Last week, we learned how a family could sometimes be aggravating and feel more like a curse than a gift. Some of the questions we addressed were: How are you treating your familia? How are you nurturing it? We asked these questions because if family is one of the most precious gifts we will ever have, it matters how we treat and care for each other.

Our second message today on this Encanto Series is about how many people suffer due to unhealthy expectations. Think of it as if you always must prove yourself as a worthy person through your intelligence, strength, or any other ability. But hardly anyone acknowledges and appreciates you for who you are regardless of your capacities, much less notices your needs and vulnerabilities. Or worse, if people knew of your weakness and failures, they may highlight them to express their disappointment, “I thought you were stronger…”

The issue is that unrealistic expectations help open the door to resentment and disappointment.

With this, the question for us today is: Are we perpetually trying to live up to other people’s expectations? And if we don’t meet them, do we feel worthless?

To speak to this, we are looking into another character from the movie Encanto: Luisa. Along with Mirabel, Luisa is the granddaughter of Abuela Alma. While Mirabel did not receive a supernatural gift, Luisa received the special gift of superhuman strength.

In the movie, Luisa is a strong and dependable woman. Everyone relies on her to take care of difficult tasks and get the job done. Due to her proven strength, she has developed a reputation as “indestructible,” but underneath, she is stressed out by the constant pressure people put on her. As a result, she believes she is responsible for carrying the weight of her whole family, worrying that she will be of no value to them anymore if she fails.

So, Luisa can’t afford to be vulnerable and take a break because everyone looks after her. She worries that if she shows any weakness, then she will disappoint her family and lose her purpose. Sadly, she can’t see and understand herself apart from her gift since her self-worth is attached to it.

All of this is expressed in her song, “Surface Pressure” (Watch it here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tQwVKr8rCYw>)

“I am pretty sure I am worthless if I can’t be of service.” Did you notice that line? Whether you are an older sibling like Luisa, a spouse, a single parent, or whatever else, if you condition your worth to living up to what people expect from you and making them happy, you hardly will have a purpose and satisfaction in life— and may end up “singing” like Luisa, “I am worthless if I can’t be of service.”

Luisa did not think much of herself beyond her gift and thought others felt the same way. She was always up to the task yet internally near the end of her rope.

Can you relate to this? Do you feel like a failure if you do not live up to people’s expectations? This is hard because from the moment we are born, we are often conditioned to believe that our worth comes from what people think of us and to the extent we can please them. This happens to many people because we condition others to believe that they are loved because of what they do for us, hence, the preoccupation to please us.

As parents, for example, this is one of the hardest things we need to learn to do with our children: to let them know they are loved not because of their accomplishments but because they exist and are ours.

What does this mean? The concern with Luisa, and perhaps with many of us too, is that we have low self-esteem because we don’t know how much we are worth and where our worth comes from. Our self-esteem and worth are contingent upon something outside ourselves and are transactional, “If I do this, then I will be loved,” or “If I suffer for them, then I will be appreciated.” That is why we are insecure about our purpose and second guess our decisions for fear of not conforming to those around us.

Here is the issue: how we think about ourselves determines how we feel about ourselves and live our lives. Luisa believed that if she could not do what people asked her, they would not care about her. In other words, she could not see a life beyond her gift.

So, how should we think about ourselves? Who do we listen to? It might surprise you what I am about to say, but we need to listen to God through Scripture. Here are some scriptures that speak to us about how God thinks of us and our worth as human beings,

Genesis 1:26,

“Then God said, “Let us make humans in our image, according to our likeness.”

Psalm 139:13-14,

“For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.”

Matthew 10:29-31,

“Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.”

Ephesians 2:4-7,

“God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.”

There is a lot we can say about these scriptures (besides God knowing how much hair we have (left) on our head), but the overall message and theme is that we are special in all creation because God made us special. We are not an accident of evolution; instead, we were “knitted together in our mother’s womb,” meaning, intentionally created. We are the only ones God made to look like him (character, virtue, feelings, etc.). And since we are not an accident of galactic chance, we are intentionally the object of God’s affections.

Therefore, every human being is of a sacred word and equal value without any conditions. We are not loved because we did something right, but because we were created out of love and for love. And we are not machines to perform a task, but people made for relationships given the gift to be our own selves.

Thomas Merton explained this when he said, “The beginning of love is to let those we love be perfectly themselves, and not to twist them to fit our own image. Otherwise, we love only the reflection of ourselves we find in them.”

What Merton is saying here explains much of what was happening to Luisa (and us). For example, Luisa was a blessing through her gift, but to expect her always to be strong because she must, was not right. In the same way, there are people in our lives that have expectations of what we ought to be and do, and if we fail, their affections toward us may change. They are only happy to the extent we please them. That is what Merton is saying here.

But not with God. God created us with the gift to be “perfectly ourselves” and we don’t have to earn God’s love. Consider that God only gave us two commandments at the beginning of creation: “rule creation and multiply!” (What a loss. We had everything; our only job was to rule the world and have babies.) This means that God’s plan was for each person to thrive in being themselves. That was a good plan because we have a good God.

But now, we don’t even know how to find God, much less ourselves. We are lost; hence, all the lack of self-esteem and worth and the trauma we cause each other because we are consumed by our fears, leading us to treat each other poorly and conditionally.

However, everything changed when Jesus came to open our eyes to see the truth, to show us the way of life, and to save us from our sins. We did nothing to make Jesus come down to us. Instead, the Bible says that “even when we were dead through our trespasses, [God] made us alive together with Christ.”

All this means that the true basis of our self-esteem and worth can’t rely on the affirmation of other people (which is still nice and welcome regardless) but on our right understanding of who God is, what God says about us, and our relationship with him. When we begin to see ourselves and others the way God sees us, we will then begin to understand our own worth regardless of our appearance, wealth, capacities, or anything else because our worth will be rooted in the love of Christ.

Here is our challenge: There will be people, whether our family or society at large, who will try to measure our worth by expectations unfairly pushed upon us. If we give in to that, we will be consumed by fear and anxiety constantly trying to be good enough for others, trying to be worth something, and trying to prove ourselves capable. But we will never do and be enough. So, getting our worth by trying to please people is something we must let go.

Here is the good news and invitation: Only God can give us certainty in who we are and our worth. Only God can truly speak to our hearts and change us from the inside out, giving us the confidence of knowing we are loved unconditionally.

So, let’s trust in God and his love and in being a fearfully and wonderfully made child of God, not because of our abilities or good deeds, but because of God’s grace.