

I. Introduction

- A. Welcome to Neighborhood. Thank you for being here.
- B. A special welcome this week to all our high school and junior high students for Worship Together Weekend.

II. Illustration: the Flow of the Chicago River.

- A. The year was 1885. In one city alone, 90,000 people— equivalent to the entire population of the city of Redding, CA—died. That city was my home town, Chicago. The reason so many people died that year was horrible and simple at the same time: they died because they drank the water.
- B. Chicago sits alongside Lake Michigan. It seems as big as an ocean, but it's fresh water. The city draws its drinking water from the Lake.
- C. But back then, there was a problem with the Lake. The Chicago River flowed into Lake Michigan. For comparison, this would be like our Sacramento River.
- D. And that is why so many people died in 1885. The businesses and industries of Chicago were dumping their waste into the Chicago River. The sewage of three quarters of a million people was flushed into the Chicago River. And since the Chicago River flowed into Lake Michigan, and since Lake Michigan provided drinking water for the city, a huge outbreak of disease happened that year. Outbreaks of Typhoid, Cholera, and Dysentery diseases killed twelve percent of the city's population in the year 1885.
- E. So the city came up with a solution. The solution was one of the most ambitious projects ever since the Pharaohs built the pyramids. Using only the technology of the 1800s, the City of Chicago reversed the flow of the Chicago River.
- F. There's never been anything like it.
- G. They dug canals. They built locks. They blasted through 12 million cubic yards of solid rock. They pushed away 26 million yards of dirt. They dug a new river bed. It was the most massive earth moving project in human history. It took 15 years. It cost \$70 million, a huge expense for the day. And it employed a staggering army of workers to get it done.
- H. But on January 2, 1900, the locks were opened, and for the first time in geologic history, water flowed out of Lake Michigan, into the Chicago River, to the Illinois River, to the Mississippi River, all the way to New Orleans.
- I. They reversed a river.
- J. It was declared the "Civil Engineering Achievement of the Millennium" in 1999.
 - a) Here is our main Bible verse for today.
 - (1) *Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mold, but let God re-make you so that your whole attitude of mind is changed. Thus you will prove in practice that the will of God is good, acceptable to him and perfect. (Romans 12:2, Phil).*

III. Against the Current

- A. The reason I told you about reversing the Chicago River, is this. Every single time you walk out of your house, and into your job, your school, your neighborhood, or Youtube, Instagram, Snapchat, Social media... If you interact with the world in any way at all, you will immediately be pushed along by the current of society.
- B. The hard part is that you're moving, and might not even know it.
 - 1. Right now, the surface of the earth is spinning at about 1,000 miles per hour compared to the core.
 - 2. Right now, the planet earth is racing at 67,000 miles per hour compared to the sun.
 - a) The only reason you don't feel the speed is because you're moving at the exact same speed as everything around you.
 - b) The current around you has become the current within you.
 - 3. And my message today, and I hope through this whole series, is to reverse the current within you.
 - 4. Turn the flow around so that it is the opposite of the world's flow. The philosophies. The guiding beliefs.
 - 5. Those philosophies are illusions, and they will break your heart.
 - 6. So God lovingly says, Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its mold. Don't flow with that current.
- C. Going against the current is really, really hard.

IV. Illusions

- A. Today is part 3 in a series. The series of talks is called Illusions. An illusion is something you believe is true, but it isn't true. It looks like the real thing, but it's a counterfeit. Fake reality.
 - 1. Here's the Big Idea:
 - a) *The main philosophies that fuel our culture are infected with illusions.*
 - 2. The first illusion we talked about is called HUMANISM — which is a religion that puts human beings above everything, even God. Except it lowers humans to animal status by saying there is no God.
 - 3. The second illusion we talked about is called DETERMINISM — which is the religion that says nobody has any choices, because we're all just a bunch of chemistry sets and therefore slaves to our hormones and DNA.
 - 4. Today, our third illusion. Today, I want to talk about the illusion, and the philosophy that is called POPULARITY.
 - 5. Or you can call it, Rock on, Nerds!

V. Popularity

- A. You might not know this, but I was always the most popular kid in school. Everybody wanted to be my friend, and everybody thought I was awesome. The reason is probably because you just can't contain all this coolness.
 - 1. I was always on the cutting edge of fashion.

2. I was a member of the very hip chess club.
3. And a member of the extremely exclusive Latin Club.
4. And always a trend-setter with hair styles.
- B. Okay, so maybe I wasn't as cool or as popular as I remember. Actually, I wasn't that cool at all. I didn't play any sports in school. I wasn't in any bands. I didn't have a girlfriend in high school. And I didn't go to my proms. My church was against it, and to be honest, I was kind of relieved. Too much pressure.
- C. Plus I'm an introvert, and God loves introverts best.
- D. Popularity isn't a bad thing. And it's not necessarily a good thing.
- E. It's just not the most important thing. That everybody likes you or knows you or thinks you are cool.
 1. How much do you think Jesus cared about popularity?
- F. Study after study shows the same thing: that being popular in high school and college does not equate to being successful in marriage, in business, in money, or in life.
- G. There's a reason why:
- H. Because there is something about a thousand times more important than popularity.
- I. And that is character.
- J. And that is the upstream, break the mold, reverse the course of the river kind of shift I would like you to make today.
 1. Break the illusion of popularity.
 2. Take your stand on the rock-solid reality of character.
- K. Because character counts.
- L. So here are my top reasons why you should shift from caring about popularity to caring about character:
- VI. *Top Five Reasons Why CHARACTER > POPULARITY*
 - A. *Because popularity wears masks, but character reveals the heart.*
 1. In the ancient world, people went to massive theatrical productions. They were held outside. There was no lighting really, and no iMag. So that people way back in the cheap seats could tell the characters apart, the actors wore masks. They were big, exaggerated emoji's, basically. Smiley faces. Frowny faces. Angry faces. They wore masks.
 2. Those masks had a name.
 3. They were called "hypokrites." [hy-POK-rit-tace]
 4. So we have our word, hypocrite. A hypocrite is a person who wears a mask. They portray a false face.
 5. Why would somebody do that?
 6. When I was in high school, I read a book that really hit me hard. It was called *Why Am I Afraid To Tell You Who I Am* (John Powell, Zondervan, 1969).
 - a) Here was the big idea: "I am afraid to tell you who I am because if I tell you who I am, you may not like who I am, and that is all I have."
 7. People who value popularity more than character are always showing you only what they want you to see. Popularity buries a person's identity under ever changing masks. It's not about being myself, it's about portraying a false self I think other people will accept.
 - a) Character drops the masks, and presents the best version of my true self, satisfied that God loves me, and I respect myself, even if I never win any popularity contests. I've already won the most important prize of all: Jesus loves me, just as I am, and that's good enough for me.
 - B. *Because popularity uses people, but character uplifts people.*
 1. If popularity is my top priority, when I look at you, I ask one question: what can you do for me?
 2. Does that sound like how Jesus treated people?
 3. There's a really interesting verse in the Bible that a lot of people get wrong. It's from the Love Chapter, which is 1 Corinthians 13. It's read a lot at weddings.
 - a) *For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known. (1 Corinthians 13:12, NKJV).*
 4. This verse is talking about Love.
 5. It is especially talking about the kind of love that you can have when you become a mature, grown up, spiritually mature Christian.
 6. Question: when you are looking at a mirror, who are you looking at?
 - a) Answer: yourself.
 - (1) It's all about selfies, and am I hot, and what do you think about me, and does this look good on me, and did you see that play I made...
 - (2) Which is all fine, a little bit. A very little bit. Okay, forget it.
 7. Question: when you are looking face to face, who are you looking at?
 - a) Answer: the other person.
 8. That is love. And love takes character.
 - a) Will you be kind to people who can't do anything for you?
 - b) Will you reach out to people who sit alone at lunch and invite you to join them?

- c) When you are in a circle of friends, will you open the circle, and call over someone who isn't part of your little clique?
- d) Face to face. Character uplifts people.
- e) Character looks into the eyes of other people as windows to their soul (generous without resentment, sacrifice without regret) [I care about you because I care about me] Because popularity helps you, but character helps the community.

C. *Because popularity is slavery, but character is freedom.*

1. Go back to the masks people where. I have a friend, who every time I see him, looks like a different person. He's a kind of sad guy anyway. But he's always giving himself total makeovers. I know that some people do that out of strength.
2. But think he's doing it out of weakness. I think he's desperately searching for an identity that other people will like.
3. So he tries on this mask... how do you like me now?
4. And then the next mask... hot or not?
5. And then the next mask... do you like this look?
6. And he has tried so many identities I don't think he knows who he really is.
7. The day you enter a popularity contest with your peers is the day you surrender control of your SELF to the opinion of others.
8. That isn't freedom, it's slavery. It's answering to the crowd.
9. Character is different. Character says, this is me. I am who God says I am. I am not who the bullies say I am. I am not who the mean girls say I am. I am not who my absent, dysfunctional, stoned, selfish, parents or guardians say I am.
10. I am saved. God has joined me to Christ. I am who God says I am.
11. When I was a freshman in high school, my English teacher told us to write a paper called, Who Am I.
12. I'm 14, I don't know who I am. So I start typing away. I am Bill. I am Italian. I am... and I ran out of stuff.
13. That night, I went to church for something. I passed a lady in the hall, and she asked me, Hey Bill, why do you look so miserable?
14. First thing I did was I adjusted my face. Then I told her about this stupid paper I had to write. Who am I.
15. She said, "Oh, that's easy. I am a child of God. I am a citizen of heaven. I am spiritual royalty... a member of the household of faith."
16. And 14 years of Sunday School clicked with me. I get it! I'm a Christian! That's the main thing! And I got home, and wrote my paper, no problem.
17. When God looks at me, he sees Bill plus Christ. As Jesus is to God, so am I.
18. Is Jesus strong? Then I am strong. Is Jesus welcomed? Then I am welcomed. Is he accepted? Then I am accepted. Is he good enough for God? Then so am I.
 - a) Character is self-mastery, and self-control by the power of God's Word and God's Spirit. It is the true royalty and nobility God made you for.
 - b) Character is me being me, and you being you, and both of us being good with that.
 - c) Character is me dropping the masks, and feeling confident to just be myself. To accept my truest, deepest self. And to let God unbury me from the avalanche of craziness, dysfunction, and sin that has piled over the real me.
19. It's not everybody's opinion that tells me who I am.
20. It is the character inside of knowing that I am linked to Christ, and I am who God says I am no matter what else anybody says. Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its mold.
 - a) I am preaching today to unleash the real you! The best you! The You you think you can be on days when your faith is strong. It's so rare. It's so against the current.
 - b) Dear child of God, be yourself!

D. *Because popularity takes the path of least resistance, but character pushes against the current.*

1. Popularity is flabby.
 - a) Character is rock hard. A backbone of steel.
2. I wasn't ashamed of being a Christian. Everybody knew. I witnessed to my friends. I argued apologetics. I tried to show them Jesus was true.
3. I went to Lane Tech High School, over 5,000 students strong. A few of us gathered every morning on the steps to pray for our friends to get saved. My brother and I started that.
4. We didn't care what people thought. We just did it.
5. Okay, I did care a little. I was pretty self-conscious. I felt like a nerd. I didn't wear blue jeans to high school, because I thought it was too cool, and I wasn't cool.
6. But the character that Christ was forming in me was more important than being popular, or well liked, or cool.
7. Every morning, I got up early before school. And I had to take a Chicago Public Transportation bus to and from school — so bus/train/bus... but I got up early to study my Bible, and take notes, and pray.
8. And that stuck with me.
9. And I'm not saying I was perfect, and I'm not bragging.
10. I was very conscious of not letting the world around me squeeze me into its mold, and I knew the only way to do that was through daily Bible study.
11. And that's my prayer for you.

12. Because you can't reverse the flow within your heart and soul, without the power of the Word of God.

- E. *Because popularity is natural and human, but character is supernatural from the power of Christ in you, the Spirit in you, and the Word in you.*
1. I don't want to be too hard on anybody today. I get it. I get the desire to be popular and liked and well known. I wrestle with that all the time. But there is something more important. And that is character. And I know that I haven't defined character, and I want to do that right now.
 2. Character comes from a Greek word that meant the creator's mark. It was engraved on metals, and carved into wood, or scribed into pottery.
 3. And when you have character, God is marking you as his own masterpiece.
 4. And what is the mark? It is the same qualities that made Jesus so beautiful, and so powerful, and so different from everybody around him.
 - a) It is the mark of wisdom. The mark of courage. The mark of kindness. The mark of discernment. The mark of love.
 - (1) *The Spirit, however, produces in human life fruits such as these: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, fidelity, tolerance and self-control--and no law exists against any of them. (Galatians 5:22, 23, Phil).*
 5. This is the character of Christ. It is the fruit of the Spirit.
 6. Have you ever seen an apple grow? How does the tree make it?
 - a) Does it strain, groan, labor, sweat, and push?
 7. No. It is the fruit—the natural outcome of a healthy life process—of the Spirit—the power of God every time you open the Bible and believe it.
 8. I would rather be friends with a person who has that kind of character than with the most popular people in the world.
 9. And if you have this character, and you're not popular, the only reason is because the people around you are so locked into their illusions, and so caught in the current of the world, they don't know an awesome person when they see one.

VII. Character > Popularity Honor Code

- A. *I will cultivate a friendship (small group) when I can increasingly be honest and open about my struggles and desires.*
 1. Keep it safe. Keep it balanced. Go slow.
- B. *I will reach out to a person who seems alone, isolated, or sad.*
 1. Not in an arrogant way where I'm their Savior, but in a kind way.
 2. I think that all the Christian kids in Enterprise, Shasta, Foothill, West Valley, U Prep, Central Valley, Redding Christian...
 3. You need to be kind to each other AT SCHOOL. You need to take care of each other. You need to say encouraging words. You need to not be bossy. You need to bless and have each other's backs. You need to stick up for each other.
 4. You're going against a very strong flow every single school day, and maybe together you can be the ones to reverse the flow, and uplift an entire school.
 5. The largest church in America began when a group of high school students in a small church, came together to pray, and encourage each other. And they started sharing and helping each other in really beautiful ways.
 6. The power of youth whose hearts are warm toward Christ.
- C. *I will discover and claim my true identity in Christ.*
 1. The Bible lists about 3 dozen statements that are true of you. I am blessed. I am beloved. I am redeemed. I am justified. The more you study those, the more your self esteem grows.
 2. We'll post some resources on that on our FB page this week.
- D. *I will speak words of grace and truth, even if people think I'm weird.*
 1. Jesus came speaking words of grace and truth, and some people loved him, and some people hated him, but nobody was bored by him.
 2. We are supposed to be known by our love. God says you're not the same as everybody else. You go against the flow.
 3. And that means your words.
 4. I was blown away when I was in high school, and one of my teachers said — and it's weird, but stick with me — what if no matter what somebody said to us, we could reply by quoting a Bible verse, especially the sayings of Jesus.
 5. So we started a group to memorize big chunks of the Bible. And I did that, in high school. And I don't go around talking that way.
 6. But it has impacted me. Speak words of grace and truth, and don't worry about your popularity.
- E. *I will grow spiritually, and seek to be mature in Bible study, prayer, and likeness to Christ.*
 1. God grows you. God matures you. You are part of Neighborhood. God saves you, blesses you, grows you, and uses you. That's our plan, because it's God's plan for your life.
 2. Don't stay a spiritual baby. Get into the Word of God. Get in a Bible study. Grow.
 3. Grow up, grow strong, reverse the current, swim against the flow, and please...
 4. Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its mold.