

## I. Set up.

A. Three thousand years ago, Socrates said that the path to truth starts as we learn to "Know thyself." 500 years ago, noted theologian John Calvin wrote, "Wisdom, consists almost entirely of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves." Many others have said similar things.

B. Our mission is to help people Discover life with God. That requires a better understanding of ourselves than most of us have.

C. Most of us want to get better. Part of getting better is seeing ourselves accurately. Today we kickoff of a new series called Blindspots, which comes our way mostly from the life of Jacob. Mike will start things off by looking at the challenge of understanding who we are.

## II. Intro

A. With that video we introduce Pat – the Cubs fan – who will be back from week to week to help us understand Blindspots. Pat also served as a bit of a Rorschach test. If you watched that video and thought, "I hate people like that. All of those clueless cads who think it's about them," as opposed to, "I hate videos like that, because they remind me that I am often clueless just like Pat," well, this video is for you. By the way, my apologies to all of the White Sox fans we offended. Please send it to Pat.

B. One of the prophets of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is an Irish singer - songwriter by the name of Bono, who leads a band – some would say The Band – called U2. As many of you know, U2 has had some great songs and Bono appears to have a sincere love for Christ. Well, a while back I ran across a Bono quote that sets up this new series. He said, "The only problem that God can't deal with is the problem you don't know you have."

1. I actually think God can deal with those problems as well. He has a way of getting our attention. But I do agree with his point. I believe we often have problems because we refuse to see our problems. We refuse to see ourselves clearly.

2. Psychiatrist R. D. Laing stated it this way, "The range of what we think and do is limited by what we fail to notice. And because we fail to notice that we fail to notice there is little we can do to change until we notice how failing to notice shapes our thoughts and deeds."

C. Another way to state this is, we all have blind spots, and, we are blind to our blind spots. And this causes problems and keeps us from moving forward.

D. At one level, this situation is not just tragic, it's comic. When one of our boys was just a few days old, he started crying in a way that suggested that he was in pain. It's amazing how as parents you learn the difference between the I'm-hurt-cry, the I'm-mad-cry, the I'm-tired-cry and a few others. This was a, "Hey, something is wrong." And both Sheri and I jumped up and went over. And he had a fist full of hair – our boys were all born with lots of hair. He had a fist full of hair, and he was pulling it. And the harder he pulled – and the more he hurt, the tighter he squeezed his hand and the harder he was pulling.

1. It took a few seconds to figure out what was going on, but then it was an easy problem to fix. But that was because we could just force open his hand. There are times when we are blind to the way we are pulling our own hair.

2. You would think that we would quickly figure it out. It turns out that some of us have an amazing ability to ignore the obvious.

E. Over the course of the next six weeks, we are going to the middle of Genesis to look at a man with a lot of blind spot, Jacob. Today I want to frame up the series by sharing the seven assumptions that inform it. If you agree with these seven assumptions – and I think you should – my hope is you’ll be back as it unfolds.

III. Assumption One: You want to get better.

A. You want to get better. I want to get better. We want to improve. Better is better. We want to be better men and women, husbands or wives. We want to be a better fathers and mothers, bosses or employees. We want to be better friends. You believe that better is better. And it is. Life works better when we are better. Which leads to point two.

IV. Two: Better looks like Jesus.

A. We want to be better, and better looks like Jesus. In Paul’s letter to the Galatians, he shares a list of attributes or qualities that describe better. These are called the Fruit of the Spirit and the list includes: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

B. Some people think that being holy or spiritual is boring. No. No, it’s exciting and joyful. And it works.

C. And Jesus is the perfect fulfillment of this list, which is why I say, “better looks like Jesus.”

D. Do note, even though Jesus is the perfect model of better, being the perfect model is not his primary role. Our biggest need is not an example – or a teacher – it’s a Savior. Christianity is not, “This I do; it is, this He did.” We are not reconciled to God by being better. We are not reconciled on the basis of our goodness. We are not reconciled to God by following Christ’s example. We are saved by grace through faith, not of our own works. We are saved by receiving the saving work Jesus completed when he died on the cross.

E. Jesus is not first of all a model, He is a Savior. But He is a model. We want to be better and better looks like Jesus.

V. Three: Better is hard.

A. We want to get better, but better is hard. Consequently, it’s not all that common.

B. Staying the same is easy. Getting worse is easier. And we know this. We do not have to work to fall out of shape or gain weight. We do have to work to get better.

C. No one wakes up one morning and discovers, “Oh look, while I was sleeping my golf handicap dropped from an 18 to a plus 2.” Or, “Wow, while binge watching reruns of the Office on Netflix, I lost twenty pounds and qualified for the Boston Marathon.”

D. Better doesn’t happen by accident. Getting better in any arena takes work and it’s hard. Growing is hard.

VI. Four: One of the reasons it is hard is because we do not see ourselves very clearly. We have blind spots.

A. This is not the only reason getting better is hard, but it's a big one. After all, if we do not see our problems, how are we going to address them.

1. As an aside I'll note, sometimes God will allow us to experience a trial in order to help us grow. We generally grow through struggle. That might be the discipline we pro-actively bring upon ourselves. Or it might be the challenges we face in a trial.

B. My point is, part of moving forward is clueing in as to how we are falling short. This series is called Blind Spots because we are not seeing our issues.

C. A few years ago, I shared a story about golfing with a guy who had a 90 second set up – it was full of this and that and shifting and wiggling and then doing it all again. And then, at the very end, it included a hop in his back swing. And I said, what was even more amazing was, after the marshal came to us and said, "You guys are holding up play. I need you to pick up the pace." He lectured the other three in the foursome, even though he was taking twice as long as the three of us put together.<sup>1</sup>

D. Well, there are lots of examples of this. When I was a management consultant, I used to start by asking organizations how they were doing? Leading them in the classic SWOT analysis. What I didn't tell them initially is that I had spent time gathering answers to these questions from their leading customers.

E. I would then tell them how their leading customers thought they were doing. Every once in a while, I would be able to say, "You are doing better than you think. Your customers actually rated you higher than you are rating yourselves." But most of the time, they rated themselves higher than their clients did, and they would dismiss the report I brought and get mad at me for bringing it. There were a few times I thought people might hit me.

F. From time to time I teach a Doctor of Ministry class for pastors. And one of the things I have them do before the class starts, is to fill out a sheet in which they estimate how they spend their time. And then to keep a time log for two weeks. And then compare how they said they spent their time with how they actually spent it. I warn them in advance that they are going to be depressed. Because they think they are so much more focused and disciplined than their time allocation suggests.

G. My most painful example involves the first time Sheri and I went to see a marriage therapist. We had been married about three years and there were some things not working. And I was convinced the counselor was going to see things my way, suggest that I was a saint for how patient and wise I was being and then suggest that Sheri see things my way. To my shock, that is now what happened. She sided with Sheri one hundred percent.

H. It turns out 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. Psychology journals discuss this all the time.<sup>2</sup> Self-deception<sup>3</sup> has been a hot topic in psychology since Freud. Their professional journals are filled with terms like unconscious motivation, repression, denial, cognitive dissonance and defense mechanisms – all of which are exploring how we are avoiding reality about ourselves.<sup>4</sup>

1. Some professionals go so far as to argue that addictions – such as an addiction to alcohol – are less of a problem than the denial of the addiction to alcohol.

I. Self-deception may not be the most terrible thing ever, but it's probably worse than you think.<sup>5</sup>

J. So, my assumptions so far: Number one: You want to get better; two: better looks like Jesus; three: better is hard; four: one of the reasons getting better is hard is because we do not see ourselves very clearly.

VII. Assumption Five: The more power or money we have, the less likely we are to see ourselves clearly.

A. Why? Because the people around us like our power and money and so they do not want to say anything to make us mad. When this is true it sets up an unfortunate scenario in which the person most likely to tell us the truth is our spouses. But that has its own problems.

B. In a perfect world, we all have great friends who will do this. What start with a family that is what a family is supposed to be: a place where we are fully know – we cannot hide – and where we are loved in spite of our problems. That doesn't always happen – and that is another sermon.

C. For now, I am simply going to note that, some of you may be particularly well positioned to think you are a better, nicer, more well-rounded person than you actually are. You are going to have to go out of your way to see yourself clearly.

VIII. Assumption Six: The Bible can help us see ourselves more clearly.

A. The classic biblical account of blind spots is King Saul, whose story is told in I Samuel 15.

1. Saul is Israel's first King. He was appointed when the Jews wanted to be like everyone else – they wanted a king they could see, not just God. This happens after the Exodus and after the period of the Judges. They are living less as a nation than a loose collection of twelve tribes. They want someone to unite them. Samuel – the prophet - argues that God is their King and that they will regret asking for a human king, but they demand one anyway. Eventually God has Samuel anoint Saul, which is exactly what they ask for – he is tall, dark and handsome. But he has issues. In I Samuel 15 we pick up the story. Saul has just disobeyed God, which leads to the confrontation which we're about to read.

2. 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.

3. 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."**

4. As a result, God speaks to Samuel the prophet. I am reading now. I Samuel 15, starting with verse 10:
5. **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.**
6. 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?”**
  - a) 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?”
7. 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!”**
8. 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.
9. 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.”**
10. 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.”**
11. 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.”**
12. 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.
13. The point is, it took quite a bit of time and evidence to help Saul see what he had done wrong. It was very easy for God and Samuel to see it. Saul had been told: do not take any of the spoils from battle. He did. But after he did, he: 1) denied it; then 2) he blamed others; and then 3) he justified what he had done.
14. It took a lot of time and evidence before he finally faced reality.

15. Saul is a great example of someone with blind spots. We follow the same path. You might think, not me, but you might want to think about this just a bit.
16. When the truth about ourselves is too hot to hold, we often tell others – or ourselves - something else.
- a) We didn't lose, the refs were bad.
  - b) I'm not chronically late, I'm just very busy because I'm very important. It wasn't my fault, it was... my boss, the weather, my parents, etc.
17. I actually suspect there are different levels of denial.
- a) When I was in neuro-ICU following my stroke, I asked people to help me leave because I was convinced that 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. That is brain-injury level delusion.
  - b) What do you call the parents you see interviewed on TV after their son has been arrested for murdering three people, and you hear them 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.
  - c) In a sermon a few years ago, I said that if you are single and want to be married, "your goal is not to find the right person it's to become the right person. And 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 knew when I said that that I'd have people come up to me and say, "I really wish my spouse was here because they needed to hear that."
18. Step one is denial. 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.
19. 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."<sup>6</sup> "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.
- B. Jacob and his cohorts also help us see who we do not want to be.

1. Jacob is one of the patriarchs. Abraham and Sarah have a son named Isaac. He and his wife, Rebekah, have twin boys: Jacob and Esau.
  2. Esau is the older of the twins and should be the favored one. But he is not. In what will be a pattern, God will elevate an unlikely person. And in this case it is Jacob, who is not only unlikely because he is the younger one. He also has issues. He causes lots of problems because of his blind spot. And he doesn't ever get that much better.
  3. Jacob is no one's idea of a good guy – he lies, cheats, fights, runs from conflict. He is going to do a lot of things wrong. But, he plays a key role in the path God goes down to rescue us. His life is critical to the story. And he is one of these guys who is a helpful example because he does so many things wrong. Because he has so many blind spots.
  4. Towards the end of his life, he tells Pharaoh that “my years have been few and difficult” and that his life has not been equal to that of his father or grandfather. Well, guess what Jacob, you made a mess of just about everything you touched. And the sad thing is, at the end of his life he is not owning his mistakes, he is still blaming others.
  5. We can learn from Jacob. Which brings us to my final assumption today.
- C. So six assumptions so far: Number one: You want to get better; two: better looks like Jesus; three: better is hard; four: one of the reasons getting better is hard is because we do not see ourselves very clearly; five: The more power we have, or the more money we have, the less likely we are to see ourselves clearly; six: the Bible can help us understand and move past our blind spots.

IX. Assumption Seven: You are willing to do the hard work.

- A. You are willing to take an honest look at yourself.
- B. How do we do that? Well, there are a variety of ways. In corporate settings, HR unfolds their bag of tricks. 1) 360 reviews – where all kinds of people offer feedback; 2) video recordings of interactions; 3) I recently listened to an extended podcast with Ray Dalio, the founding partner of Bridgewater. He claims that one of the reasons they are so good is because of the radical honesty that they practice.
- C. So, there are business tools people use. And I want to affirm them. But I do not want to miss the counsel we get in Scripture, which suggests that we start with prayer, reflection and repentance. That we read the Book, study the Law, compare ourselves to Christ, and ask the Holy Spirit to help us see ourselves.
- D. It will also take some processing – in your small group or with some good friends.
  1. One of the things I have done with two friends almost every year for the last 15 years, is something we call, Two Plus One. It comes in the context of an intentional deep dive into each other's lives. I have posted the questions we ask each other a few times in The Friday Update. One of the last things we do there is two affirmations and a challenge.

2. Of course, the challenge is the critical piece of this equation. But think about what you are doing: you are asking people you trust (who are for you) - who are safe – to help you see yourself more accurately so you can grow. Some find this too much. No. Stop and think. We pay money for feedback on things that do not matter – or do not matter much. Golf lessons. Piano lessons. A creative writing class. You pay someone to critique how you are doing. To tell you what you are doing wrong. How about finding some settings where you could get that feedback on your life?

E. And there is one more thing: And it's key. In order to look at yourself as honestly as you can, you need your view to be shaped by the Gospel:

1. You need to know that He knows the worst about you and He loves you. His love does not depend on your being loveable. It is only after you really make peace with that, that you can relax about your performance and stop lying to yourself about it

2. He loves me. And it is a love that grows out of his nature, not my performance. I am free to look honestly at myself, because I am safe in his love.

X. Closing 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. We want to help you with that. If I can help, let me know. Perhaps you want to sit down for a spiritual check in. Or you are ready to take a next step into a small group. One of the things that should have become clear is, if you do not have some really honest relationships, you are unlikely to be able to see yourself clearly. A small group can become that over time. Now is a great time to get in one. Let me help.

C. Maybe today the very next step is to pray with someone. There are people up front ready to pray with you.

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<sup>1</sup> 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.” 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 was easily taking 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 as he lectured us that I realized, he didn't get it. He didn't see it. He was clueless about how odd his golf game

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was or that he was the one slowing us down. 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?

<sup>2</sup> Abstract: People tend to hold overly favorable views of their abilities in many social and intellectual domains. The authors suggest that this overestimation occurs, in part, because people who are unskilled in these domains suffer a dual burden: Not only do these people reach erroneous conclusions and make unfortunate choices, but their incompetence robs them of the metacognitive ability to realize it. Across 4 studies, the authors found that participants scoring in the bottom quartile on tests of humor, grammar, and logic grossly overestimated their test performance and ability. Although their test scores put them in the 12th percentile, they estimated themselves to be in the 62nd. Several analyses linked this miscalibration to deficits in metacognitive skill, or the capacity to distinguish accuracy from error. Paradoxically, improving the skills of participants, and thus increasing their metacognitive competence, helped them recognize the limitations of their abilities. For the full article, go to this web site: <http://gagne.homedns.org/~tgagne/contrib/unskilled.html>

<sup>3</sup> See Ian Deweese-Boyd, Self-Deception, Nov. 7, 2016, for an overview of this discussion.

<sup>4</sup> One of the ongoing debates philosophers have is whether it's possible to know something and hide it from ourselves at the same time – because that sure seems to be what we do. There are things that are so obvious that we have to know them – but somehow, we are not able to consciously access them. 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 too far out of line with who we believe ourselves to be, so we deny it, rationalize it, bury it - something.

<sup>5</sup> If you know you are lying you can repent and move forward. If you do not now you are lying it's really hard to take steps forward.

<sup>6</sup> Thanks to Tim Keller for this illustration.