor Kevin DeYoung describe this morning's cultural message in this way: "To deny the fulfillment of what you desire is not just to tell you that you can't do

¹ Tim Keller speech found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uq8NPWbEo5w>

something; it is to strike a death knell in your truest identity. [Our culture is] awash in... expressive individualism. The message that you are what you feel, and don't let anyone tell you otherwise... The world says, 'You must find yourself, be true to yourself, and above all, express yourself.'"²

Or as I'm saying it, life is found in looking inside, being true to yourself, and doing what makes you happy. It's a cultural message that some think is so self-evident that it shouldn't even be questioned, though it doesn't have any basis in objective or scientific fact, nor any grounding in God's Word. It's just a common belief in our particular culture.

Teaching: Problems with and biblical responses to this morning's cultural message

Cultural filters hinder us from truly looking inside – As we examine this belief this morning, I wonder if our cultural filters hinder us from truly looking inside. Maybe we're not actually free to look inside and figure out who we are, because our cultural filters have influenced us.

Imagine a man who looks inside and sees anger and aggression, a strong impulse to be a warrior. Let's say that man lived in an old tribal culture where fighting for honor for yourself and your people is a big deal and where being a powerful warrior is really important. In that culture he'd affirm, "that's me, I'm an aggressive warrior."

But if the same man instead grew up today in an upper-class home in the suburbs, he might try to control those violent, aggressive tendencies with therapy or anger management, saying, "those aren't really me", choosing instead to focus on other desires inside of him.

And neither the ancient tribal nor the modern version of the man would say, "What's most important about me is that my eye color matches my dog's" because neither culture valued that.

So our cultural filters can get in the way of us looking inside and being true to ourselves. Perhaps that's why people's identities so often form around things that are valued in their culture. Maybe we can't be as radically individual as this morning's cultural message suggests.

² <https://kevindeyoung.org/conference/whatever-you-do-do-not-be-true-to-yourself-geneva-college-commencement-2022/>

Trying to apply this message can bring burdensome pressure – But even if someone still wants to try to look inside, be true to themselves, and do what makes them happy, I also wonder about the burdensome pressure that this message can bring.

What’s inside of us can be confusing, elusive, changing. One day doing an activity brings me happiness, while another day the same activity is unfulfilling. What’s inside of us can even be contradictory. Your career desires and romantic desires might be pulling you in two different directions.

I know my food desires and my health desires are pulling me in two different directions. ☺ And advertisers make things more confusing as they try to convince us that what’s going to make us happy is purchasing their product.

On top of all that, the Old Testament book of Jeremiah, chapter 17 says, “The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?”

So sometimes it’s not easy to figure out what we really want or who we really are. All my desires sometimes sound like a bad committee meeting, with various voices vying for attention and trying to hijack the agenda. It’s why people change majors and careers and partners and many other things.

Yet this morning’s cultural message is essentially telling people, including young people, “All you’ve got to do is separate yourself from everyone and look inside. In that confusing mess of your desires, figure out the true you, and then somehow bestow dignity on yourself, and be true to you. Then just figure out what you need to construct a life that makes you happy.”

As if all that’s just a piece of cake. I’ve heard Pastor Mark Sayers describe these modern burdens using a map metaphor. If you don’t get a life map from a faith, then you don’t know where you’re going in your life and can get lost and anxious along the way.³

I grew up in Dallas, and one time in high school, my school’s football team was playing a friend’s team. So, I went to hang out with my friend. I had never been to their stadium before, and this was well before Google Maps. So my parents wrote me some directions on an actual piece of paper ☺ to get me to the stadium.

³ I’ve heard Sayers make this point on his podcast, *Rebuilders*.

I got there just fine, and had a great time with my friend, but eventually it was time to go home. Now it was dark, and I was in an unfamiliar part of town. Though my parents wrote me good directions home, and though they were a reversal of the way I had come, I still managed to take a wrong turn.

After a while, I realized everything was unfamiliar and that I was going the wrong way. So I took more turns, trying to find my way back to the right path. But eventually I was completely lost, in the dark, in a kinda sketchy part of town. I got anxious as I was alone, without a map, and unsure where to go.

This morning's cultural message tells people to start with a blank page, to just look inside, be true to themselves, and do what makes them happy. And this lack of a life map, being told to start essentially with a blank page and figure it out, can lead to anxiety as a person can feel lost and without needed direction for their life.

Any identity or happiness strategy we create is insecure and insufficient – Not only can trying to figure all this out in your life feel burdensome, but even if you think you've figured it out, can any identity or happiness strategy we create can actually be secure and sufficient?

David Foster Wallace, a noted secular author, not a Christian, does not think so. Foster says that if we build our life on any earthly thing, whatever earthly thing we worship, it will end up eating us alive.

Foster once wrote, "In the day-to-day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as... not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship. And the compelling reason for maybe choosing some sort of god or spiritual-type thing to worship... is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive. If you worship money and things, if they are where you tap real meaning in life, then you will... never feel you have enough. It's the truth. Worship your body and beauty and sexual allure and you will always feel ugly. And when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths before they finally plant you."⁴

⁴ Keller, Tim, *Making Sense of God*, 111.

Wallace is observing here that any earthly thing we build our life on, any earthly thing we worship, that we look to for our identity or happiness, it's all insecure and insufficient. For example, if someone looks to their career to provide their identity and happiness, they may work so hard that it eventually damages their health and relationships, which works against their happiness.

And if their career isn't working out well, that can lead to things like resentment towards others who are doing better, selfishness in their actions, and even despair.

Pastor Tim Keller notes how in former times, our self-regard was rooted more in our relationships and faithfulness. But today it can sometimes feel like an embarrassment, "to be merely faithful and not successful. This is a new weight on the soul, put there by modernity... Our culture tells us that we have the power to create ourselves, and that puts the emphasis on independence and self-reliance. But it also means that society adulates winners and despises losers, showing contempt for weakness."⁵

Today it's not enough to be faithful in your work, our culture says you need to find happiness in it, and have success, and so this morning's cultural message brings added burdens.

Even if one's career is going great, it will still have hardships along the way and not be consistently fulfilling enough to give everlasting happiness.

And there's always the chance that a career focused person could mess up in a way that ruins their career. Or factors outside the person's control could derail their career.

These last few years have made clear that much is outside our control: war, disease, death, racism, social unrest, supply chain issues, inflation and so we can't assume that everything will run smoothly in the background in a way that allows many the freedom to pursue their personal happiness.

If life is looking inside, being true to yourself, and doing what makes you happy, then what if you have ongoing pain and suffering that keeps you from doing that? A message of doing what makes you happy as life's meaning doesn't provide any hope to a person facing chronic suffering.

⁵ Keller, Tim, *Making Sense of God*, 129.

And to cope with that pain, the overly career focused person who can't pursue their career or is failing in it might turn to unhealthy additions.

But even if that career driven person doesn't befall any of these negative fates, eventually, if they live long enough, they'll have to retire. Then they'll lose their sense of self since it's been rooted in their career. They won't know who they are anymore, or how they're significant. And this isn't just true of our career. Any identity or happiness strategy that we create is ultimately insecure and insufficient for us.

The Old Testament book of Jeremiah, in chapter 2, talks about this reality. There God says, "My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water." Any identity or happiness strategy that we create is insecure and insufficient. It's like a broken cistern where the water just keeps leaking out.

Jesus is the right guide, Who provides what is secure and sufficient – We've considered so far how cultural filters can hinder us from truly looking inside. If we still try to look inside anyway, figuring out what's inside can bring burdensome pressure. And then any identity or happiness strategy that we create is still ultimately insecure and insufficient.

So let's consider now God's better alternative to this cultural message. Earlier I shared about being lost in a sketchy part of town, without a map, anxious, alone, and unsure where to go.

This was back in the days of those huge brick cell phones, before most people owned a cell phone, including me. So in that sketchy part of town, I had to pull over at a gas station and call my parents from a pay phone.

As I explain my situation, trying to hide the anxiety I'm feeling, my mom freaks out a little bit. Then my parents ask me to name the closest intersection. My parents are never in this part of town, so they're not sure where I am either.

So they bust out their giant *Mapsco*, a huge book filled with a couple hundred pages of maps of every street in Dallas and the surrounding area. They find the page that includes my intersection, and figure out how to get from there to home. They give me those directions, and this time I actually follow them correctly, and make it home.

Pastor Mark Sayers says that if you don't get a life map from a faith, then you don't know where you're going, and you can get lost and become anxious along the way, as I did that night.

So instead of starting with a blank slate for your life, trying to look inside and figure out what makes you happy, instead, Sayers advises, "Find the right guide to follow, and follow that guide."

Let's see that guide as we turn to the gospel of John, chapter 14. Here in the gospel of John, Jesus is having the last supper with His disciples, soon before His death on the cross. Jesus tells His disciples that He will be with them only a little longer and how where Jesus is going, His disciples cannot come at first. This troubles the disciples, and Jesus responds to their concerns, starting in verse 1 of John chapter 14. Here Jesus says: **(1-6)**

14 "Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. ² My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? ³ And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. ⁴ You know the way to the place where I am going." ⁵ Thomas said to him, "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?" ⁶ Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

Jesus is the way and the truth and the life. Jesus is the guide that we all need, Who takes away the burden of figuring out what life is about on your own.

Jesus is our creator, so when we follow Him, we're living in accordance with our design, with how we're created to live. And Jesus leads and directs and invites you to be part of His worldwide mission of love. Life's not about you looking inside and living for you, life is about loving God and people, participating in Jesus' glorious mission to make disciples.

There's a much deeper sense of meaning in life walking with Jesus. As Pastor Mark Sayers describes it, here in the west, many are trying to have progress in life and society without God's presence. When what we need is to be next to the spring of living water, like Jeremiah the prophet talked about. God is the primary thing we need for a healthy life and system. Out of community with God comes freedom in Christ, fellowship with other

believers in Jesus, and a deeper sense of meaning that comes from walking with God and serving His worldwide mission.⁶

When I was lost that night, I turned for help to the people who cared most about me, and who had the right map to guide me home. When it comes to our lives, Jesus is the Who cares most about us, choosing to come on a rescue mission for us to suffer and die for our sins. And Jesus doesn't just have the right map, Jesus Himself is the right guide. Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. He is the One to follow, Who guides us home, into the loving arms of our heavenly Father.

And Jesus is the only guide Who provides an identity and happiness that is ultimately secure and more than sufficient. There's potential for eternal fulfillment in relationship with Jesus that no earthly thing can provide. You're designed for that relationship, to know Him and to serve His mission.

My life became so much more meaningful once I was no longer merely looking inside and living only for myself. Life is found in relationship with Jesus, following Him, and serving Him by serving others in love.

As we talked about earlier, if you look inside and decide to find your identity in your career, or any other created thing, that's unstable. Those things can't provide a secure identity, only Jesus can. For a secure identity can only be given by Someone Who never changes, will always be around, and has resurrection power over death.

Someone Who will always love you perfectly, forgive all your failings, and Who takes away the burden of trying to prove yourself worthy of love. Your career is not going to die for your sins and remove your striving and shame.

But Jesus loved you enough to give up His glory and suffer, for the joy of being in relationship with you. So you can rest in His love.

As your love for Jesus grows, you'll find more joy in pleasing Him, even when you sacrifice and suffer, as your happiness is linked with His happiness.

⁶ I've heard Sayers make this point on his podcast, *Rebuilders*.

When things aren't working out, Jesus gives hope that nothing else can provide. Because He is with you, working in you, and will one day give us the true longings of our heart, not a mere earthly happiness, but an eternal overflowing joy.

Next Step

This morning we've examined the cultural message that life is found in looking inside, being true to yourself, and doing what makes you happy. We've considered how cultural filters hinder us from truly looking inside, and how this cultural message can bring burdensome pressure, and how any identity or happiness strategy we create is insecure and insufficient.

So our next step is to look to Jesus and live for Him. That's how we can apply this sermon to our lives. Look to Jesus and live for Him. Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. He is the right guide for your life. The only One Who provides identity and happiness that is ultimately secure and more than sufficient.

I recently saw a video from Christian author Rebecca McLaughlin about the smallness of a life that looks inside. If you told me I have to stay in my bedroom for the rest of my life, I'd be sad. My room is far too small a place for an adult to live out their life. Think of how little my room is, compared to leaving my room, where there's a whole world to explore of people and places and ideas and activities.

Similarly, looking inside myself for my life meaning is like choosing to stay in my bedroom: small and confining. While if I instead look to God for my life's meaning, I have a whole universe and beyond to explore: ideas beyond my wildest imagining, life meaning and love beyond my wildest dreams.

McLaughlin notes that we have a term for those we make stay inside their rooms. It's prison, and I wouldn't choose that voluntarily.⁷ Look to Jesus and live for Him. Let's pray...

Dismissal – You're dismissed. Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.

⁷ <https://www.rebeccamclaughlin.org/videos?pgid=k9virkmg-345841e3-3ba8-44e1-85ca-371be4e2b8a7>