

# Becoming Who God Meant You to Be

Sixth of six sermons in the “Daniel Plan” series<sup>1</sup>

by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher

Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio

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- Proverbs 4:20-27 “Be careful what you think, because your thoughts run your life.” (v.23 GNT)
- Matthew 25:14-30 “Well done, you good and faithful servant!” said his master. “You have been faithful in managing small amounts, so I will put you in charge of large amounts. Come on in and share my happiness!” (v.21 GNT)
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: God came among us in Jesus to show us how we can aspire to live our lives for God’s purposes.

For nearly forty days 115 people from this church and elsewhere have been engaged in a faith-based program seeking a healthier life, a program called The Daniel Plan. For the past five weeks my sermons have focused on dimensions of The Daniel Plan such as why your body matters to God, the importance of setting goals, how it’s more effective to join with others in trying to make changes in your life, how faith brings God’s power into your life. All those messages can be read or heard on our website. In today’s sixth and final installment let’s ponder what it would mean for us to become who God means us to be.

As you heard, all week the Vacation Bible School has been learning about parables – lessons from everyday life. Today we heard a parable sometimes called “The Parable of the Talents” or “The Parable of the Three Servants.” A wealthy boss asked three of his workers to take care of some of his money while he went on a long trip. He wanted them to use the money, invest it, put it to work so that the money earned more money. To one person the boss gave \$5,000, to another he gave \$2,000, and to another he gave \$1,000. The boss never said he expected all three workers would produce the same amount of money. After all, different people had different amounts to work with.

That’s a parable for our lives because each of our lives is different, too. We have different situations, different conditions. We can’t all do the same things because we’re not all the same. Different factors have shaped each of our lives, so while we may have similarities, we aren’t the same. Different things have influenced who we are.

The nationally-renowned pastor Rick Warren has used the game of poker as an analogy for five factors that influence who you are. I’m not a poker player. I understand that in one kind of poker called 5-Card Stud you don’t get the chance to swap out any cards for other cards; as the saying goes, “You play the cards you’re dealt.” Pastor Warren says that’s true for our lives, too. Here are the five “cards we’re dealt,” five factors that influence who we are.

**The first factor is “your chemistry.”** Your genes, your DNA have determined some things for you. Maybe your DNA has determined that you’ll need eyeglasses, or that you’ll tend to have a sore back, or that you’ll be left-handed, or that you’ll love the taste of Brussel sprouts.

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<sup>1</sup> This sermon is indebted to the Rev. Rick Warren’s “Daniel Plan” sermon series for a number of the illustrations and points presented here.

Your chemistry – your biological make-up – has a big influence on who you are, and there’s not too much that you can do to change it.

**A second factor that determines your identity is “your connections.”** Connections are your relationships in life. Who you are is shaped in great measure by the relationships, the connections you experienced as a child and youth. Maybe they were healthy and nurturing. Maybe they were neglectful or abusive. Maybe those connections were consistent. Maybe they changed a lot, creating unstable or unpredictable connections. Who you are is greatly influenced by your connections. And how you see yourself is greatly influenced by how you think the most important people in your life see you.

**A third factor that makes you *you* is “your circumstances,”** the things that happen to you that you can’t control. Things like troubles, traumatic experiences, crises, pressures, abusive treatment, rejection, failure are all circumstances that influence your identity. There are also fortunate circumstances like a safe and comfortable environment, supportive relationships, intellectual and artistic stimulation, good health. Sadly, those kinds of fortunate circumstances are things that we tend to take for granted because we assume we deserve them.

**A fourth factor is a big one: “your consciousness.”** That means, how do you talk to yourself? How do you think about you? You do it all the time. And if you talked to your friends like you probably talk to yourself, your friends wouldn’t stay your friends for long, because you are your harshest critic. In fact, you lie to yourself. You say, “I’m not as smart as other people.” You say, “I’m not coordinated.” You say, “I just don’t have any self-discipline.” You say, “I’m too skinny” or “I’m too big” or “I’m not as good looking as everybody else” or “I don’t have a mind for money” or “I’m a total klutz with anything involving tools.”

The reason your “consciousness” is so influential on your identity is that you believe yourself... even when it’s not true! In Proverbs 4:23 the Bible cautions “Be careful what you think, because your thoughts run your life.” Your fears are often self-fulfilling prophecies that will sabotage you until you challenge your thoughts, until you challenge your self-talk, your consciousness. Feelings are not facts. Your consciousness is a strong influencer of your identity... but realize that some of the self-criticism you may be saying to yourself may be based on distorted feelings, not fact.

**A fifth factor that makes you *you* is “your choices.”** The freedom of having choices is your greatest blessing and curse. Some choices are stupid: for proof, simply consider fashions of the ‘70s and ‘80s. Some choices harm others, like turning your back on a friend or angrily saying deeply hurtful things to a loved one. Some choices we make are actually self-destructive. For instance, do you really want to clog your lungs with tar and nicotine in an attempt to appear sophisticated, “hip” or attractive, or do you really want to be consuming massive amounts of caffeine or sugar every day?

As we mature we become aware that choices can have moral consequences. Some consequences are not that big a deal, and others will shape the rest of our lives.

But there’s something unique about this fifth factor affecting your identity. Imagine the five factors influencing your identity as the cards in your poker hand for 5-Card Stud. Remember, in that game you can’t swap out the cards. But this fifth factor of your choices is a “wildcard.” Like a wildcard can change number or suit, the choices you make can impact the other four factors.

So for instance, while you didn’t get to choose your chemistry, you *can choose* what you’ll do with your body, what you’ll put in your body, how you’ll care for your body, how you’ll make the most of what you have.

And though you didn’t get to choose all of your connections, you *can choose* how you respond to those relationships, and if some of your relationships are harmful or hurtful for you,

you can choose to learn new relationship skills and find people who lift you up, not tear you down.

Many of your circumstances happened to you without your input. But you *can choose* how you'll respond to the circumstances that shaped you and the circumstances you find yourself in. Maybe your upbringing was less than ideal. But rather than assigning blame to the people who raised you, maybe you can begin by acknowledging that they did the best they could, given their circumstances and experience. And maybe your situation in life right now is unsettled or uncomfortable, perhaps even distressing. But you can choose to focus on the positive, promising dimensions of your current circumstances and not obsess over what's not going well.

And as far as the fourth factor of your "consciousness" – how you talk to yourself – much of that is ingrained early in life and now is instinctive for you. But you *can choose* to work on changing the tone of your self-talk. You can say to yourself, "I will not always tear myself down. After all, I wouldn't do that to my best friend. Instead, I'm going to be more encouraging and affirming to myself. After all, that's how I'd treat my best friend."

So God gives you the ability to make choices, and your choices can act like a wildcard to improve some of the factors that have made you *you*.

Our goal is not to become perfect. That's not what God asks of us. That's not what God made us for. God chose to come among us in Jesus Christ. The Gospel of John says, "No one has ever seen God. God the only Son, who is at the Father's side, has made God known."<sup>2</sup> When we look to Jesus, we see the perfect example of what God meant us to be. And though we cannot be perfect in this life, God asks us to aspire to Jesus' level of obedience and dedication. God asks us to love as graciously as Jesus does. God longs for us to show forgiveness and mercy as generously as Jesus does.

Like we heard in the Parable of the Three Servants, God doesn't expect every one of us to be exactly the same or to achieve the very same things. As the boss entrusted different things to different servants, God has entrusted us with different chemistry and connections and circumstances and consciousness (self-talk). But God has blessed each of us the gift of free will, of choice. Free will enables us to choose how we will respond to the lives we have been given, and God has come to us in Jesus so that we will choose to aspire to Christ-like living. That's not just a pipedream: as Paul wrote to the Philippians, "I can do all things through [him] who strengthens me."<sup>3</sup> Being like Jesus – that's who God means us to be.

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<sup>2</sup> John 1:18 Common English Bible

<sup>3</sup> Philippians 4:13 New Revised Standard Version