

Lesson 2

BALANCE THROUGH AUTHENTICITY

Introduction

The doorbell rang and I panicked. With our house on the market, we needed to be able to show it with very little warning, and the Realtor was a half hour early! I still had to put away the dog dishes so it looked like no dog lived with us (at least not one who ate food), the kids' balls were still strewn across the front lawn (too late for that), and I needed to hang a picture to cover up an unfinished repair job. The prospective buyers were through my front door before I was able to get out with the dog and baby, so I simply apologized for not having been able to fully create the illusion that people didn't really live here. Because isn't that what we do when we're showing a house?

The effort I am making to keep this house "show ready" is exhausting me, and we can draw a parallel between this and many of our relationships. How many of us are tired of attempting to project an image of "perfect" when what we really feel is that we can't keep up? How often do we say we're fine when we're not? There's a cost to this "image is everything" way of living. Our relationships remain superficial. The result? Loneliness. We may be surrounded by people, but we don't feel that they really know us. And we fear that if they did, they'd walk away. So we hide behind a fake exterior that we're trying really, really hard to keep polished and pulled together.

Living authentically means we drop the mask and embrace vulnerability. We stop acting like we're something that we're not. And for most of us, that is a terrifying thought. The minute we contemplate being real to this degree, fear kicks in. We fear we'll be rejected; that friends will be disgusted; that love will be pulled back. We worry that if we're really known in this way, if we're seen for who we truly are, we won't be worthy of connection. We'll be lonely. And although living behind a mask is its own version of loneliness, it seems safer.

So we try to live up to the expectations around us. We do our best to do it all, to do it perfectly, and for it all to appear effortless. We paste smiles on our faces and say we're fine, when we're anything but.

But what are we missing when we fail to live authentically? In all this effort to become who we "should" be, are we kept from becoming the amazing women we were created to be? Is our real life passing us by?

Day One

WHERE DID THIS HIDING BEGIN?

1. Adam and Eve have always been depicted without clothing in the Garden of Eden. Their nakedness is a picture of total vulnerability. It was safe to be naked in the garden because something was absent. This "something" is very present in our world, and blocks our ability to be authentic and vulnerable with one another. According to Genesis 2:25, what was absent from the garden?

Shame is not the same as guilt. When you feel guilt, you feel badly about something you have done. When you feel shame, you feel badly about who you are. It's the difference between feeling you *made* a mistake and feeling you *are* a mistake. Shame corrodes your ability to be authentic, because you're afraid to reveal your true self.

2. When God settled Adam in the Garden of Eden, He told him, "You are free to eat from any of the trees of the garden except the tree of knowledge of good and evil. From that tree you shall not eat; when you eat from it you shall die." (Genesis 2:16–17) Carefully read Genesis 3:1–5. How did the snake (the devil) get Eve to doubt God's goodness and disobey Him?

3. When did the hiding begin? What was the root cause of the perceived need to hide? See Genesis 3:6–10.

This is the first time we see a woman not wanting to be seen. Her fig leaves and the coverage of the trees were her attempt to avoid facing what she had done. But God loved her too much to leave her there. He called her out of the shadows and dialogued with her about her choice.

4. Read Genesis 3:13–23. As God discussed Adam and Eve’s choice to disobey, He described sin’s consequences. One of those consequences was separation from God; they would no longer be able to walk with Him in the garden. But God’s desire was (and is) restoration and reconciliation. What evidence is seen in God’s words to the snake in Genesis 3:15 that He had a plan to bring people back to Him, into an authentic, close relationship? Note: Read this verse and interpret “the woman” as Mary, the Blessed Mother, and “her offspring” as Jesus.

Genesis 3:15 gave hope that restoration was coming. While those in the Old Testament looked *forward* to the day their Redeemer would come, we look *back* to our Redeemer’s victory on the cross. When Christ died on the cross and rose again from the dead, He destroyed “the works of the devil.” (1 John 3:8) The devil wanted (and still wants) to keep people in darkness, certain that there’s no hope for us when we sin. He wants to keep us in that place of shame that says, “You are a mistake, and there’s nothing that can change that.” But Jesus’ death and Resurrection changed *everything*. He paid the price for our sin, so we don’t have to. If we stop hiding from God and allow Him to truly see us, He will not reject us. If we ask, He will forgive us.

Quiet your heart and enjoy His presence. . . . Get real with God.

One place we can lack authenticity is in our relationship with God. We hide from Him, as if He can't see our sin. God invites us to see ourselves as He sees us. This is how we are described in 1 Peter 2:9–10:

But you are “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of his own, so that you may announce the praises” of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were “no people” but now you are God’s people; you “had not received mercy” but now you have received mercy.

He calls us out of darkness and into the light. He asks us to stop hiding our sins and instead lay them before Him in the light of His presence. This is authenticity with God. He has given us one of the sweetest promises ever in 1 John 1:9. He promises that if we'll stop hiding from Him, if we'll acknowledge our sins, He will be faithful and just and will forgive our sins and cleanse us of every wrongdoing.

Settle yourself in God's presence. Take off your mask. Stop acting as if He can't see into your heart. Stop believing the lie that if you tell Him your sins, He'll reject you. He will not. He will forgive you. Confess all that's on your heart. Connect to Him again. Enjoy what it feels like to be honest and authentic with God.

Day Two

WHAT KEEPS US STUCK IN SHAME?

Sin should draw us to confession, not to shame.

When we sin, the Holy Spirit begins to work in our souls (because that's where He is), and He *convicts* us. This is what we feel when we know we've done something wrong and we need to make it right. It's a call to confession.

By contrast, when we sin, the devil begins to work from outside us (because he is not within us), and he *condemns* us. He whispers shame in our ears (remember, outside in). The problem is, all too often we don't know how to differentiate between our own voices and thoughts, God's voice, and the devil's. So we listen to the voice that shames us, and we believe the lie that we aren't good enough, we never will be, that we *are* the sin. We're damaged, beyond repair.

But this is a lie, and believing it keeps us stuck in shame.

1. How is the devil described in John 8:44?
2. When people are trained to recognize counterfeit money, they do not spend their time studying the counterfeit. Instead, they make such a thorough study of the real thing that when they see something counterfeit, it immediately stands out as a fake. In that same way, the best strategy to help us recognize the devil's lies is not to focus on the way he's been messing with our minds for centuries. Instead, we should be saturating our minds with the truth of Scripture. What will be the result if we do this? See John 8:31–32.
3. How is Scripture described in Hebrews 4:12?
4. There is a battle that rages every day within your mind. The devil wants you to believe his lies, and God wants you to embrace His truth. How is this battle described in 2 Corinthians 10:3–5? What are we to do with every thought?

We get stuck in shame when we believe the devil's lies about who we are and who God is. This is why it is absolutely essential that we know Scripture. We need to go beyond just hearing it at Sunday Mass, to saturating ourselves with it *every day*. This is the best way for us to be able to discern whose voice we are hearing (the Holy Spirit convicting or the devil condemning). What we need to do is compare what we are hearing or thinking to what has been revealed to us in Scripture. What we read in Scripture is truth. If what we are hearing does not gel with what we have read in Scripture, then we know that what we are hearing is a lie. We hold the lie up to the

truth, throw it away, and embrace what God says. That's taking every thought captive to Christ.

Quiet your heart and enjoy His presence. . . . Allow Him to renew your mind.

“Do not be conformed to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and pleasing and perfect.” (Romans 12:2)

Throw the garbage out and invite truth in to stay. Ask God to renew your mind—to replace your faulty way of seeing Him, yourself, and those around you with His truth. In what area of life are your thoughts condemning, negative, shame filled? Bring those thoughts into the light. Hold them up to the truth of God's Word. Throw out the thoughts that are not from God. Ask Him to replace them with His words of truth.

Day Three

WHERE SHOULD OUR SENSE OF WORTH COME FROM?

Vulnerability expert Dr. Brené Brown has done extensive research into shame. After thousands of interviews, she discovered a common denominator among people who are able to separate themselves from shame and live with authenticity and vulnerability. In each case, they have a deep sense of worth. They believe that they are worthy of being loved and of belonging. This gives them the courage to be seen for who they really are.

Our sense of worth is under constant attack. This is one of the key battlegrounds in our minds. We hear the following lies over and over again:

Your worth is measured by what you do.

Your worth is measured by whether or not you have a loving husband.

Your worth is measured by the success of your children.

Your worth is measured by how much money you have.

Your worth is measured by what others think of you.

Lies are whispered into our minds, and it's our job to counter those lies with the truth of God's Word.

1. How can the truth in 2 Corinthians 12:9 help a woman who is struggling to believe that she is worth everything to God, even when she isn't accomplishing what she feels she should?
2. How can the truth contained in Romans 5:8 and Ephesians 2:4–9 help a woman to believe that she is worth everything to God, even when she is so aware of how far she falls short of His standard of holiness?
3. How can the truth contained in 1 Samuel 16:7 help a woman to believe that she is worth everything to God, even when she feels overweight and unattractive?
4. How can the truth contained in Psalm 139:1–16 help a woman to believe that she is worth everything to God, even if her own parents didn't love her or if people in her life today aren't caring for her as they should?

Quiet your heart and enjoy His presence. . . . Your life is hidden with Christ in God.

The truth is, our worth is not based on who we are. It is based on who God is. It is based on the one we belong to. We belong to God. We are His beloved daughters. The more we are able to focus on God and His worth, the more we can rest in His all-sufficiency. He is everything we need. We don't need to worry about anything being taken from us. We can lose our health, our money, our beauty, our achievements, our reputations, our relationships, but none of this will touch our worth. Your

worth is not measured by any of those things. It has been measured in one place—the cross. At the cross, Jesus measured your worth and declared you worth everything. He held nothing back. He gave His life so that you could live in freedom. And if the Son has set you free, you are free indeed (John 8:36)! Saturate yourself in this truth. Talk to the Lord about how worthy He is. Thank Him for counting you worthy of His love.

Day Four

BEING AUTHENTIC WITH YOURSELF

Before we can explore being authentic in relationships, we need to check how authentic we are with ourselves. How often do we stuff our feelings in order to avoid conflict or to behave the way we believe a good Christian should? We can ignore our feelings to a point that we can't even recognize what's going on inside us. Peter Scazzero explores the detrimental effect of this in his book *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*. He writes the following:

To feel is to be human. To minimize or deny what we feel is a distortion of what it means to be image bearers of our personal God. To the degree that we are unable to express our emotions, we remain impaired in our ability to love God, others, and ourselves well. . . . When we deny our pain, losses, and feelings year after year, we become less and less human. We transform slowly into empty shells with smiley faces painted on them.¹

1. How authentic are you with yourself in regard to the ways in which you have been hurt? Which of the following four descriptions do you most identify with? “I stuff my feelings.” “I ignore my feelings.” “I explode.” “I share what I’m feeling in a healthy, balanced way.” If you tend to stuff those feelings or ignore them, why do you think you do this?

¹ Peter Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality* (Nashville, TN: Integrity Publishing, 2006), 26, 70.

2. Do you remember how the snake spoke to Eve in the garden, insinuating that God was holding out on her? He does the same thing today. He tries to convince us that if we draw close to Christ, we're going to have to give up who we are and what brings us joy. What does Psalm 37:4 say about the desires of our hearts?

God didn't create us to be automatons—people without passions, dreams, and desires. In fact, God gives us healthy and wholesome desires because He wants us to experience joy. The devil tells us that following Christ is boring, and that we know best what will make us happy. God wants to explore our desires *with* us, to redeem the ones that He knows will ultimately not satisfy, and to help us achieve the ones that He knows will be good for us. He wants us to be the authentic women He created us to be, in touch with the desires of our hearts.

3. Women are natural nurturers and caregivers. It's easy for us to lose ourselves as we serve others. Do you feel selfish focusing on yourself? Do you know your authentic self well enough to express and embrace what truly brings you joy? If so, describe what fills you with delight and joy.
4. Many of us have lost our ability to dream. Financial constraints, the demands of family, being stretched too thin, aging, and a steady reminder of our limitations get in the way. Take a moment to think about what you truly hope for. Let go of all the reasons why it can't be. List your dreams here.

Women often worry that thinking about what brings them joy, what they dream of, and what they hope for is self-centered behavior. But knowing who you are is simply being authentically *you*. That is healthy. What's unhealthy is making the achievement of these things your primary goal. Living selfishly occurs when you are determined to

achieve these things at a cost to other people. Sometimes we'll have to say no to what we most desire, and although that is difficult, it's a part of surrendering our lives to Christ. But when we don't even know what we hope for, we've lost touch with who we are. And that's not living authentically.

We will not achieve every one of our dreams and hopes. Not every moment in the day will be joy filled. But being aware of these desires in our hearts will help us to be on the lookout for the times when God delights us by bringing these things to pass. It'll help us to develop the virtue of gratitude. And we'll feel more fully alive as a result.

Peter Scazzero says it well:

God plants desires in our hearts so we will nurture and water them. Often these desires and passions are invitations from God, gifts from him. Yet somehow we feel guilty unwrapping those presents. When I ask people, "Tell me about your wishes, hopes, and dreams," they are often speechless. "Why do you ask?" they respond. "Isn't my only wish, hope and dream supposed to be to serve Jesus?" Not exactly. God never asks us to annihilate the self. We are not to become "non-persons" when we become Christians. The very opposite is true. God intends our deeper, truer self, which he created, to blossom freely as we follow him.²

Quiet your heart and enjoy His presence. . . . He understands what you are feeling.

Jesus went before us and set us a wonderful example to follow in terms of living authentically. He was fully human, so He truly understands how hard it is to be us. He felt the same pressures that we do, yet He never lost Himself in His mission, or gave up and conformed to be who people wanted Him to be.

He started with the firm foundation of basing His worth and value on the right things. He didn't base it on people's opinions, His own accomplishments, or His possessions. He surrounded Himself with friends, and shared how He felt with them. When He needed help, He asked for it. He also practiced self-care. He didn't heal every person who was sick. When He needed to pull away to pray, He did. Everything about Him flowed from His union with His heavenly Father. He was authentically Himself, regardless of the pressures or circumstances.

So talk to Him about what you are feeling. He understands. He's listening. There's no need to edit your words or keep your emotions under control. Just let it all out.

² Ibid, 28.

Day Five

BEING AUTHENTIC WITH OTHERS

Once we've done the hard work of being authentic with God and with ourselves, we face the next challenge: being authentic with those around us. Whether or not we can do this will impact the quality of our close relationships, but that's not all that's on the line. Christians are increasingly being perceived as hypocritical, and as a result, many people who desperately need Christ are walking away. You may remember how full our churches were following the tragedy of 9/11. Unfortunately, within a relatively short period of time, most of those people left. The Barna Group researched this and came to the following conclusion: September 11 gave churches an amazing opportunity to be a transforming presence in people's lives. But few people who showed up at church experienced anything that was sufficiently life changing to capture their attention. In essence, people came back to church and rediscovered why they hadn't been coming in the first place.³ Would this have been different if they had seen Christ's followers living radically transformed lives? Might they have stayed if they saw a level of holiness, joy, and peace that had no explanation other than that God must be real and at work in lives today?

As Christ's representatives on earth, we have been asked to live our faith authentically. People don't want to *hear* what we believe (or read it in our status updates); they want to *see* what a difference Christ makes. Authenticity requires personal integrity. Having integrity has been described as doing the right thing, in the right way, for the right reason. Let's stand on the foundation of God's unconditional, personal love for us, and show Him our gratitude by living in this way.

1. What do the following verses have to say about how Christians should live? See Matthew 5:16, Ephesians 4:1–3, and 1 Peter 2:12, 15.
2. What we do matters. But how do we know the right thing to do? Where should we go for guidance? See Psalm 19:9 NAB, 119:105, and CCC 104 and 107.

³ Barna Group, "How America's Faith Has Changed Since 9-11," November 26, 2001, https://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/5-barna-update/63-how-americas-faith-has-changed-since-9-11#.UwHv7_1S4c4.

3. Why we do what we do matters. What do the following verses teach us about the importance of our motives? See Matthew 6:1 and 1 Corinthians 10:31.

4. Does this mean that to be people of integrity we can never fail? No. The truth is, one of the best opportunities to be authentic and show personal integrity comes when we mess up. People can accept that Christians are imperfect. They'd just like us to be honest and humble instead of acting like we're something we're not. Jesus addresses this in Matthew 5:23–24. What does He say we should do before we come and worship Him? Is there a relationship in your life that God is asking you to tend to? Do you owe anyone a humble apology? What do you think would happen if everyone attending church on Sunday made the effort to seek reconciliation with his or her “brother” before showing up to Mass?

Quiet your heart and enjoy His presence. . . . Let Him infuse you with what you need to live authentically.

Dear God,

Help me to live courageously and authentically. Doing the right thing, in the right way, for the right reasons is hard. The truth is, I can cover up a lot of my sin with a well-constructed mask. But there's no freedom in living like that. Help me to remember that although it's painful to admit that I have been wrong, the alternative is to act like I'm someone I'm not. Help me to remember that when I admit I am flawed, my transparency allows others to admit their own struggles. It's the power of the “me too.” Suddenly we don't feel so alone. We're able to grow in empathy. Thank you for becoming a man and sharing in the mess of humanity. Knowing that you understand the obstacles that I face helps me turn to you for strength and guidance.

Conclusion

An Australian nurse, Bronnie Ware, has spent years caring for patients in the final weeks of their lives. She was so struck by her observations that she wrote a book called *The Top Five Regrets of the Dying*. Common themes emerged that remind us of the importance of living authentically.

Here are the top five regrets of the dying, as witnessed by Ware:

1. I wish I'd had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me.
2. I wish I hadn't worked so hard.
3. I wish I'd had the courage to express my feelings.
4. I wish I had stayed in touch with my friends.
5. I wish that I had let myself be happier.⁴

Suppressed feelings had led to bitterness and often physical illness. The busyness of life had crowded out time with friends, and in the end, loneliness resulted. Many people had spent their lifetimes assuming that circumstances determined the course of their lives, not realizing that *choices* are what truly shaped them. Much of life had been spent pretending to be content, when dreams, desires, hopes, and preferences had never been truly owned and embraced.

If we want to live without regrets, it's clear that we need to embrace authenticity. It'll require leaving the comfort zone and dealing with some conflict. It means we don't settle for false peace, and instead do the hard work of reaching for the real thing. Is it easy? No. But the alternative, in the words of author and speaker Christine Caine, is becoming "actors in a drama rather than pilgrims on a journey." Let's not settle for that. Reach out and grab hold of your life—the messy, wonderful, imperfect, and authentic one you were created to live.

⁴ Bronnie Ware, "Top Five Regrets of the Dying," Exposing the Truth, July 27, 2013, <http://www.exposingthetruth.co/top-five-regrets-of-the-dying/#axzz2tEjmC2Sx>.

My Resolution

In what specific way will I apply what I learned in this lesson?

Examples:

1. In order to live authentically before God, I'll go to confession. I won't hold back. I'll let Him into the dark places within me, and I'll ask Him to shine His healing light there.
2. Each morning, as a part of my prayer time, I'll allow myself to feel emotion before God. Then I'll journal any insights I receive.
3. There is something unresolved between me and another person. Instead of ignoring that, I will go to him or her to seek reconciliation. I will admit where I have been wrong, and will ask for forgiveness. I'll let go of the myths that I am always right, that I have to be perfect, or that vulnerability is a sign of weakness. The truth is, it takes courage and strength to be authentic.

My Resolution:

Catechism Clips

CCC 104 In Sacred Scripture, the Church constantly finds her nourishment and her strength, for she welcomes it not as a human word, “but as what it really is, the word of God.” “In the sacred books, the Father who is in heaven comes lovingly to meet his children, and talks with them.”

CCC 107 The inspired books teach the truth. “Since therefore all that the inspired authors or sacred writers affirm should be regarded as affirmed by the Holy Spirit, we must acknowledge that the books of Scripture firmly, faithfully, and without error teach that truth which God, for the sake of our salvation, wished to see confided to the Sacred Scriptures.”