

I. Set Up

A. Welcome. Introduction, greeting to guests. Last week we finished up a three-week series called Invest and Invite. (Talk about your BBQ)

B. This week we begin a five-week series called Unstuck – during which we'll be exploring insights from God about how to avoid the things that hold us back. God's desire is that we flourish – but that doesn't always happen. In a few minutes, Mike will be turning to Jeremiah for the first glimpse at the kind of ways we may be sabotaging ourselves. Right now....

II. Intro: Let me tell you about a few people. They do not attend Christ Church. But just to be extra safe, I've changed the names.

A. First there is John. Great guy. He joined a running group I was in. We were both in our early thirties at the time. He was a Christian, newly divorced and though he was very funny and outgoing, over time it became clear that he was struggling. He was unemployed, and though he had vague plans to get a Master Degree. Nothing ever seemed to happen on that front.

1. John was fun to be around. Very helpful. Very funny. I assumed he'd eventually pull out of his post-divorce slump. But then I got a call from his Dad asking to meet (secretly, John was not to know). When we got together, John's dad told me, "John's been stuck for years. This is a big part of the reason his wife left him. He cannot get out of his own way. He has options, but he cannot make a decision; he's his own worst enemy. I tried to help John take some next steps, but nothing ever changed. He eventually moved away. The last I heard, things were not much better.

B. Sara is in her fifties and in a troubled marriage. She and her husband have several grown children. She is back in the workforce now, and doing OK at that. But if you look carefully at her life you realize that she skips from job to job more than is ideal. And she tends to do the same with friends.

1. Sara is very different than John. She is quieter; not as funny, much more thoughtful. And where John hated counselors, Sarah loves them. I'd go so far as to suggest that her hobby seems to be analyzing everyone around her.

2. And if you agree with her assessment of people and situations, things go well. But if you challenge her narrative, or suggest that some of the reason she keeps changing jobs or friends, is because she is very critical of others, you get cut off. Sara is stuck.

C. I can go on. Peter is late fifties and very successful. He has a wonderful wife. He is very generous. Few would describe him as stuck, but he has little ability to control his temper. When he gets mad, look out.

D. Clair's husband left her for a younger woman ten years ago. She remains very angry about it. Bitter. It's hard to have a conversation with her about anything else.

E. Sam is forty and drinks too much.

F. Paul's a very successful thirty-five-year-old who is significantly overweight and whose morning coffee includes five extra shots of espresso. By the way, he takes several Ambien to go to sleep each night. These are two of the many clues that his life is not working. I tried pleading with him to make some changes. The last time we met I changed tactics. I asked him to put me in charge of his money (of which he has a lot) so that when he died, which I told him I thought would be in the next five years, I could give it away to great ministries.

G. Ruth is 25 and blames others – for everything. She blames Boomers for taking all the good jobs; she blames her professors for encouraging a major that left her with few prospects and a lot of debt; she blames her parents for the fact that her car is old.

H. Some of these people are more high performing than others, but they all have one thing in common. They are stuck. Are you? Or maybe the better way to ask this question is – in what ways are stuck?

III. This series is based on a few assumptions.

A. First, there is an ideal. When it comes to what we're supposed to look like – our life, our character – there is a target. We're supposed to look like Jesus.

1. He was wise, loving, strong, purposeful, dialed in to the needs of others, profoundly connected to His Heavenly Father.

2. If you are a Christian, Jesus is not simply your Savior, He is your example. He did things – like die a sacrificial death – that we do not have to do. And he is not the only place we look to see what life should look like. There are other descriptions, such as the list of the Fruit of the Spirit that we find in Galatians 5. But there is an ideal. And Jesus is the first place to look to see it.

B. Two: we are supposed to be moving towards that ideal. We are supposed to be more like Jesus tomorrow than today.

1. You've likely seen this spectrum. SPECTRUM. We are all on it somewhere. We are all spiritual beings with souls that have been formed or malformed in various ways by the things we do and choices we make. We start in negative numbers because of sin. We cross over into positive numbers on the work of Christ alone. And though we cannot get to positive or negative five on this side of the grave, once we die we head to one end or the other.

2. And here's the point. We are supposed to be moving towards God every day. Life is better when we do. Spiritual maturity is its own rewards. Love, joy, peace, patience, self-control – these are great things to have. But...

C. Three: Many people are stuck.

1. Many people cross over the line and stall. This is not just true today, it's been true from the earliest days.

2. In his first letter to the church in Corinth, Paul lamented that they were too immature to understand what he really wanted to share with them.¹ The author of Hebrews offers essentially the same complaint about a different group.²

D. There is a lot more that could be said here:

1. God wants us to get better. In John 10:10 Jesus says as much. He wants you to flourish. God wants us to know Shalom.

2. It is no fun to be stuck. Getting better is better.

E. But I want to drill down on a different point. This series is framed by the idea that to get better we need to understand what's wrong. Before a doctor can prescribe a treatment, he or she needs to make an accurate diagnosis. Before we can fix something, we need to know how it's broken. In this case, we need to know how we are broken.

1. Some of us are trapped in addictions.

2. Some of us are held back by a lack of insight.

3. Some of us are stuck because we are lazy or undisciplined.

4. Some are being held back by others – we are victims of injustice

F. In this five week series, I want to help you better understand the obstacles we're up against. And that means, we're going to look at what the Bible says about sin. I think we are naïve on this front. The Bible has a very sophisticated and nuanced view of what we are up against.

1. The Old Testament uses 6 different nouns and 3 verbs to describe sin.

2. The Greek New Testament uses five nouns, five adjectives and three verbs to describe it.³

G. The Bible also tells stories and uses metaphors to help us develop a more complete view of how and why we get stuck. In this series, we are going to look at five of them. Today we get started by thinking about what Jeremiah says about roots.

IV. If you have a Bible, turn to Jeremiah 17. This was written by the prophet Jeremiah about three thousand years ago.

A. It was during a time of great political drama.

1. Jerusalem falls, the temple is destroyed and Judah goes into exile.

2. The Assyrians were declining and the Babylonians and Egyptians are fighting to see who will take over.

3. There were reform efforts going on under Josiah.

4. It was a time of political intrigue.

B. His comments were initially directed towards Israel. And in this case, they unfold by way of contrast. Jeremiah uses two different kinds of trees to make a point about the importance of roots. In the first part, he does a great job of describing someone who is stuck.

V. Jeremiah 17:5

A. Cursed is the man who trusts in mankind and makes flesh his strength. And whose heart turns away from the Lord – trouble is coming to those who put their trust in titles, countries, armies, presidents, pensions, whatever. Who trusts in man and the things of man rather than God.

B. he will be like a bush in the desert.

1. The word used here for bush is the Hebrew term *yar yar*. *There are several things going on in the Hebrew that do not easily translate into English. For starters, the word means naked.*⁴ PICTURE

2. Around here we might think of a Juniper bush, which are not my favorite. Every house we bought has had massively overgrown juniper bushes out front. So one of the first things I've had to do is rip them out.

3. In Jeremiah 17 the prophet references a special kind of juniper that grows in the stony waste lands that make up much of Israel. But of course, what he is really referring to is a certain kind of person. Let me keep reading because, as I said, things come together by way of contrast.

C. V. 5: Cursed is the man who trusts in mankind, and makes flesh his strength. And whose heart turns away from the Lord. For he will be like a bush in the desert, they will not see prosperity when it comes. They will dwell in the parched places of the desert, in a salt land where no one lives.

D. V. 7: Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord and whose trust is the Lord. For he will be like a tree planted by the water (note that the bush is just in the desert, but the tree was planted by the river) that extends its roots by a stream. And will not fear when the heat comes. But its leaves will be green, and it will not be anxious in a year of drought nor cease to yield fruit. PICTURE

E. What is Jeremiah saying? What is God telling us here? A lot. This is a rich passage. Let me make three observations.

VI. Our roots need to be in God.

A. One of the reasons we end up with a life that is unpleasant, barren, a life that looks like a gnarly, leafless desert bush. One of the reasons we get stuck is because of sin. And, according to Jeremiah, one of the chief sins, is unbelief. It is putting our roots down in something other than God. It is being anchored and fed by something other than God – because that is what roots do. They anchor us (provide stability) and they feed us.

1. The question is not whether a tree has roots, but what they are in and how deep they go. Is it good soil or not? Is there water there or not?

B. The question before us is: at the deepest level, where are our roots? What anchors me? What nourishes me? What frames my life and worldview?

C. If you think of sin as violating certain rules – “don’t drink, smoke or chew or go with girls who do” – then you are missing the point. Jeremiah doesn’t give us a list of “do”s and don’ts. He is contrasting two different approaches to life, two different Gestalts, two different orientations.⁵

D. Some of you need to put your weight down with Christ. You need to move from negative to positive numbers. I’ll say more about that in a second. Some of you have crossed the line – or you think you have – but your roots are very shallow or suggest otherwise.

1. To push the analogy, they go through God to something else. To use Jeremiah’s language in v. 7, you trust in God, but God is not your trust.

2. Some people ask God for something. And if he doesn’t come through will often walk away from faith. I had a conversation with someone not that long ago in which they expressed frustration with God. In essence they said, “I was good. I went to church. I did what I was told to do. But my life is still hard. I didn’t get the raise. I didn’t win the game. Life is still hard.

3. In this scenario, they (you?) were trusting in the Lord but He was not their trust. He was a means to a higher end. The highest good was not a relationship with God, it was money or ease or something else. To use Jeremiah's language, their roots went through him but were not anchored in Him.

E. Jeremiah is saying, this is the essence of sin. And I am adding, if you are doing this, your efforts are misguided and at some point you will stall.

VII. Two: Roots trump the weather.

A. Jeremiah not only sets things up by contrasting two orientations, characterized by a bush and a tree – the one eking out a hard life in a desert wasteland, and the other thriving while planted by a stream, he makes a second point. He says something else that is very important: the bush will not see prosperity even if it rains and the tree will not become a gnarly bush even in a drought.

B. V. 5: Cursed is the man who trusts in mankind, and makes flesh his strength. And whose heart turns away from the Lord. For he will be like a bush in the desert, they will not see prosperity when it comes. They will dwell in the parched places of the desert, in a salt land where no one lives.

C. V. 7: Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord and whose trust is the Lord. For he will be like a tree planted by the water, that extends its roots by a stream. And will not fear when the heat comes. But its leaves will be green, and it will not be anxious in a year of drought nor cease to yield fruit.

D. We talk about the second more than we do the first. That is, we talk about people knowing peace and joy even in the face of a crisis. They are like a tree whose roots run deep into soil that is watered by the stream. I am just back from my 35th college reunion. And at reunions, you see things play out. You see who has grown and who has stalled. Who is still essentially a 20 year old. And you see those who have weathered a lot of set backs with grace and joy.

E. Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord and whose trust is the Lord. For he will be like a tree planted by the water, that extends its roots by a stream. And will not fear when the heat comes. But its leaves will be green, and it will not be anxious in a year of drought nor cease to yield fruit.

F. That tree – that person – is set. Even if it is not raining, the tree is fine. In other words, a person whose roots go into God can survive difficult times.

G. We talk about that a fair bit. We spend less time talking about the other, but it's also important. Jeremiah notes that a bush in desert doesn't profit from a flood. It does not see prosperity when it comes.

H. My experience is that some of the most miserable people to be around are those who have made it – hit it big, but whose roots do not go deep. They have been exposed. They are now left with the reality that, they have it all and it is not what they hoped for.

1. You read stories of athletes who win the Super Bowl or some other world title, and are almost immediately crushed, because they have nothing else to shoot for – to hope in. They had thought, when I get that, life will be good. And they get it and realize, "I'm still me." I'm a world champion, I'm famous, I'm rich, I'm the CEO, I'm whatever... but I'm still thirsty.

2. It's the other way around for the person whose roots go to God. When bad things happen you think, "OK, but this isn't the main thing I am living for." And when good things happen there is a chance to celebrate, without it being the defining aspect of their life.

I. Men and women, you are your roots. You are not your circumstances. If you find yourself thinking, "if only I had a wife or a husband, or a new wife or a new job – of this job or this title or this house or whatever - then I would be happy and life would be great" you need to realize, your roots are not in the right place. It's not the weather it's the soil.

J. A lack of rain will not hurt those whose roots are in the river. An abundance of rain will not help the one whose roots are not. Stop blaming your circumstances. Turning your heart to anything but God is the source of problems.

K. Which leads to point three:

VIII. Some of you need to move closer to the river - you need to be replanted.

A. Some of you are there but you need to go deeper. Your roots are by the stream but they are not very deep. You need to work on cultivating a deeper walk with Christ. More time in the Word. More time with other Christ followers. More time listening.

1. Right now I am working to hear from God more clearly.

2. I believe that the key, foundational, basic way is through the Bible. Read it. Memorize it. Study it. Every day. 10 & 10.

3. But I was challenged to be a bit more Spirit led. And I decided to take that challenge. So I went with the guy throwing down the challenge. He said, we are going to go out and allow God to direct us to people who we should pray for. And I said, "OK. This is not the way I roll, but I'll go with it."

4. Story of gas station / Holy man whose been to Nepal and will pray for me?

5. I'm not sure what the next step may be for you. Let me add, I am not sure what you need to do to put down roots is what I need to work on.

a) Some of you need to get into a small group. You need support and encouragement and weekly accountability.

b) Some of you who have been in one need to step up and lead. Go to the web site and you'll find all the info you need there. This fall's series will be called Discovering life with God. You need to grab some friends and make it happen. You provide the people and we'll provide the resources and coaching and encouragement.

c) Some of you need to step up and invite someone to take a next step. This week I was sharing with my Mom and a friend of hers at the wedding about some of the risks I have decided I need to take in reaching out. And her friend said that few things have changed her life more than sharing her faith..

6. Let me make an offer, if you think this is you, sign up for the Spiritual Check Up – a confidential, hour long, one-on-one discussion about where you are at and what the right next steps might look like.

- B. Some of you are by the river but you need to put your roots down deeper. And some of you need to be repotted – which will take outside intervention. Trees can't walk. You need a non-tree type to do it. Someone from different realm, dimension. You need the God of the River to be planted by the River of God.
- C. Some of you know you need help b/c you have faced:
1. Floods of the river or heat of summer and it has exposed you.
 2. You may need to be born again.
 3. If you think you are OK without God, you haven't faced the flood or heat.
- D. The Good News is, God has replanted many people. Only one person lived by the river and was uprooted and was thrown into the desert.
1. He was thrown into the desert. Why? It was boot camp. On the cross he was in the real desert
 2. For our sake he was thrown into the desert.
 3. Because he became a desert we can live by the river.
- E. Let's pray – give people a chance to come to faith here

IX. Campus Pastors

- A. Are you stuck? That is the question of the hour. If you are, let me assure you that there are ways forward. Mike mentioned a few:
1. Being repotted?
 2. Getting into a small group.
 3. Sitting down with someone for a confidential, one hour spiritual checkup.
 4. Next week Mike will be going deeper into this topic. You do not want to miss it. But there is no need to wait.
- B. Let me say this – if I can help in any way, let me know. If you want to be replanted – to place your roots in God – I'd love to talk with you about that.
- C. Let me also say, when you realize you need to make some changes, make them.
1. In snow skiing, there is an idea called "falling fast." The premise is, once you realize you've got issues – that your roots are not where they need to be or do not go deep enough, i.e., that you are stuck. You need to make changes.
 2. Though it takes humility and courage to fall, falling fast is much better:
 - a) On the slopes, those who fall fast don't hurt nearly as much as those who continue and build up more speed and ski recklessly out of control before falling.
 - b) Out of control skiers don't only hurt themselves, they often take out others with them. Those who fall fast limit the collateral damage. The faster you fall, the fewer people you hurt.
 - c) So, fall fast. Act now. Don't put this off.

¹ I Cor. 3:1f

² He, writes: We have much to say about this, but it is hard to explain because you are slow to learn. In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food!
Hebrews 5:11f

³ On top of these we have lots of popular definitions. N.T. Wright equates sin with “subhuman behavior.” RC Sproul calls it cosmic treason.

⁴ I am indebted to Timothy Keller, “Sin as Unbelief” for this point and many others in this sermon.

⁵ Those of you who are scientists may want to push back on this. But those who argue that science disproves God are taking science in places it cannot go. Science operates on induction. The inductive method entails searching out things in the world and drawing conclusions about things based on observation. Scientists can only draw conclusions on what they find, not on what they can't find. Science, by its very nature, is never capable of proving the non-existence of anything. Since science, by its very nature, is never capable of proving the non-existence of anything, one can never accurately claim that science has proven God doesn't exist. That's a misuse of the discipline. Such a claim would require omniscience. The only way one can say a thing does not exist is not by using the inductive method, but by using a deductive method, by showing that there's something about the concept itself that is contradictory. // This came into focus for me years ago in a conversation with a friend. He was a professor of biology. Bright guy. He'd written lots of books. Studied at Harvard and he was an atheist. He wasn't ugly about it, like some professors are. But he made it clear that he thought I was being both superstitious and an intellectual lightweight by believing in God. After several friendly jabs at each other we decided to have it out. I'd try to persuade him to believe in God and he would try to talk me out of it. We met at a restaurant. His wife showed up to make sure we kept it civil. It was a very frustrating hour because he kept dismissing my points without refuting them. But then