

**Know yourself**

**by Rev John Castle**

A sermon given on Sunday 14<sup>th</sup> September 2025

Readings: Psalm 139:1-18,23-24; Philippians 3:2-16

### **Introduction: Building blocks for a happy life**

Today's sermon is number 2 in a series of four, entitled "Building blocks for a happy life". We're looking at four principles that we as Christians should follow if we're to find the life that God wants us to have, principles which may conflict with some of the values and beliefs of the society around us. Last week's topic was "Seek truth", and we noticed some differences between the worldly attitude that you can pick your own truth to live by and the Christian notion that truth is found in God, and that many of the problems of the world are due to people rejecting God's ways and God's truth in order to follow their own path.

This week we're looking at ourselves – who are we, and what attitudes to ourselves can lead to a happy life?

### **Who are you?**

If you were introducing yourself to someone at a party, what would you say about yourself? What facts would you tell them, and what would you withhold? Depending on who you were talking to, you might talk about your job, or your children, if you have them, or your hobbies and interests, which could include work you do as a volunteer. You might talk about interesting experiences you have had, or places you've visited. These are all things that go to make us the people we are today.

But there might be some important things we'd be reluctant to share – times in our lives when we've failed, when a relationship has gone wrong, or when we've done something we're ashamed of. After all, we don't want to give a bad impression of ourselves. We want people to like us, or even admire us. So we're often checking for feedback from other people, either through things they say, or through non-verbal reactions – the expression on their face, for example.

A lot of how we think about ourselves is based on how others have treated us. If we've been fortunate to have grown up in a loving home, we're likely to see ourselves in a good light. But being treated in a negative way, whether by family or perhaps by teachers at school or work colleagues, can undermine our sense of worth.

Another feature of how we see ourselves is by comparing ourselves with others, or with an image of what we think society values. We get these images from the media – the internet, television, books and magazines, films and so on. These tell us that to be worthwhile we should be rich, good-looking, intelligent or skilled at sport or music.

Let's take just one of these areas: looks. How many people here have never felt any worries or insecurities about their physical appearance? The beauty and fashion industries make billions of pounds from people's insecurities about their appearance. These products are mostly aimed at women, who are under enormous pressure to look good. But men can also be insecure about their appearance. People don't work out at the gym just to keep fit and healthy. Men are supposed to be strong and muscley. We care about how others see us –

not just women, but other men. Speaking personally, I remember many years ago my first girlfriend telling me that she told her friends that I wasn't much to look at, but I was good in other ways. That didn't make me feel great!

Most of us are never going to look like the models we see in the adverts, or the actors and actresses we see in the films. So how are we to come to a place where we feel happy in our own skins? Is the answer to buy more expensive beauty products or have botox or cosmetic surgery?

Now I'm not saying there's anything wrong with wanting to look your best. But if your happiness depends on your looks, I'm afraid that however fabulous you feel now, it's not a secure base for happiness in the future. Think about the people who love you – will they love you less if you lose some of your good looks? And what about God? When the prophet Samuel was looking at all of Jesse's sons to see which one God had chosen to be king, he thought the oldest, Eliab, looked the part. But God said to Samuel,

“Do not consider his appearance or his height ... People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.”<sup>1</sup>

### **Searching inside yourself**

But there's another route to happiness which is on offer: success! I'm sure you've heard the mantra “You can be anything you want to be.” It's just a matter of believing in yourself. Follow your dream and it will come true.

Now I know that this is usually said with good intentions, to reverse the negative things that young people have often

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Samuel 16:7 NIV

heard about themselves. Think of Angela Rayner, until recently the Deputy Prime Minister. She was told as a pregnant teenager that she would never amount to anything. She proved them wrong. Many children of African heritage have been treated similarly at school, subject to racist assumptions and stereotypes.

But it is patently false to say that you can be anything you want to be. Yesterday at the Last Night of the Proms it was the last public performance of the virtuoso trumpeter Alison Balsom. I would love to be able to play the trumpet like her. I have six of her albums. But how ever hard I practise, I will never be even half as good at the trumpet as her. That doesn't stop me from playing for my own enjoyment and that of others, and, I hope, using my playing for God's glory.

Here are some of the lyrics from the song *Search for the hero inside yourself*:

You've got to search for the hero inside yourself  
Search for the secrets you hide  
Search for the hero inside yourself  
Until you find the key to your life...

Because you and only you alone  
Can build a bridge across the stream  
Weave your spell in life's rich tapestry  
Your passport to a feeling supreme...

When I looked on Amazon to download this song, I saw that there is also a book by the same title, one of many self-help books you can buy. Here's how the book is described:

*When was the last time you specifically asked yourself whether you are Happy, healthy and prosperous? ...*

*‘SEARCH for the HERO Inside YOURSELF’ aims to encourage you to find YOUR Happiness, health and prosperity and the hunt begins inside to out.*

Now I don’t doubt that there may be some good advice in this book. The very fact that someone buys the book and reads it could be the sign that they are wanting to take responsibility for their lives, shake off negative feelings and beliefs that are holding them back, and seek to realise their God-given potential – although I doubt that there’s any mention of God in the book. And that is the important thing that is often missing from such self-help books: what I would call the God Dimension.

### **The example of the apostle Paul**

The Apostle Paul is a classic example of someone who found the hero inside himself. As Saul the Pharisee, his ambition was to be the hero who defended orthodox Judaism from heretics, in particular this new Jesus cult which seemed to be spreading like wildfire. His credentials were impeccable. As he wrote many years later in his letter to the church in Philippi:

If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.<sup>2</sup>

But on the road to Damascus, Saul met Jesus in a vision, and discovered that he had got things completely wrong. It took the voice of Jesus and being struck with temporary blindness

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<sup>2</sup> Philippians 3:4-6 (ESV)

for Saul, who thought he knew it all, to humble himself, seek forgiveness and find what God really had in mind for his life.

Jesus saw the hero inside Saul; he saw how his enormous gifts and learning, as well as his personal drive, could be harnessed to make him the man who planted churches throughout the Mediterranean, and the theologian who was able to capture in his writings God's purpose to bring non-Jews into his Kingdom. But Saul had to learn to follow God's will for his life. And a key part of that was to discover God's love for him, which was worth more than anything he could gain from his status or his achievements.

But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ...<sup>3</sup>

There are many other examples in the Bible of God seeing what you might call "the hero inside" someone. Moses was an escaped murderer, who had fled from the palace in Egypt to become a shepherd. Gideon was hiding from the Midianites when an angel met him and addressed him as "you mighty warrior".<sup>4</sup> Mary was an ordinary village girl when God called her to become the mother of his Son. Unlike the last two examples, she overcame her fear and responded to God's call with the words

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<sup>3</sup> Philippians 3:7-8 (ESV)

<sup>4</sup> Judges 6:12 (NRSV)

I am the Lord's servant... may it be to me according to your word."<sup>5</sup>

The role that God assigned to Mary was the greatest role that any human being could take. This humble, obedient servant of God became the most famous woman in the world. Her example inspires me to rewrite the mantra "You can be anything you want to be" to "You can be anything that God wants you to be." That may seem daunting, but it is also wonderful. It requires us to be open to amazing possibilities, but we are assured that success is not just up to us: if we surrender our lives to God, and seek each day to live according to his will, he will work wonderfully through us, and we will be agents of his saving and healing work in the world.

### **God knows us**

We've thought about how the way we see ourselves is influenced by what other people say about us, or how we *think* they see us. That can be good for us, if we receive words of encouragement, or harmful. Of course, getting critical feedback can be difficult to cope with, but if it is genuine it can be a vital learning tool. I remember some years ago that on one occasion I expressed my opinion quite strongly, and later got feedback that I had come over as aggressive. This and other feedback led me to work on my emotional intelligence – that is, being more aware of the emotions I am experiencing, so that I can avoid hurting others unintentionally and be more sensitive to other people's feelings.

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<sup>5</sup> Luke 1:38 (NIV)

Recognising our weaknesses and our faults is an important part of Christian discipleship. Every Sunday in church we say the prayer of confession, which reminds us that we are all sinners and are all in need of God's forgiveness. The words of absolution tell us that God forgives us, and the Holy Communion reminds us that through Jesus' death on the Cross all our sins are washed away and we can always have a fresh start.

God loves us and accepts us, whatever our moral failings, however successful or beautiful we may or may not be. Psalm 139 reminds us that God knows our every thought, hears our words before we even speak them, and is with us wherever we are. It also says that he saw us being knit together in our mothers' wombs, and knew in advance how many days we would have on earth.

Psalm 103 says,

As a father has compassion for his children,  
so the LORD has compassion for those who fear him.  
For he knows how we were made;  
he remembers that we are dust.<sup>6</sup>

## **Finding your identity in God**

Knowing yourself means recognising your strengths and your weaknesses; it means seeking to understand how the experiences of your life have shaped you for good or ill, acknowledging where you've got things wrong or where you are vulnerable; it means trusting God to strengthen you, equip you and empower you by his Holy Spirit, so that you

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<sup>6</sup> Psalm 103:13-14 NRSV

can overcome temptation, pick yourself up when you fall down and move forward, growing in grace and becoming more like Jesus.

The Bible tells us that we are chosen and called by God. What better way to find fulfilment and happiness than to know that you are a son or daughter of God, redeemed by the blood of Jesus and equipped by the Holy Spirit to be, like Gideon, a mighty warrior for God, and, like Mary, a servant of the Lord.

## **Prayer**

Let's take a moment to reflect on the fact that God knows us intimately; there is no thought, word or deed that he does not know; he is aware of our insecurities, our hurts, and also of our desires, ambitions and hopes.

If there is something we have been trying to hide from God, now might be a good time to tell him about it.

I'll read these words from Psalm 139:

Search me, O God, and know my heart;  
test me and know my anxious thoughts.  
See if there is any offensive way in me,  
and lead me in the way everlasting.

And finally, a prayer for surrendering ourselves to the will of God - a prayer attributed to King Henry VI:

Lord Jesus Christ,  
who created and redeemed me,  
and have destined me to be that which now I am;  
you know what you would do with me;  
do with me according to your will,  
in your mercy. Amen.