

I. Set up.

A. Welcome. Introduce self. Christ Church is multisite....; If you are new...

B. This is the second week in a series called *Unstuck*. We are exploring ways we can keep growing. Last week Mike spoke from Jeremiah 17 about the importance of putting our roots down into God. Today he is going to be looking at the challenges we face in seeing ourselves accurately. The ugly and frightening truth is, we are often the last to know that we are stuck. We seldom see ourselves the way others do. But it's very helpful to do just that.

C. This is not a new idea.

1. Socrates believed the path to truth lay in the maxim, "Know thyself."

2. Benjamin Franklin added that "knowing ourselves" is hard to do. In fact, he wrote, "Three things are extremely hard: steel, a diamond, and to know one's self."

3. And Scripture goes one step further. The prophet Jeremiah famously said: the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?

D. Knowing ourselves is hard. But it's important if we do not want to be stuck. Right now...

II. Intro

A. About five years ago, I was invited to join a few guys in a golf tournament. I have three significant memories of that event. The first was making eye contact with two of the golfers after watching the third guy take his second shot. On the first tee, he had gone through a very long and very odd routine that, among other things, included about 15 seconds of wiggling his feet to get them just right – and then he hoped during his back swing. When he did it on his second shot I looked up at the other two and realized that they were watching me watch him. And their look basically said, "Yes, every shot. He goes through that routine on every shot. It is going to be a long round."

B. The second memory is the lecture that this guy – Mr. 90 seconds per shot - gave us after the golf marshal told us we needed to pick up our pace. This guy – who easily took twice as long as the other three of us together – said, "Come on guys, you're going to have to pick up the pace. You are making me look bad." (This was his course). It was during the lecture that I realized, he didn't get it. He didn't see it. He was clueless about how odd his golf game was or that he was the one slowing us down.

C. Which set up the third memory, which came a few holes later when I started wondering, what part of my life don't I see? If this guy can be that clueless, who's to say I'm not?

III. This is week two of a series called *Unstuck*. The big idea is that God wants us – wants you! – to flourish, to have a rich, full life of joy, during which we get better in the ways that matter most.

A. We are supposed to be forming and transforming in a certain direction – one best seen in Jesus. But sin has made a mess of everything. And part of sin's collateral damage is that we are not only broken, but we can stay stuck. We stop moving in the right direction. We do not keep getting better.

B. Last week I noted that:

1. We currently identify lots of reasons for being stuck: addictions; unjust systems; confusion, laziness and more.
2. I argued that the Bible includes all of these under the heading of sin, which is a big, complex and nuanced idea.
3. I said that it's no fun to be stuck. Better is better.
4. And then we explored Jeremiah's idea that at the deepest level, our problem is that we anchor our lives and nurture our soul on things other than God. We put our roots down in the wrong thing.

C. Today I am going to argue that we often do not see ourselves very clearly. We lie to ourselves. We shield ourselves from an accurate understanding of who we really are.

D. Since the 1960s, philosophy journals have been exploring self-deception,¹ which had become a hot topic in psychology under Freud a few decades earlier. As a rule, the philosophers still debate whether it's possible to know something and hide it from ourselves at the same time. And psychologists use terms like *unconscious motivation*, *repression*, *denial*, *cognitive dissonance* and *defense mechanisms* to explain how we do just that.

E. If you read the literature in these fields you learn that many people are too psychically weak to admit the truth to themselves. Their behavior – our behavior – is so far out of line with who we believe ourselves to be, that we deny it, rationalize it, burry it - something.

F. You also learn that self-deceit is a big problem. Some go so far as to argue that addictions – such as an addiction to alcohol – are less of a problem than the denial of an addiction to alcohol.

G. Self-deception may not be the most terrible thing ever, but it's probably worse than you think. Today we are going to see what it looks like by focusing on King Saul.

IV. The account is found in I Samuel 15 – I invite you to turn there. As you do, let me provide some context.

A. Saul is Israel's first King. The Jews become the Jews when God taps Abraham back in Genesis 12, promising him land and descendants if he followed Him. Abraham gets the land right away and eventually gets an heir. We follow their story through the life Isaac (the heir) and the rest of the Patriarchs – Jacob and his 12 sons, who become the twelve tribes of Israel. We watch as they grow in number, wealth and power. And we look on as they leave the promised land because of a famine. They go to Egypt, where they eventually become slaves. And they remain there until God sends Moses to liberate them 400 years later.

B. Once they are freed they refuse to follow God’s instructions to go back to the Promised Land, which leads them to wander around the desert for forty years. After Moses dies, Joshua steps up, and leads them into the Promised Land. There they live less as a nation than a loose collection of twelve tribes. After a while they ask for a human king. Samuel argues that God is their King and that they will regret asking for a human king, but they demand one anyone. Eventually God has Samuel anoint Saul, which is exactly what they ask for – he is tall, dark and handsome. But, he has issues. As we pick up the story, he has just disobeyed God, which leads to the confrontation which we’re about to read.

C. Samuel was instructed by God to give King Saul a very specific order: defeat the Amalekites but do not take anything from them. God wanted Israel to punish the Amalekites, who were a uniquely cruel people. But they were being sent to exercise justice not engage in imperialism. They were specifically told, “you may not do to them what they are doing to others. You are not going to war for profit. Do not, under any circumstances, take anything from them. No plunder. Nothing. Nada. Zip. Zilch.

D. But verse 9 of chapter 15 tells us that Saul disobeyed this specific order. He kept, **“the best of the sheep, the oxen, the fatlings, the lambs, and all that was good.”**

V. As a result, God speaks to Samuel the prophet. I am reading now. I Samuel 15, starting with verse 10:

A. Then the word of the Lord came to Samuel, saying, “I regret that I have made Saul king, for he has turned back from following Me and has not carried out My commands.” And Samuel was distressed and cried out to the Lord all night.

B. V12: Samuel rose early in the morning to meet Saul; and it was told Samuel, saying, “Saul came to Carmel, and behold, he set up a monument for himself, then turned and proceeded on down to Gilgal.” Samuel came to Saul, and Saul said to him, “Blessed are you of the Lord! I have carried out the command of the Lord.” But Samuel said, “What then is this bleating of the sheep in my ears, and the lowing of the oxen which I hear?”

1. Saul is in a good mood. They won the battle and he has acquired lots of stuff. When he sees the prophet, he says, “I did what you asked.” And Saul says, “I don’t think so. What’s with the livestock?”

C. V15: Saul said, “They” – notice the quick shift in blame. “They have brought them from the Amalekites, for the people spared the best of the sheep and oxen, to sacrifice to the Lord your God (first, blame others, second, justify what you did) but the rest we have utterly destroyed.” Then Samuel said to Saul, “Wait, and let me tell you what the Lord said to me last night.” And he said to him, “Speak!”

D. Samuel says: God took you when you were a nobody and elevated you; on this mission He gave you very clear directions; you violated them and God is moving on. You are out.

E. Dropping to V20: Saul responds. “I did obey the voice of the Lord, and went on the mission on which the Lord sent me, and have brought back Agag the king of Amalek (kings seldom killed the Kings they captured because, they didn’t want to be killed if they were captured, and because if they had kings as prisoners, they could call themselves a “king of kings.”

F. In verse 21 – we get the blaming again: **“the people took some of the spoil”** and then the justification **“to offer a sacrifice to God.”**

G. Then, verse 22, we get a pretty famous line: **“Has the Lord as much delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams.”**

H. In verse 23 Samuel restates that Saul is out. And then in verse 24 Saul starts to clue in, and he says: **“I have sinned; I have indeed transgressed the command of the Lord.”** There is a bit more that happens, but basically, this is the beginning of the end for Saul. His kingdom unravels from this point on until his death.

VI. Here’s the deal: we are all quite a bit like Saul. We rationalize our behavior. We deny, blame and justify. One of the biggest problems we face is self-deception – the lies we tell ourselves because the truth is too painful to face.

A. When you analyze self-deception, you see that it’s not very complicated. There are three techniques and we often use all three.

VII. The first is denial. We not only spin others, we spin ourselves.

A. When the truth about ourselves is too hot to hold, we often believe something else. We didn’t lose, the refs were bad. I’m not chronically late, I’m just very busy because I’m very important.

B. In today’s passage, Saul is excited to meet Samuel because Saul has hidden his disobedience from himself.

C. There are different levels of denial.

1. When I was in neuro-ICU following my stroke, I asked people to help me leave because I was convinced I was OK. The fact that not only couldn’t stand or walk, I couldn’t sit up – in fact, I held onto the rails of the bed because I was so disoriented I was afraid I’d fall out of bed - didn’t strike me as a problem.

2. We occasionally deal with someone who is psychotic or delusional.

D. One of the ways to think about mental health is that it’s the measure of the overlap between who we think we are and who we actually are. VENN DIAGRAM #1.

1. If I tell you I’m a 56-year-old male with a great family and bad balance, you think, “Well, that sounds about right.” If I say I’m 35 or claim that I could beat Usain Bolt in the 100-yard dash, then you are left with two options:

a) I am a liar – I know what I am saying is not true but for some reason I am trying to persuade you that it is.

b) Or, I am mentally ill. Because the distance between what I think about myself and what is real is so great, I’ve crossed from what we call deceit to what we call mental illness.

2. Today we’re not focused on those who lie or are mentally ill. We are talking about those who’s Venn Diagram looks like this VENN DIAGRAM #3 not this VENN DIAGRAM #2.

3. We are dealing with the fact that we often believe we are better than we are. I am arguing that one of the reasons we get stuck is that we do not - or cannot - face the truth about ourselves.

4. Last week I mentioned Ruth, the 25-year-old who blames Boomers for taking the good jobs, blames her professors for talking her into a bad major, blames others for her student loans and blames her parents for her bad car. She is unwilling to own any of the responsibility for the decisions she has made. She sees herself as a victim.
5. There are other examples.
 - a) We've all seen news clips where the parent of an adult child – the parent of someone who has just murdered three people or been arrested for raping a dozen women – say, “I don't know how this happened. My son is a good person.” Clearly, they have not able to admit to themselves the truth about their son.
 - b) In the relationship series a few months back – the one in which I said, “your goal is not to find the right person it's to become the right person. If you are married you need to work to become the kind of person the person you are married to can love, trust and respect.” I had several people come up to me and say, “I really wish my spouse was here because they needed to hear that.”
 - c) And it's not just individuals, it can be groups of people.² As a consultant I learned that I had create scenarios in which companies discovered the bad news about their performance for themselves, because if I delivered it, they would deny it or attack me. If I said, “Hey, it takes you 3 months to do XYZ. I found this other organization that does it in 4 days.” They would not say “thank you.” They would say, “No they don't. Impossible. You're an idiot.” It would take weeks for them to accept the data and take a critical look at their own behavior.
6. I have had plenty of unpleasant discoveries about myself. They have come when I have seen pictures or videos of myself or when I've taken tests or gotten feedback on a 360 review. Perhaps the most disruptive came when I was diagnosed as having ADHD.
7. I was 45 at the time. Sheri would claim that she made the diagnosis about thirty years earlier. Over the years, it had come up from time to time. At this moment I said, I'm going to meet with an ADHD specialist to get it removed from the discussion. And so I did. And the guy I was meeting with said, “I've been to the church you pastor. You do not have ADHD.” I said, “great. Write that on an official script and let me take it to my wife.”
8. And then he said, “If you had ADHD you would, and he started listing some things that seemed, uh, descriptive of things I do. And after talking for another twenty minutes or so I could see that he was starting to reassess his initial diagnosis.
9. And then he said, “why don't you take this 20-minute test. It amounted to looking at a computer and pressing a space bar every time the letter X appeared on the screen. That was it. He set me up, left the room. Twenty minutes later it was over. A few minutes after that he stepped back in with the results. And he asked how I thought I had done. And I said, “OK I guess. It was pretty boring.”

10. He said, well you scored in the first percentile. How does that make you feel.
11. Now I thought by first percentile he meant, 99th percentile. And so I said, “OK. Whatever.”
12. He then asked, “Does it surprise you?” Again, I thought he was saying that I had outscored 99 people out of 100. And I said, “a bit. But whatever.”
13. Then he said, “I am required by law to tell you that you can never work as an air traffic controller,” and he had a list of other jobs.
14. And I said, “Wait, when you say first percentile, you mean the top one percent or the bottom one percent?” And he said, “the bottom.”
15. And I said, “you mean, if there are 99 people and a chimpanzee seeing who can focus the longest that,” “It’s you and the chimp battling out for last place.
16. The diagnosis explained a lot. But it was also very unsettling, especially when I went to my friends and said, “I just got 1 percent on this ADHD test. Does that surprise you?” And they all said, “No. I can see that.”
17. It led me to wonder, how could I be the last to know?
18. Step one is denial.

VIII. Step two is to shift the blame.

- A. After Samuel asks, “What’s that bleating that I hear?” Saul says, “the soldiers brought them.” This is the oldest play in the book. Adam tried it first. After God asks him, “Did you eat of the fruit of the tree I told you not to eat?” He replies, “The woman you gave me.” It’s not my fault.
- B. Think of the tension our country is in right now, think of the challenges we face in this state, and then think about the last time you heard anyone take the blame. It is seldom done.
- C. A few weeks ago, Tiger Woods was arrested on suspicion of driving under the influence and his mugshot went viral. He later issued a statement claiming that "alcohol was not involved" and citing "an unexpected reaction to prescribed medication."
- D. Maybe. I’m skeptical. For the record, after his life fell apart ten years ago, I gave a talk at Men’s Fraternity noting that I am not sure I would have been able to handle his fame any better than he had.³ Maybe Woods is telling the truth. But, it wouldn’t surprise me to learn that he isn’t. It’s easy to deny the truth. And, I have a few friends who have been arrested for DUIs. Only one of them admitted that it was at fault. The others denied and then blamed. (“I worked out extra hard that day and was dehydrated.” Or, “I’m sure their breathalyzer was off. It was my wife’s fault. I was driving her car and the tail light was out. I got pulled over for that, otherwise this never would have happened.”) Having a DUI was so different than how they thought about themselves that they moved from denial to blaming.

IX. The third part of this is to justify what we did. To rationalize.

- A. In Saul's case, he decided to make a large donation to God, thinking that that action justifies his disobedience. He is hardly the first or last to do that. There is a lot of money given to the church and other causes by people trying to assuage their guilt.
- B. Some people justify cheating in their business, saying, "Everyone does it. It's not illegal, just a gray area."⁴ "I may have misappropriated a few dollars, but it's not like I'm Bernie Madoff." Meanwhile, Bernie Madoff is saying, "At least I didn't kill anyone." And the Mafia hit man is saying, "At least I'm not Hitler." Deny, blame, justify.
- X. So how do we fight this?
- A. I said I was not going deep into solutions. This series is focused on helping us understand ourselves better. Next steps are coming in the fall. But there are a few things that need to be said here.
- B. The obvious first step is to pray and ask for the Holy Spirit to convict us.
- C. Second, we need our friends to be friends. So we probably have to give them permission to do so.
1. We need to ask them, "What are my blind spots? Or we need to engage in the two plus one exercise. Where you ask people to share two strengths and one challenge area.
 2. Then we need to listen and sit with it.
- D. We also need to focus on grace. We need to preach the Gospel to ourselves over and over because it's unbelievably good news, consequently we tend to slip back into a works righteousness.
1. This is the game changer. There is little as freeing as being fully known and accepted.
- E. Prayer
- XI. Campus Pastors
- A. We opened with some quotes - from Socrates, Benjamin Franklin and the prophet Jeremiah – that each suggested that we needed to see ourselves accurately but that it's hard.
- B. Let me emphasize that a proper understanding of ourselves – and others – starts with knowing God, this is our highest goal.

¹ See Ian Deweese-Boyd, *Self-Deception*, Nov. 7, 2016, for an overview of this discussion.

² When Eisenhower was liberating Germany at the end of WWII, he'd find atrocities – work camps and concentration camps in various towns. The people there said they didn't know what had been going on. He didn't believe them. In fact, he forced the citizens of these towns into the camps to bury the bodies. His view was that they knew, but to face what was going on required them to act or to admit that they were cowards.

³ The day before Woods's arrest, Bernhard Langer became the first man to win all five senior major golf championships. I watched his victory on television and the interview in which he was asked to comment on his record-breaking success.

Langer complimented the player who came in second, then stated that he had been carrying a piece of

paper with him during the round and would like to read what it said. He then read Proverbs 3:5–6 to the national TV audience and testified that his relationship with Christ was more fulfilling for him than golf or any other priority.

Scripture testifies that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23), including Tiger Woods and Bernhard Langer. The difference is that the latter admits he needs salvation by grace through faith in Christ (Ephesians 2:8–9) while the former does not.

⁴ Thanks to Tim Keller for this illustration.