



A DUTCH FRONT

a series on authenticity



**A CENTERPOINT CHURCH
SERIES STUDY GUIDE
APRIL-MAY 2025**

A Dutch Front: A Series on Authenticity

Typically, our study guides have followed the passages of the weekend messages pretty closely.

We have done so intentionally to be an extension of the conversation started on Sunday morning.

For this series, we are going to take a slightly different approach. This content will be a bit more message adjacent, but on topic with where we are going.

Intro

If you aren't from Northwest Iowa - or maybe Pella, IA - when you hear the phrase "Dutch front," you probably think it's an architectural term. A Dutch front is a term regarding a certain style of façade seen on commercial properties that erect something to cover up something else. The Dutch front might make the exterior of the building look "better" or "nicer," but behind the facade, the structure may be crumbling.

If you ARE from Northwest Iowa or Pella, you understand that there is more to it. A Dutch front is not just a cover-up for a building; it's an ethos that communicates to a watching world that everything is perfect – at least from the outside. Perfect cars. Perfect churches. Perfect houses. Perfect jobs. Perfect lawns. Perfect lives. Perfect towns.

Everything, it seems, is perfect.

If we are willing to have an honest moment, we could admit that perfect isn't possible. In pursuit of the appearance of perfect, we create our own facades, Dutch Fronts, to maintain the false ideal. This leads to a shame-based culture. It looks something like this:

8 Covert rules of a shame-based culture:

1. Image is everything.
2. Don't make a mistake. Be perfect, you have to be right.
3. When bad things happen...blame - self & others.
4. Control everyone & everything - overtly &/or covertly.
5. Don't feel bad (no negative feelings).
6. Don't talk about bad things (no problems).

7. Don't think for yourself.
8. Don't trust people.

At its core, a shame-based culture teaches people to believe this lie: "I am bad." Shame-based cultures force people to behave in ways that aren't true to who they are – they force us to be inauthentic.

We've narrowed the list of behaviors down to eight - eight ways beneath the surface that create the facade – our Dutch Fronts. The Eight Covert Rules of a Shame-based Culture is a construct many of us have experienced but may never have been able to put into words. Perhaps now that we see it in black and white, it makes us pretty uncomfortable. We Pastors want to say, that's okay.

It's okay for us to lean into things that make us uncomfortable. We can't go around, over, or under the things that make us uncomfortable. The way of transformation is to go through them, which is what this study guide provides.

Each week, we will tackle two of these unspoken rules that are at work around us

and within us. We will look to the Bible to see if our way is in alignment with Jesus' way. How you engage with this material will make a difference in whether you enjoy it or not. Make the commitment now to lean in and do some work in areas that may be challenging for you.

Week 1

8 Covert rules of a shame-based culture:

- 1. Image is everything.**
- 2. Don't make a mistake. Be perfect, you must be right.**
3. When bad things happen...blame - self & others.
4. Control everyone & everything - overtly &/or covertly.
5. Don't feel bad (no negative feelings.)
6. Don't talk about bad things (no problems).
7. Don't think for yourself.
8. Don't trust people.

The first unspoken rule of shame-based family systems is this: "image is everything." What's real and what's true doesn't matter; the key is maintaining the agreed-upon image.

Unfortunately, this idea didn't originate with our generation.

Since nearly the beginning, humans have been trying to cover up the reality of their sin. In the garden after they sinned, Adam and Eve tried to hide from God.

Jesus talked about people who pretended to be perfect during his day in Matthew 23:25-26 - 25. "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside, they are full of greed and self-indulgence. 26. Blind Pharisee! First, clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside will also be clean."

Jesus makes it pretty clear in this passage that transformation happens from the inside out. Of course, when Jesus is talking about the cup and the dish, he is referring to the Pharisees' lives. Instead of being focused on what we appear to be from the outside, maybe we should be more concerned about who we actually are on the inside.

A secret life full of hate, gossip, lies, and fear stinks. It makes us dead inside. Jesus wants to

transform our lives - and the process starts on the inside. Surrendering our lives to Jesus, we receive a new heart, and the Holy Spirit resides in us, empowering us to behave in new ways.

The only way to correct an attitude fixated on our image is to clean the inside of the cup and dish.

The battle over image is one we can never win on our own. If "Image is everything," whose input are we responding to? Who are we trying to keep up with? Who sets the standard for what we are striving for? The worldly target, if you will, is always moving. The "right" image is always shifting. And it's exhausting.

Another impossible proposition is perfection. Jesus was perfect. We are not. The belief that we cannot make a mistake is debilitating. We've all seen the movies – you know, the one where the young, dumb child does something horrible – only to have parents swoop in with their power and influence to cover up whatever their child did to protect the (false) image of a perfect family.

That's the most severe version of the eraser parent we can think of, but smaller versions exist when parents are trying to get more time for their child to turn in a project they didn't turn in and summarily failed. Some parents do their kids' homework for them, so there won't be mistakes. Parents don't allow kids to make any decisions because they may make the wrong one and make the family look bad.

You get the picture.

The lie - "We are perfect-we don't make mistakes" - is proliferated by unimaginable amounts of effort to keep up the facade. To cover up the messes that we make. When we try to live perfectly, things get ugly quickly. What if it's true that we all make mistakes? What if it's true that all of us fall short of the glory of God?

God knows that we have – and that we will – make mistakes. We're exhausted because we keep trying to manage things on our own – in our own power. All our efforts leave us exhausted, frustrated, and overwhelmed with life.

It doesn't have to be this way.

Romans 3:22-24 says – 22. “This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, 23. for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24. and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.”

God has a plan in place, and that plan has been in place ever since sin entered the world. That plan is Jesus! Jesus says, “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life.”

Elsewhere, the Scriptures say:

Psalm 103:12 - “as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.”

What if it's true that we don't have to cover up our mistakes because literally everyone is in the same boat? All of us are overwhelmed by sin, and left to our own devices, destined for eternity outside the presence of God?

You were not created to live a life that appears to be in relationship with God. You were created to actually live in relationship with God, imperfections and all. Here is the good news:

Romans 10:9-10 – 9. If you declare with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your

heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. 10. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved."

If Jesus is Lord, our curated image – that one where we are acting apart from Him - doesn't matter. That means we can let go of it. We can lay down that curated image and let it go. We can be the person God intended us to be. Just like in all of life, saying "yes" to one thing means saying "no" to another. In this way, saying yes to Jesus means saying no to controlling and manipulating our image apart from Him.

If "Image is everything" ... "Don't make a mistake" ... "Be perfect" ... "You must be right" ... hits close to home, you're not alone. It's part of the human condition. It is the operating system that has been running in the background for many of us as long as we can remember.

Maybe you have experienced the results - the rotten fruit - of this shame-based system, but never understood where it came from or why it was present? That may have been your

story - that may be your story - but it doesn't have to continue to be.

Jesus offers us another way...a better way...the only way.

When Jesus becomes everything, everything starts to fall into place. Maybe it is time for us to bring our sins to church and to bring Jesus home. If you are ready for another way...the Jesus way...it starts by turning to Jesus in surrender.

When tempted to maintain your image, or to "be perfect," take those thoughts to Jesus instead.

DISCUSS:

1. How have you seen the rule "Image is everything" in your life, your family, the church, the community?
2. If "Image is everything," whose input are you responding to? Who are you trying to keep up with? Who sets the standard for what you are striving for? Is this a real or perceived pressure?
3. If you live as if "Image is everything", where did you first, or primarily, feel the pressure to believe that it was true?

4. What do you believe about Jesus' love for you? Can you believe in the genuine love Jesus has for you and live as if "Image is everything"? Does that cause a conflict in you?
5. What would be different for you tomorrow...if image wasn't everything?
6. If I asked you, is it okay to make a mistake? What would you say?
7. What if it's true that we don't have to cover up our mistakes because literally everyone is in the same boat? Does that change your angst about making a mistake?
8. What is the impact of the appearance of a mistake-free, sin-free life on your witness? Your family?
9. The door to the prison of perfectionism has never been locked. What keeps you there? What step can you take today to be free?

Week 2

8 Covert rules of a shame-based culture:

1. Image is everything.
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3. When bad things happen...blame - self & others.

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7. Don't think for yourself.
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The key to a good con is to throw a fit if anything bad happens. Throwing a fit will create anxious responses in others, and when they are stirred, they will do whatever it takes to get the conflict to stop. This works really great if it's happening in a public place.

Have you ever been in a grocery store where a kid is melting down? Sure, you have! We've all seen the child (or have been said child) who was losing their mind, lying on the floor - writhing, screaming, throwing things - just to get the cereal or juice they want? Of course, some of us have even been in the store when our own child threw a temper tantrum. Some counselors teach their clients to mirror their children when this happens. The thinking is that by doing so, the child will recognize how ridiculous it looks to act the way they are, and they will stop.

While that's a nice tool to have when we are stirred up, most of us just do the first thing we think of to get it to stop. Often that means giving in to what is being asked of us. It's another covert way of functioning in a shame-based culture.

Do you remember the story of Anna Delvey? That's not her real name - it's the name she used in her con to pretend to be a New York City socialite around ten years ago. She eventually was found out, but she kept up the charade for five years before being caught. In the Netflix story based on her life, there is at least one scene where people would question the legitimacy of something she was proposing. To regain control of the situation, she would start to raise her voice and lose her mind quite publicly while threatening to ruin the person, business, or establishment.

When anything goes wrong, blame. Everyone – but yourself.

To blame is to assign responsibility for a fault or wrong. In the context of a shame-based family system, it is used to explain why anything bad happens. In a system like this,

nothing bad can happen. But when something is not as it should be, someone – other than me or mine – has to be responsible. Blame is often levied to explain it away, because bad things don't happen to "us" - because we don't do bad things. Blame can keep us from owning the results we are getting.

When the image you hope to portray is perfection, when the rule is that you can't make mistakes and nothing bad can happen, your life is going to get a little tense – even unmanageable. Everyone around us can be found walking on eggshells, which is by design.

This works well as long as no one in the family breaks rank - which doesn't happen because everyone knows the unwritten rules. They know the wrath that can follow if you break them. The unwritten rules are designed to keep everyone in line – to maintain the Dutch Front – even if everything behind the front is crumbling.

In the short term, blame diverts attention away from us and keeps people from seeing behind the facade.

We can expend a lot of energy getting others to join us in blaming whoever we have chosen to blame.

“That teacher is the worst, look what they did to my kid.” “The city is terrible, look how they messed up my yard.”

“The church is the worst, look how they aren’t playing the songs we like.” Then we go and rally support for the cause.

It’s as easy today as it was back in the olden days when the mobs were pushing people outside of the city with rocks in their hands, ready to throw the first stone. Maybe even easier, we can use social media to recruit folks to our blame brigade.

Sometimes we don’t even realize we are blaming and controlling. We’ve behaved like this for so long that it becomes an autopilot response – the way we keep up the Dutch Front.

It’s almost as if we have forgotten that Jesus said, “In this world you will have trouble, but take heart, I have overcome the world.”

While this way of being is overt within the family, it's the covert control – manipulation – which can be the most damaging.

Rather than telling people to their face what they are going to do, covert control means doing it behind the scenes. To maintain the Dutch Front, people manipulate the options other people have, and they exert control over third parties to control potential outcomes.

Controlling circumstances and environments gives the illusion of having some choice, but the options for outcomes are limited to those that are acceptable to the controller.

In the 2021 movie “Free Guy,” the video game characters didn’t know they were in a video game, and they had no role in deciding what would happen to them. Covert control can work like that in real life.

Those who are being controlled and manipulated don’t realize it’s happening. The way through all of this isn’t easy, but we can find a clear path in the Scripture.

Romans 12:1-2

1. “Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as

a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. 2. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.”

The move away from being a controller is surrendering our lives to Christ. Change comes by way of being transformed by Jesus. The key to stopping controlling is giving up control – surrendering to Jesus. It may not be easy, but it is necessary. It's the only way out of our life of sin.

Matthew 12:33-37

33 “Make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognized by its fruit. 34. You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of. 35. A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him. 36. But I tell you that everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken. 37. For by your words you

will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned.”

Jesus was talking with the Pharisees, the protectors of the Law, and he wasn't happy about what they were doing. What Jesus makes clear is that they aren't going to be able to blame others for the state of their hearts. For generations, they had been able to blame the condition of Israel on the unrepentant members of the people. But Jesus wants them to understand they are accountable for how they are treating the people and for how they receive the Messiah. We are accountable for how we treat those around us. We are accountable for our response to the grace and forgiveness of Jesus.

Jesus takes on the sin of all mankind on the cross. He takes the blame for all of our shortcomings.

How do we want to respond?

DISCUSS:

1. Read the Romans passage aloud. What's the most challenging part of the passage for you? What part gives you the most hope?

2. Have you ever experienced either a culture of blame or control in your family system? How has that impacted you?
3. What belief about who God is do you need to strengthen so that surrendering to Him becomes easier?
4. Read the Matthew passage aloud. Is it easier for you to hold other people accountable or to be held accountable?

Week 3

8 Covert rules of a shame-based culture:

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"Don't cry. Rub a little dirt on it, get up, and dust yourself off. Get back on the horse."

“Don’t be mad, we need to forgive them. Be the better person.”

“Don’t be disappointed, that’s God’s will.”
Have you ever heard of the term “stoicism” before?

The Stoics believed that the practice of virtue is enough to achieve a well-lived life. They identified the path to achieving it with a life spent practicing the four cardinal virtues in everyday life — prudence, fortitude, temperance, and justice.

Prudence is defined as cautiously behaving so you don’t make any mistakes. Fortitude is courage or gritting one’s teeth in the face of pain or adversity.

Temperance is exercising self-control and moderation. Justice is the pursuit of fairness. Cautious to avoid mistakes, unflinching in the face of pain and adversity, full of self-control and moderation, and pursuing fairness; do you know anyone who fits this description? Are there times when this applies to you? Stoicism isn’t what God is looking for from us. God created us to have emotions - but stoicism considers most emotions to be destructive.

The natural response when hearing this is to swing the pendulum all the way to the other side and think, “Well, if it isn’t stoicism, maybe emotionalism is what I should be pursuing.” Emotionalism is the tendency to be excessively emotional, to show emotions quickly and easily, or to place undue focus on emotions.

The reality is, this isn’t it either. God gave us emotions, but that isn’t all we are to function out of. Emotions aren’t designed to control us, but they are to be a part of our lives. It’s really a balancing act.

We can find ourselves in the position of thinking it’s one way or another – stoicism or emotionalism. We can believe that our Dutch Front must be one or the other. A shame-based culture can lead us to believe these are our only options.

Thankfully, Jesus offers a third way. This third way is where we follow the example of Jesus. And in Jesus’ own words, the way of Jesus is narrow and hard to find. Jesus was able to model self-control in the face of challenging circumstances.

In those circumstances, he showed appropriate emotions. Jesus wept. Jesus had righteous anger. He wasn't afraid to show his emotions.

In a life surrendered to Jesus, we get access to the Fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

This is a life accessing all the best parts of the human experience while not failing to acknowledge the difficulties we are certain to encounter.

We aren't asked to live a life where we can't feel bad or have any problems. That life is not real or realistic. Try as we might, we can't avoid suffering. We can't avoid problems. Problems exist because sin exists. From the beginning, God has shown us his response to this reality.

Genesis 3:21

"The Lord God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them."

God cared for Adam and Eve after they sinned. God doesn't expect us to be perfect.

In fact, He knows we won't be. And He is still with us.

Isaiah 43:1b-2

1b. "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine. 2. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you.

When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. God doesn't tell us there will be no problems, He just promises He will be with us in them. He doesn't remove the problems from us. God is present with us in them David had to face up to a giant. Moses had to stand before Pharaoh. Joshua had to lead the people in a battle against the Canaanites. Nehemiah had to rebuild the wall and the city. God didn't remove the trouble. God loved them and led them through the trouble.

He does the same thing for us. God doesn't usually remove obstacles, especially the obstacles we have created ourselves, but he is faithful to work with us through the challenges.

Before Jesus was arrested and crucified, he sat down with the disciples to explain once again who he is and what is to come. Jesus says:

John 16:33

33. "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."

Jesus knows what it is to experience bad things, and he modeled it by openly talking about them. Jesus knew that we would struggle, that we would experience bad things too, and he invites us to bring our struggles into His light with confidence and hope.

God invites us to come to him with our problems, to be open with him, and God loves us through them. We know that Jesus has overcome the world and all its problems, and through him, we too will overcome.

DISCUSS:

1. When someone asks you, "How are you?", do you feel free to genuinely express how you feel? Why or why not? Do you purposely avoid an emotional response...good or bad?

2. What would be necessary for you to feel free to express your emotions, especially emotions that might make you or others feel bad? Can you think of a time when you did express those emotions? What was the reaction of those around you? How did you feel when you did this?
3. What is the impact on you and others when some feelings or subjects are “off-limits?” How does this affect your relationships with others?
4. What opportunities are missed when we keep our feelings to ourselves?

Week 4

8 Covert rules of a shame-based culture:

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5. Don't feel bad (no negative feelings).
6. Don't talk about bad things (no problems).

7. Don't think for yourself.

8. Don't trust people.

Has anyone ever said to you, "How can you be so stupid?" Maybe when you were young? Have you ever done anything, then, after looking back at it, you can admit that wasn't the best idea? Or maybe even that was pretty dumb.

Usually, poor choices are made because we aren't using all of our thinking brain. It's also possible that the part of our brain that governs logic isn't fully developed, so we aren't even capable of critical thought. So, by default, knowing no better, we do stupid stuff.

"You should know better..." or its slightly meaner cousin – "How can you be so stupid?" – can be more damaging than we know. These statements are often followed by "Why didn't you listen to what I told you? Why didn't you do what I said?"

The shaming language can result in the belief that "I am bad." And that feeling – I am bad – leads us to scramble for self-protection, and we create facades...we put on a Dutch Front. None of us wants to be stupid. Because we don't want to be thought of in this way, we tend to develop a vow as a way of protecting

ourselves that says something like, “I’m always going to do what my parents say...” And that sounds like a great plan when we are seven, when our brains are not yet fully developed and not up to speed on logical thought. Here’s the thing about vows. We make them – unconsciously – as a way to experience the feeling of safety. It was useful when we were seven, but “I’m always going to do what my parents say” is probably not useful when you are 37, 57, or 97. It can’t be useful, because your parents probably won’t be there when you’re 97.

Creating vows to protect ourselves is part of the human condition. We make them to protect ourselves – to hide, to numb, to feel more secure. They may have been useful in childhood, but in adulthood, we need to access our best thinking. The world needs us to be able to think for ourselves.

If we refuse to think for ourselves, we miss out on the fullness of the calling God has given to us. We end up trying to be a continuation of our parents. But we are different, and that’s on purpose.

Shame is a powerful weapon that can often be wielded by those who love us most in hopes of getting the results that they want. When we are protecting a constructed reality instead of resting in the Truth, it takes a lot of effort to maintain the story that is being told. The reality is that when we think for ourselves, we sometimes make mistakes. When we make mistakes, we learn things on our own. As we have already discovered, some family systems may not have room for mistakes. Mistakes are hard to recover from when you are building and maintaining a house of cards.

Some of us are in these situations through no fault of our own. We may not even realize it's true for us. For others of us, it's not our story now, but we can see how it could be true or has been true.

The answer - the way out, now and always - will be a genuine faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. Hope is not lost.

When the ways we have always protected ourselves are still at play, our Dutch Front may not allow us to trust other people. We may have believed we can't trust authority. We can't trust people who hurt us. We may

believe nobody is safe for one reason or another.

These feelings may be legitimate.

The interesting thing is that trust is something we do all the time. The concept of not trusting anyone isn't realistic because if that were the case, we would never leave the house.

In our daily lives, we trust strangers all the time.

We trust strangers when we drive. We trust them to follow the rules of the road, to maintain control of their vehicle, and to be reasonable in response to your actions and decisions. Trust is innate in driving.

Walking down the street, buying gas, shopping for groceries, buying coffee, or whatever your normal daily habits are - we trust strangers throughout the process. If you are reading this, you have survived thus far with the trust you've given.

Given is the correct word here, as trust isn't necessarily earned; trust is offered. Being

taught or conditioned not to trust people can have a huge impact on our faith.

Proverbs 3:5-7

5. Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding;

6. In all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.

7. Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord and shun evil.

One of the main tenets of Christianity is submission. Submission requires trust. The way forward for our lives isn't back-to-back with our allies fighting off all comers. It's shoulder to shoulder - on our knees - submitted to the Lord; receiving forgiveness and grace.

Submitting leads to freedom. Freedom from the oppression of our own way.

God will give us the desire of our hearts, but the problem is that before we are transformed by the saving grace of Jesus, our desires are evil. God knows this - but is also a gentleman - who wants us to bring our sinful selves to him and confess our need for a Savior.

There is a much better way than the way we have known – the way of hiding behind a facade that leaves us isolated and alone. The way of Jesus isn't a way of shame and control, but the way of grace and freedom to follow in His steps.

DISCUSS:

1. Has anyone ever said to you, "How can you be so stupid?" Maybe when you were young? How did you react? How did it make you feel?
2. Have you ever done anything, then, after looking back at it, you can admit that wasn't the best idea? Or maybe even that was pretty dumb? How did it make you feel to admit it?
3. Can you think of a time when you believed a lie about yourself? What situation precipitated that lie? Do you still believe that lie about yourself?
4. Can you think of a time when you made a vow to protect yourself? From what were you trying to protect yourself? What is the promise you made to yourself to be safe?
5. What are some reasons that keep you from thinking for yourself? Where does that influence come from? Is it real or perceived influence?

6. If we refuse to think for ourselves, we miss out on the fullness of the calling God has given to us. Why do you think this is true? Can you think of a situation where this might have been true for you?
7. Are there reasons you don't trust others? How has that impacted your relationship with Jesus?
8. What faithful step could you take to strengthen your trust muscle?