

Taking My Personal Life to the Next Level

1. Warm-up: We all have our little idiosyncrasies. What's something you do that can drive the people around you a little crazy?
2. Self-reflection and self-evaluation is good for the soul. So right now we're in a New Year's sermon series that is challenging us to evaluate how we're doing spiritually, personally, relationally, and together as a church. This week we're focusing on how we're doing personally. We all have something – some kind of personal issue – that tends to hold us back and may even cause deep pain. Jeff gave the example of Whitney Houston. From the outside looking in, she seemed to have everything. But those who knew her said there were two Whitney Houstons – the dazzling pop princess who seemed to have it all together and the ordinary New Jersey girl who struggled internally. One friend said, “Someone may look good on the outside, sturdy and strong, but on the inside, you had someone who had insecurities and family issues and emotional personal issues and struggles. There has to be some outlet. For her, it became drugs.”
 - a. Why do you think it was so hard for Whitney Houston to face her issues? Why is it so hard for any of us to face our deepest issues?
 - b. Have you ever known someone who outwardly seemed successful, but inwardly struggled with serious dysfunction? Tell us about them. What kept them trapped in their dysfunction?
3. Even Bible heroes had their issues. You might say Samson was the Bible's version of Whitney Houston. Samson was born with enormous gifts of physical acumen and amazing strength. God raised him up to deliver Israel from the oppression of the Philistines. But Samson had a problem – an anger problem. When provoked, he would lose control and do incredibly destructive things. Read Judges 15:1-8, as printed on p. 3.
 - a. After reading this excerpt from Samson's story, how do you feel about him? Would you want to be friends with him? Does he strike you as a Bible hero?
 - b. Eventually Samson was captured by the Philistines, tied between two pillars in a Philistine temple, and mocked by onlookers. He became so angry, he pulled against the pillars and brought the temple down, killing himself and everyone else. Why do you think the Bible spends so much time on the story of Samson? What are we supposed to learn from him?
 - c. Jeff told a true story about a man who sought counseling from a therapist because his angry outbursts were hurting his career and family. At one point, the therapist asked, “What would your life look like if you got rid of your anger?” He was quiet for a long time, then said, “If I get rid of my anger, what will I have left?” What insights does that offer us for why it's so hard to face our issues?

- d. Jeff shared that one of his greatest personal issues is conflict avoidance. How about you? What would you say is one of your greatest personal issues – something that keeps holding you back and causing you pain?
4. On Sunday, we explored two Biblical principles that can help us do a better job of addressing our issues. The first principle is drawn from the writings of the Apostle Paul when he challenges the Corinthian Christians to be less judgmental toward one another. There Paul says, “What do you have that you did not receive? And if you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?” I Corinthians 4:7. Paul seems to be saying that all our strengths – and all our weaknesses – have been “given” to us through some combination of nurture and nature and life experience.
 - a. Do you agree with Paul? Why or why not?
 - b. If what Paul says is true – if everything about us, both strengths and weaknesses, have been “given” to us – what are the implications for us and those around us?
 - c. If what Paul says is true, it raises the question: why would God give us weaknesses? Ronald Rohlheiser suggests an answer. He says, “Crises of every kind will find us, but these crises enter our lives not just as challenges to us to retain our balance and stability, but as invitations to stretch our hearts and minds. Every crisis includes within it an invitation for us to move from being good people to becoming great people.” What do you think he means? Do you agree?
 - d. Jeff invited us to imagine encountering a dog in a cage at the Humane Society who shivers in fear when you approach it. Instead of judging the dog and shouting, “What’s wrong with you! Why are you like that?”, we instinctively understand that the dog is the way it is because something happened to make it that way. So instead of getting angry, we respond with great sympathy and seek to be a source of healing. Jeff invited us to approach the wounded parts of ourselves in the same spirit – to love the wounded parts of ourselves, seek to heal them, and see them as opportunities to grow wiser, stronger, and more beautiful. Do you think you can genuinely love the broken parts of you and embrace them as opportunities? Do you think this would help?
5. The other great Biblical principle we explored on Sunday comes at the end of a parable meant to help us better understand how Jesus will judge us when we stand before him at the end of our lives. There Jesus says, “To whom much is given, of them shall much be required.” Luke 12:48. The point here is that Jesus doesn’t measure us against each other, but rather by how much each of us has (or hasn’t) been given in a particular area of our life. So, for example, God is not going to measure someone has an addictive personality by comparing them to someone who doesn’t. It’s easy for a person with a non-addictive personality to resist addictions, but really hard for someone with an addictive personality. God measures the person with an addictive personality by how hard they fight and how far they come – and in God’s

eyes they may be greater than the naturally non-addictive person who's never had an addiction in their life. All of which means, in your area of personal weakness, don't measure your progress against somebody else. Measure yourself against where you started. Celebrate even incremental progress, because God does!

- a. When we're weak at something, we have a tendency to measure ourselves against those who are great at it, and get discouraged that we can never be them. You might call this an "all-or-nothing perspective." How does that perspective tend to undermine us?
- b. Instead of taking an "all-or-nothing perspective," Jeff urged us to set a very realistic, incremental goal for growth in our own personal area of greatest weakness. In your area of greatest personal weakness, what might a realistic incremental goal? Are you ready to embrace that goal?

Judges 15:1-8

After a while, at the time of the wheat harvest, Samson went to visit his wife, bringing along a goat. He said, "I want to go into my wife's room." But her father would not allow him to go in. Her father said, "I was sure that you had rejected her; so I gave her to your companion. Is not her younger sister prettier than she? Why not take her instead?"

Samson said to them, "This time, when I do mischief to the Philistines, I will be without blame." So Samson went and caught three hundred foxes, and took some torches; and he turned the foxes tail to tail, and put a torch between each pair of tails. When he had set fire to the torches, he let the foxes go into the standing grain of the Philistines, and burned up the shocks and the standing grain, as well as the vineyards and olive groves.

Then the Philistines asked, "Who has done this?" And they said, "Samson, the son-in-law of the Timnite, because he has taken Samson's wife and given her to his companion." So the Philistines came up, and burned her and her father.

Samson said to them, "If this is what you do, I swear I will not stop until I have taken revenge on you." He struck them down hip and thigh with great slaughter; and he went down and lived in the cleft of the rock of Etam.