

- We are starting a new series today about what it looks like to follow Jesus. Before we can get into what this looks like, we need to look at identity because it forms the basis for everything else.
- We are going to look at the three basic needs that we have wired into us the influence, either positively or negatively, our identity. The first one we are looking at is the desire for acceptance.
- Acceptance. At some level, everyone wants to be accepted.
- 1/3 of teenage guys and 1/4 of teenage girls feel pressure from their friends to have sex. That number goes to 1/2 if they are already in a relationship.
- Almost half of teens surveyed were mean to or bullied someone else because their friends did.
- 2/3 of girls felt they had to dress a certain way to fit in.
- 3/4 of teens tried alcohol for the first time because they wanted to fit in.
- The desire for acceptance is incredibly strong.
- But's it's not just in teenagers. What about you?
- Have you ever worn something specifically because of what another person would think or say?
- Have you ever done something that you wouldn't normally do but everyone was pushing you to do it?
- Have you ever avoiding doing something because you thought it make you look stupid?
- Have you ever decorated your house just because others were coming over and you wanted them to admire your place?
- Have you ever worked a whole lot of overtime because your co-workers were and it would look bad not to?
- Have you ever done something and been irritated that no one thanked you for what you did?
- Have you ever bit your lip and not said something because you did not want the negative reaction from the other person?
- Have you ever deeply longed to hear "I love you" or "I'm proud of you" from your parents or grandparents?
- Have you ever stayed off the dance floor because you didn't want people to see your moves?
- Whose acceptance do you want? Do you wish you had? That you did not get?
- In our culture, everyone says they want to be independent. To depend is weak. To need the approval and acceptance of others is only for those who can't hack it as leaders.
- We praise the person who "marches to the beat of their own drummer."
- To some degree we admire mavericks, those who charge out on their own.
- Yet we feel bad when people think poorly of us, don't accept us, disagree with us, or get downright hostile towards us.
- And we think, "I know that this shouldn't bother me so much, but it does."
- Let's clarify something first.

I. God designed us for relationship.

- The desire for acceptance is based in relationship. It's how it's supposed to be.
Genesis 2:18 The LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him."
- *Genesis 2:24 That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh.*

- There is oneness
 - When Jesus prayed for his followers, he prayed for unity.
- John 17:20 "My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, 21 that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you."*
- There is nothing like having someone who loves you, accepts you, wants to hang out with you and enjoys spending time with you. They have your back, and you just don't have to worry about what they think about you.
 - We all crave acceptance. Sometimes from the masses. Sometimes from specific people.
 - The desire in itself is good. There is nothing wrong with it.
 - It turns into a problem when that desire is elevated and begins to determine how I feel about myself and what I do. If others think good of me, then I feel good. If they criticize me, I am devastated. The bible labels this as fear.

Proverbs 29:25 Fear of man will prove to be a snare, but whoever trusts in the LORD is kept safe.

- Our responses to our fear of man is varied. It might lead us to acquiesce, withdraw, pull into a shell, seek others out who will agree with us or prove ourselves.
- It can be as simple and relatively harmless or seriously damaging. I see this all the time, in others and in myself.
- The girl who is sleeping with her boyfriend because she is terrified he might move on and she will be alone.
- The man who never heard from their father say, "I'm proud of you" and now is driven to prove his worth at his job.
- The person in the church who feels compelled to always say yes to ever request because they do not want to disappoint.
- The friend who lets another friend manipulate them because they are the only friend they have.
- The woman who wants friends but stays home and becomes increasingly lonely because she is anxious about making new relationships.
- We don't love people the way they need to be loved. We put on a front, an act. We are timid. We are consumed with worry.
- Public speaking is the #1 fear people have – it's not a fear of speaking, it's a fear of making a fool of oneself.
- When our identity is based on the acceptance of anyone in this world, then it will always be susceptible to change, to compromise, to disappointment, to discouragement.
- I heard this quote this week. *"One of the greatest mental freedoms is truly not caring what anyone else thinks of you."* (Unknown) I think this is dead wrong. You will always care what people think.

II. We need to understand whose acceptance matters most.

- Through Jesus, you are fully accepted. We often hear the phrase "God loves you", but I sometimes wonder if we really believe what we hear. Jesus painted a picture in a story that he told. Charles Dickens described it as "the finest short story ever written" and it is my favorite in the entire Scriptures.
- It is the story of the prodigal son. As we go through it, pay attention in the story to the Father. What was his attitude? How did he act? What was his posture? What was his motivation?

Luke 15:11 "There was a man who had two sons. 12 The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them. 13 "Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there

squandered his wealth in wild living. 14 After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. 15 So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. 16 He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. 17 “When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! 18 I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.’ 20 So he got up and went to his father. “But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. 21 “The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ 22 “But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. 23 Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. 24 For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate. 25 “Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. 26 So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. 27 ‘Your brother has come,’ he replied, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’ 28 “The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. 29 But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. 30 But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’ 31 “ ‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. 32 But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’

- The son turned his back on his Father. He rejected him, minimized him. Spurned him. He was hostile and he left. He humiliated him. Embarrassed the family.
- His son used his newfound wealth to find acceptance. Friends. People to party with.
- When it ran out, so did the acceptance.
- He found himself alone with the pigs where “he came to his senses.”
- What was he thinking on his trip back. Will he accept me? Will he turn me away? What about the neighbors? It will be so embarrassing. Will I even be allowed to serve? What is my dad going to say?
- He ran to him – threw dignity out the window. He was waiting for him.
- He kissed him – not after he repented but before.
- He restored him to relationship. The son had done nothing to earn it.
- The fattened calf fed a lot of people – this was a community event. He was not ashamed of his son, despite all that he had done.
- Ironically, the attitude of the older brother is probably what we could expect from the father.
- He is a part of the family. He is loved. He had thrown the gates wide open to him.
- The older son was trying to earn his father’s love through his actions – the Father is telling him he didn’t have to.
- The Father loved the one son despite of all the wrong things he had done.
- The Father loved the second son regardless of his efforts to do the right thing.
- You’ve heard the saying that there’s nothing I can do to make God love me less and there is nothing I can do to make God love me more.
- We sometimes catch half of this but live as though the other half isn’t true.
- When the prodigal son came home, it did not matter what everyone else thought. It did not matter what the community said. It didn’t even matter how his brother responded. It was all about the Father.

III. God's acceptance needs to inform every part of our lives.

- We are often trying to balance the scales. Make things right for what we did before. You can't!
- God made you in his image. He designed you. He loves you. That is true for every single one of you.
- This love is so great, that he is inviting you to follow him. He wants you to be in his family. But you have to choose. The father loved the prodigal son even though he ran away. But the son had to choose to respond to his fathers love and come home.
- If you have never come home, do it today. There is no relationship with God unless you recognize you have sinned, that Jesus died for those sins, and you confess them to him and invite him to take charge of your life.

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! (2 Cor 5:17)

- If you have done this, and you are a follow of Jesus, then his acceptance is secure. Really! Truly! All the time! God gives us multiple pictures of what this looks like.
- He is daddy. (John 1:12) One who you can go to and crawl on his lap. Lay your head on his shoulder. Let him hug you and hold you.
- He is Father. (1 John 3:1-3) He grabs your shoulders, looks you in the eye, and says, "I'm so proud of you."
- He is a friend. (John 15:15) The one who walks beside you. Listens without judging. Sits across the table at the restaurant and simply enjoys hanging out with you.
- He chose me to be with him. (Eph 1:3-8) He picked me. He wants me on his team. He is proud of you and shows you off to his angels whenever they come by.
- He is a confidante. (Heb 4:14-16) He listens always. He is not distracted. He always has time to discuss life and issues and problems with you. He is always accessible. (Only friends are like this – Dane/Skeeter telling me to call them in the middle of the night)
- He is the perfect husband. (Eph 5:25, Rev 19:6-9) The level of intimacy, of speaking love to you, of pouring himself out for you, his longing for you, his desire for you, are greater than any we have experienced.
- When we are not acting from this acceptance, we turn elsewhere to feel included, loved and accepted. We feel we must people please. We refuse to step out. We let others decide what I do. I am working to keep up appearances.
- When you act from our acceptance, you are free to love as people need to be loved, with all that entails. You are free to boldly challenge however God leads you to challenge. You can be you, without pretense, without masks, totally authentic. You can live confidently, without fear.
- **YOU ARE FULLY ACCEPTED.**
- Not when you do good. Not when you are reading your bible and praying. Not when you conquer your sins. Not when you clean yourself up. Not when you make amends for your past.
- His acceptance of you is not increasing or decreasing.
- Jesus has secured the Father's full approval for us, and we cannot get more.
- And if you have the acceptance of the most Glorious One, then that decides what we do and how we live, not the approval and acceptance of those around us.
- Maybe you are like the prodigal son. Ashamed, guilty, afraid. Convinced that you have to somehow behave your way to acceptance.

- Maybe you are fearful of what others think of you. You have been timid because you didn't want to look foolish. You have avoided conversations or actions because of the potential reaction, even though you knew it was right.
- Perhaps you are like the older brother. Working hard, trying to prove yourself, doing all the right things.
- Perhaps you are working hard, pushing off feelings, convincing yourself you don't need anyone else's approval. Maybe you've been hurt by the rejection of parents, friends, siblings, co-workers, classmates.
- Or maybe it's just been a while since you have felt the complete love and acceptance of your perfect heavenly Father.
- **YOU ARE FULLY ACCEPTED.**