

Most of you have heard of the great magician/illusionist of yesteryear, Harry Houdini (**picture**). I remember seeing a movie about him when I was a kid. Tony Curtis played Houdini and the film showed him successfully escaping from all kinds of traps and jails, including a time when he was able to get out of a trunk. That may not seem like a big deal but Houdini was chained hand and foot inside that trunk which was then lowered to the bottom of the Hudson River at the height of winter, but he did it!

Houdini was so confident in his talents that he claimed he could be locked in any jail cell in the country and would be able to set himself free in short order. Every time he was given this challenge, he accepted and did just as he promised. They would leave him alone in a locked jail cell and in a few short minutes he'd miraculously escape. Except for that one time.

One time it didn't go as Houdini planned. He entered a jail cell, the heavy, metal doors clanged shut behind him. Then, when he was alone Houdini quickly took a special lock pick that he'd designed, a piece of strong but flexible metal he kept hidden inside his belt and he set to work. But he discovered that something was unusual about this particular lock. For thirty minutes he worked and worked, and got nowhere. An hour passed, and still he'd been unable to open the door. By now he was dripping in sweat and panting in exasperation, but he still couldn't pick the lock. He tried all the tricks of his trade but nothing worked.

Finally, after laboring for two exhausting hours, Houdini gave up and in frustration he sat down on the floor. Then, as he leaned back against the door to his cell, it swung open. It had never been locked in the first place. Houdini thought the door was locked and that mind set, was all that it took to keep him from opening the door and walking out of that cell a free man.

In a very real sense you and I are like Harry Houdini that day. As Christians, the Bible tells us that we're free, but often we don't live that way. Instead we live like imprisoned, enslaved people. This morning, on this national holiday weekend when we're remembering those who gave their lives so we could be free, I want us to learn how we can open the "jail cell doors" of our lives so that we can live as truly free people. Please turn to John 8:34-36 (p. 894). Jesus came and died to set us free but too many of us live trapped and imprisoned lives. If you're taking notes...

1. Many times we are imprisoned and we don't even know it. Because of so many who paid the ultimate sacrifice, we rejoice at this time every year because in this country we're blessed with freedom; freedom of assembly, freedom of religion, freedom to bear arms, freedom of the press. Essentially, we're free to do whatever we want in the United States as long as it doesn't infringe on the freedoms of others. Yet, though we're free in the areas I've mentioned, there's another area in which many of us are not free. Many of us are enslaved...

Many of us are enslaved by the opinions of others. Perhaps this doesn't seem like much of a hindrance to you, but it can be very limiting to be a slave to the judgments of others. It's also known as "*approval addiction*." It can take many forms and affects people of all ages.

Here are some symptoms of approval addiction. Maybe you're affected by it and don't even know it. If you find that you're hurt deeply when people express anything less than glowing opinions about your accomplishments, then you may be suffering from approval addiction. Or, if you constantly think that other people devalue you because of your weight, height, lack of hair or lack of education...you could be an approval addict. If you feel that to prove your own worth, you must degrade others or you find you're constantly criticizing everyone. If you find you continually live with the nagging sense that you're not important or special enough. Or, if you get envious of others who get the spotlight more than you do, then, you're probably an approval addict. Or, if you worry that someone might think you're an approval addict, then you probably are one.

Henri Nouwen (**picture**) described those who suffer from this form of bondage: "*Who am I? I am the one who is liked, praised, admired, disliked, hated, or despised. Whether I am a pianist, a businessman, or a minister, what matters is how I am perceived by my world.*" When we're addicted to others' approval, we're at the mercy of their opinions.

Pastors can be people pleasers. Many suffer from this enslaving mind set. One old preacher wrote in his memoirs, "*I was leaving my last church and a woman at the farewell reception was weeping. 'Don't be sad,' I said, 'I'm sure the next pastor will be better than me.' She replied, 'That's what they said last time Reverend, but they keep getting worse.'*"

Too many of us are like Sally Fields at the Academy Awards a few years back when she won her second Oscar and then responded. Well, let's show the clip. (**Clip**). "You like me! You like me!" Many of us think we're only valuable if other people like us.

Other people are our own personal "American Idol" judges to whom we're constantly looking for a thumbs up or thumbs down when it comes to our performance in life. These "life critics" can include our parents, teachers, neighbors, spouses, friends, bosses, co-workers, children and any others we deem significant. Approval addiction causes us to see

our lives through their eyes. When we do this we're enslaved. We can't take a step without wondering what our particular "American Idol" judge might think.

Many of us are enslaved by constantly comparing ourselves with others. Probably, the first example of this is Cain and Abel, and it's why Cain killed Abel. Cain felt out-sacrificed by his brother.

As kids we all did this. Remember those awkward times in school when report cards came out? You could always tell who got good grades. They were the ones showing off their report cards. They felt good about themselves and looked for someone whose report card had less "A's" on it.

When we went to college, we behaved the same way about our academic prowess. How many of us used the phrase, "I hardly studied for this test" as the professor was passing out recently graded exam papers? We want to make sure others know that a potential bad grade on a test is no reflection on our intelligence or ability.

How many of us have talked to someone about a TV program we watched and prefaced our comments with, "I don't watch much TV but the other night I saw this show...." We talk like that because we're afraid others might think all we do is sit around watching TV. All of us reveal our "jail cells" with this kind of behavior. We're imprisoned by the opinions of others when we constantly compare ourselves, whether it's our house, job, vacation plans, children's achievements, or success at work.

This attitude has enough enslaving power to make us feel like a failure even if we accomplish great things. Listen to what one famous American wrote at the end of his life: *"I have done nothing. I have no ability to do anything that will live in the memory of mankind. My life has been spent in vain and idle aspirations, and in ceaseless rejected prayers that the result of my existence should be beneficial to my own species."*

Do you know who wrote those words? John Quincy Adams (**picture**), former President of the United States, Congressman, and Secretary of State. This great man felt like a failure!

Many of us are enslaved and it contaminates our ambitions in life. For example, if I think being busy is important to others, then I make it my goal to be busy. If having money gives me worth, I feel that I must get lots of it. If knowing all the right important people proves my worth, then I have to do this. I have to become a name dropper. Can you relate? Too many of us live inside the "jail cell" that this attitude creates?

Wouldn't it be great if there were some way that we could make our own personal Declaration of Independence, and in so doing free ourselves from this addiction to the approval of others?

Imagine being able to consider the criticism of others as a small thing. Picture what it'd be like to be liberated from a need to impress people. Think how free we'd feel if our sense of self-esteem no longer rested on whether someone noticed how smart, attractive, or successful we are. Imagine being able to actually feel love toward someone who constantly disapproves of us. Lewis Smedes (**picture**) describes this kind of freedom: *"One of the fine arts of gracious living is the art of living freely with our critics. When we have the grace to be free in the presence of those who judge our lives and evaluate our actions, we have Christian freedom."*

2. Three lock picks that can set us free. In John 8, Jesus said that we can experience true freedom. With the time we have left, let me share three things that will help break open the doors to our "jail cells" so we can be as Jesus said, *"free indeed."* Think of them as "lock picks," three things we can do that make it possible for us to be free of the enslavement that comes from worrying too much about the opinions of others.

a. The first lock pick is the practice of secrecy. This is a very simple way of countering the effects of approval addition. It involves doing good for others without anyone knowing about it. It helps us learn to do good without seeking the praise of others. Jesus spoke of it in Matthew 6:1-4 when He said, *"Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven. So when you do give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, Who sees what is done in secret, will reward you."*

Jesus says we miss a blessing when we do things to be seen by others. There's a reward we forfeit when we neglect the practice of secrecy. In fact, He seems to be referring to not just one reward but two.

First, Jesus was saying if we do things such that only God knows, if our motive is to please God and not be seen by others, then some day when we get to Heaven we'll hear God say, *"Well done, thou good and faithful servant!"* Wow! That's quite a reward! The best compliment we get on earth is merely a shadow of the joy that will come from hearing those words uttered by God. Jesus says if we do things just to be seen by others, we forfeit this. Our Heavenly Father won't say these words to us.

But I think Jesus is also saying that there's a second reward we forfeit if we do good deeds just to be seen by our peers. It's a present reward, something we give up in the here and now. Acts of servanthood done to impress others tend to lose

their intrinsic power to help us grow spiritually. For example, if we give money away anonymously, we become less enslaved by it and experience freedom and joy. Money is no longer our master when we give secretly to help others. Doing this helps us to discover that God will meet our needs. It feels great to help others. We begin to experience the abundant life Jesus promised with this practice.

But if we choose to impress people by making sure they know of our generosity, then the nature of our action changes. We settle for the narcotic of the approval of others. Instead of becoming a little more free, we become a little more enslaved. Acts done to impress others cease to have value as training for life in the kingdom. One way we can free ourselves and at the same time experience the abundant life is to do good things for others secretly, believing it's enough to know that God sees...and it works.

The happiest Christians I've known live for an audience of One. They don't work to gain the approval of others. Instead they yearn for the approval of their Heavenly Father. They agree with the Apostle Paul who wrote to the Corinthians and said, *"It is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one whom the Lord commends."*

When we were little and accomplished things, we wanted our parents to notice. How many times have you taken your little children to the park and when they climbed to the top of the monkey bars or when they first got the hang of a two-wheeler they said, "Look at me Mom! Look at me!" They did that because they wanted their achievement to be noticed. There's nothing wrong with that. It's normal for children to do this.

But when adults live for the praise of others something is wrong. Their maturity is stunted. They're still acting like children. If you fall into that category, one way you can grow up and free yourself of this immature attitude is by doing good deeds in a way that no one but God will ever notice. Just try it. Every once in a while do something good and make sure no one finds out about it. Maybe choose someone in your life and immerse that person in prayer but don't tell anyone. Or, make a lavish donation to a missionary or send a sacrificial gift to a person in need and keep it anonymous. Live so deeply with a portion of Scripture, it becomes etched on your heart and don't tell anyone you've studied and memorized it. Maybe mow your neighbor's lawn while they're on vacation. Wear a disguise so your other neighbors won't recognize you.

Tony Campolo (**picture**) shared that whenever he crosses a toll bridge in his home town of Philadelphia, he always pays not only his car but for the car behind him, telling the toll clerk, "This is for my friend behind me." Then he'd look in his mirror and enjoy the facial expression of the stranger in the car who's wondering, "Who did this thoughtful thing for me?"

Giving in secrecy helps us to learn that it's truly better to give than to receive. It's much more fun! One way to open the "cell door" of your life is by thinking of yourself as "The Lone Ranger" secretly doing good deeds in Jesus' name after which people are constantly saying, "Who was that masked man who did that wonderful thing for me?"

Do good things, do great things but do them in secret so that only God knows. When you do, I believe you'll hear the "lock" click and the door to your cell starting to open. A second thing that will break the chain and help free you from the opinions of others is to....

b. The second lock pick is not letting others opinions matter to you. Other people's opinions can enslave us if we let them. Psychiatrist David Burns (**picture**) points out that it's not the compliments that we get from other people that make us feel better about ourselves. Rather it's our belief that there's validity to their compliments. He writes, "Suppose you were to visit the psych ward of a hospital and a female mental patient approached you with this greeting, 'You are wonderful. I had a vision from God. He told me the 13th person to walk through the door would be the special messenger. You are the 13th, so I know you're the chosen one, the bringer of peace to the world; let me kiss your shoe.'" Now, of course if this happened to you in a psych ward, your sense of self-esteem would probably not rise because you would not assess her opinion as being valid.

This should help us see that we're not the passive victims of other people's opinions. Their opinions are powerless until we validate them. No one's approval can affect us unless we give it credibility. The same holds true for disapproval.

Paul writes, *"Am I now seeking human approval or God's approval? Am I trying to please people? If I were still pleasing people, I would not be a servant of Christ"* (Gal. 6:10). Mature, genuinely free, Christians don't live to please people but live to please God. They live for an audience of One. They don't care what others think, unless they know God would care what they think.

c. The third lock pick is believing that the only opinion that matters is God's. Jesus said, *"Do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more. But fear Him Who, after the killing of the body, has power to throw you into hell."* Jesus was saying that the only disapproval that we should fear is God's. Paul understood this. In 1 Corinthians 4:3-4 he said, *"I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord Who judges me."*

Paul didn't say the Corinthians' criticism didn't bother him. It mattered what they thought but it didn't matter too much. He *"cared very little"* so little that their opinions were not able to enslave him. Paul's self-worth rested on his

acceptance by a higher court. He knew that *“it was the Lord”* who judged his life. Doesn’t it make sense to base our self-worth on God’s judgement? After all, He made us and is best-qualified to be our Judge. Ephesians 2:10, *“We are His workmanship.”* The Greek literally says that God has uniquely designed each one of us. No two of us is alike. It’s silly to compare ourselves to others.

You don’t have to travel around the world to discover that God loves variety. He made all shapes, sizes, colors, intensities of everything. Did you know that God made over 300,000 species of beetles? I don’t know about you but wouldn’t you call that creative overkill? Couldn’t the world have been happy with just 50,000 species? Why did God create six times that many?

Did you know that in one cubic foot of snow there are 18 million snowflakes and no two of them are alike? Now, nobody else is going to appreciate this but God. We can’t even see the beauty of all those differently sculpted snowflakes without a microscope. Only God can do that, so He must love variety in snowflakes and beetles, and in people too.

Last week Jane and I were in D.C. Jane and I love to people watch and we saw a myriad of different types of people. We saw tons of Middle Schoolers touring D.C. We saw homeless. We saw veterans at the World War II Memorial. We saw men and women dressed very professionally. We saw people with tattoos. I saw a man with dreadlocks to his waist. We saw Mennonites where the ladies had little buns on their heads. People are unique. They come in all sizes, shapes and colors! They’re unique mentally and emotionally, too. In fact, their interchanges can be very entertaining.

Did you know that researchers have discovered that there are at least 18,000 different personality traits? The possible combinations of these various traits are limitless. The point is that you are unique. There’s not another person in the world like you. There has never been and never will be. God did not create carbon copies. He only creates originals.

Why would God go to all that trouble? Wouldn’t it have been a lot easier to make only one kind of man and only one kind of woman? But He didn’t do that. He made every human unique because He wants you to know how special you are, how precious you are, you’re a one of a kind. Not only did God create you uniquely, He also custom-designed you for a specific purpose, a purpose that brings our lives freedom and fulfilment.

Ephesians 2:10, *“For we are God’s workmanship-His masterpiece-created in Christ Jesus to do [specific] good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”* Have you ever seen a child frustrated with a jigsaw puzzle? If they become frustrated enough, if they can’t get a piece to fit – what will they do? They’ll bend it and force it to make it fit. You and I do that. We’ll try to find our place according to the world’s standards rather than God’s. We bend and break and force ourselves...and it hurts.

But when we devote our lives to God’s purpose, we find fulfillment and freedom. You’re not an accident and you’re not here by accident. You’re not just taking up space. God made you for a reason. He had a plan in your genetic codes. You are you because God wanted you to be you. It’s pointless to compare ourselves to others. God created each of us unique.

Your value is not only seen in the unique way God created you, it’s seen even more in the fact that He claimed you as His own. 1 Corinthians 6:19, *“You are not your own; you were bought with a price.”* We are far from worthless! God paid a staggering price to make it possible for our sin debt to be paid so He could get us back.

If you and I can ever grasp the fact that we’re worth so much to God that He was willing to pay the ultimate price, the death of His only Son on the cross, in order to claim us as His own, then we’ll never again be enslaved by thinking of ourselves as worthless or unlovable. John 3:16 basically says, *“God valued every single human being so highly that He gave His One and only Son to die on the cross so that whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.”* When we know this and believe it, then we’re indeed free from the approval of other people.

Conclusion: In his book, *You Are Special (picture)* by Max Lucado describes a fictional village inhabited by wooden people called Wemmicks. If you’ve read it, then you know Wemmicks are the creation of a wood carver named Eli who lives in a house above their village. All day long the Wemmicks engage in one activity – they give each other stickers. If a Wemmick is pretty or talented, he or she receives yellow star stickers. But if a Wemmick is not pretty or talented, then all day long there are given gray dot stickers.

The hero of the story is a Wemmick named Punchinello. He had no star stickers and was covered with so many gray dot stickers he rarely went outside. When he did he hung around with other Wemmicks who were covered with gray dots. He felt better in comparison to them. One day he met a Wemmick named Lucia who had no stickers at all on her wooden body. When Punchinello asked her how this was possible, she directed him to visit his creator, the woodcarver, Eli. Let me read to you what happens when Punchinello takes Lucia’s advice and goes to Eli’s workshop.

Eli scooped him up into his arms and said, “Looks like you’ve been given some bad marks.” “I didn’t mean to, Eli. I tried really hard” said Punchinello. “Oh, you don’t have to defend yourself to me, child. I don’t care what the other Wemmicks think.” “You don’t?” “No, and you shouldn’t either. Who are they to give stars or dots? They’re Wemmicks just like you. What they think doesn’t matter, Punchinello. All that matters is what I think. And I think you are pretty special.”

Punchinello laughed, “Me, special? Why, I can’t walk fast. I can’t jump. My paint is peeling. Why do I matter to you?” Eli looked at Punchinello, put his hands on those small wooden shoulders, and spoke very slowly. “Because you’re mine. That’s why you matter to me.”

Punchinello had never had anyone look at him like this, much less his maker. He didn’t know what to say. “Every day I’ve been hoping you’d come,” Eli explained. “I came because I met someone who had no marks,” said Punchinello. “I know. She told me about you.” “Why don’t the stickers stay on her?”

The maker spoke softly. “Because she has decided that what I think is more important than what they think. You see, the stickers only stick if you let them. The stickers only stick if they matter to you. The more you trust my love, the less you care about their stickers.”

Eli lifted Punchinello off the bench and sat him on the ground and as he did, he said, “You are special because I made you. And I don’t make mistakes.” As Punchinello walked home he thought, “I think he really means it.” And when he did, a dot fell to the ground.

My friend, God says you are special! All of us are precious in His sight. There’s great freeing power in that knowledge. When we know how priceless we are to God, stickers don’t stick...the cell doors in our lives swing open.

Do you feel imprisoned this morning? Have you come to see that you are enslaved by approval addiction? Would you like to free yourself of it? You can, by practicing the art of secrecy, doing good that only God sees and by remembering that other people’s opinions can enslave us only if we let them and by believing that the only opinion that matters is that of our Heavenly Father Who uniquely made each of us and Who valued us so highly that He sent His Son to die for us.

You are so special that Jesus left heaven, took on a human body, let evil men kill Him and nail Him to a cross to pay for your sins and my sins. He wants us to be free! My friend, run to the cross. Leave your bondage and come into the freedom and light of God’s love.

And if you’re here and you’re a Christian but you’ve been living a life of addiction to the approval of others, then today I urge you to commit to live your life playing for an audience of One.