

Session #3 – Centering My Identity in Christ – Going Deeper

Premise

When we were born, at the core of our essence was an identity that God dreamed up for us. But life and the world layer lies and false identities on top and we tend to lose sight of who we really were created to be. As we follow Christ, our original identity is renewed.

Key Scripture Passage

Ephesians 2:10 (NIV) For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

Identity in Christ

The Bible is from start to finish about identity. Adam and Eve struggled to determine their identity in Genesis and the members of the seven churches in Revelation struggled as well. The world, the devil and the flesh are constantly warring against the Spirit to control and challenge our identity.

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The Old Testament (OT) saints were known as the sons and daughters of the Most High God. However, their hope was in the coming Messiah. And, although the Messiah had not yet been revealed, their identity was nevertheless wrapped up in the hope of the coming Christ. Of course, Jesus is eternal, along with the Father and the Holy Spirit. So, in that sense the OT saints', along with the New Testament saints' identity was and is in Christ.

The Identity of an Addict

For most of us, we can clearly see that an alcoholic's identity is wrapped up in his addiction. When he experiences emotions in life such as depression, anxiety, boredom, desperation, despondency, unforgiveness, paranoia, fear, guilt, resentment, disappointment or loneliness, the natural thing he turns to is alcohol. In the moment, it feels like the solution or a way to escape or a way to be rescued from his current situation. What he is unable to take hold of in the moment is that whatever we surrender to, wherever we find our identity, eventually becomes our master. And whatever masters us (apart from Christ) demands more and more of us with ever-diminishing returns. What starts out seemingly as a blessing turns out to be a curse.

We might indignantly look at the alcoholic and think: "Poor soul. Too bad for him. I'm glad I'm not like that." However, we are all born into sin because of the Fall in the Garden, and therefore experience the temptation to base our identity on something other than Christ. We fool ourselves if we think differently.

We are all "addicts" in some ways. And while the alcoholic's addiction may be more visible and destructive than our "addictions," anything that causes us to move away from our identity in Christ is destructive from a spiritual and eternal sense.

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The Gospel is Offensive

In Matthew 15, the disciples told Jesus that his teaching had offended the Pharisees (as if Jesus was not aware of that!). The issue that prompted Jesus' teaching was that the Pharisees were upset because the disciples had not washed their hands before they ate.

In verses 8-9, Jesus told the Pharisees that:

"These people [the Pharisees] honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules."

In verses 15-20, it goes on to say:

Peter said, “Explain the parable to us.”

¹⁶ “Are you still so dull?” Jesus asked them. ¹⁷ “Don’t you see that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body? ¹⁸ But the things that come out of a person’s mouth come from the heart, and these defile them. ¹⁹ For out of the heart come evil thoughts – murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. ²⁰ These are what defile a person; but eating with unwashed hands does not defile them.”

The Pharisees’ identity was wrapped up in “merely human rules.” They had traditions which were more important than loving God and loving people. They were saying the right things, but their hearts were not in it. They even “worshiped” God, but it was in vain.

Above all, Jesus is concerned about the heart, which is where evil thoughts come from. And, furthermore, the things that come out of the mouth and the things that we act out are from the heart.

The Pharisees were greatly offended because he was challenging one of their traditions that was at the core of their identity. The Jews had three major symbols of their identity: the Sabbath, circumcision, and their dietary laws. In this passage Jesus was challenging their dietary laws. In other passages, He challenges their understanding of the Sabbath and circumcision. The Pharisees tended to be legalistic religionists. Oftentimes, their identity was wrapped up in following the rules.

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I may look at the Pharisees and say: “I am glad that I am not like them.” However, the truth is that the gospel is offensive to anyone who finds their identity in anyone or anything other than Jesus, which includes all of us, at least from time to time and if we are honest, likely daily.

Am I so “dull” that I cannot see that sin is insidious? It may not be outwardly obvious, as with the alcoholic or the Pharisees, but God judges the heart. There is no one righteous, not even one (Romans 3:10).

In what ways is the gospel offensive to me? How does it challenge the things in which I find my identity? Here is a testimony about identity from Jeff.

It was around 2014 and I really disliked a certain politician. Let’s call this person Lynn (since that could be a man or woman’s name). I reveled in my dislike of Lynn. I enjoyed putting Lynn down with my friends. My political party reveled in making fun of Lynn, demonizing, and dehumanizing this person. My party presented Lynn as an existential threat. And my political party was a significant part of my identity.

One day, I felt the Lord rebuke me because of my attitude. As part of my repentance, I felt like the Lord wanted me to do research on Lynn. As I did the research, I began to see that Lynn had some positive qualities. Many politicians who worked with Lynn from the opposing party had good things to say about this person.

Another thing I felt the Lord asking me to do was to discontinue partaking of the media outlets and media personalities that were demonizing Lynn. As I reflected on that, I began to realize that some media outlets are focused primarily on presenting the other party as an existential threat with absolutely no good people and no good causes. When viewed this way, it feels like any and all means can justify the end. I began to see that life is more nuanced than that. And surprise ... there are good people and good causes in both of the major political parties.

I began to understand that no political party or cause or politician deserved my total allegiance. My allegiance is first and foremost to Jesus and there is room for only one person to sit on the throne of my heart.

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Now, just to be clear, I still don't like Lynn and much of what Lynn stands for. However, I can now acknowledge that Lynn is made in the image of God and has some good qualities. And while I am free to disagree with Lynn's position on various issues, I am not free to dehumanize Lynn.

Can you see how the Lord was at work in Jeff's life? He had let his worldly allegiances get out of sync with his values as a Christian, which in turn threatened to undermine his true identity (and witness) in Christ. This is an example of what transformation looks like. The Holy Spirit convicted him that his attitude was wrong and that his identity was too wrapped up in his political party. He repented and took steps to make things right with God.

Joshua's Identity Was Secure

Despite being born a slave in Egypt, Joshua was able to overcome his humble beginnings and become a successful military commander with a lifelong commitment of obedience to the Lord. His life exemplifies the life of surrender. His identity was rooted in the Lord.

When Joshua first shows up in the Biblical narrative, Moses tells him to: "choose some of our men and go out and fight the Amalekites." (Exodus 17:9) He was likely around 40 at the time, and he: "overcame the Amalekite army with the sword." (Exodus 17:13) This was quite an accomplishment, since the "army" was mostly untrained volunteers, and Joshua, as far as we know, did not have any experience leading men into battle.

When Moses went up the mountain to receive the law and the commandments, he chose Joshua to be his aide and accompany him. Moses evidently had great respect, not only for Joshua's bravery and leadership on the battlefield, but also for his walk with the Lord.

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In preparation to take the Promised Land, Moses chose twelve men, one from each tribe, to spy out the land of Canaan. Joshua was one of the twelve. They came back with a mixed report. Ten of the spies reported back: "We cannot attack those people; they are stronger than we are." (Numbers 13:31) The other two spies, Joshua and Caleb, said that the Israelites should take the land and that the Lord would give them the victory.

The ten spies won over the hearts of the people and caused them to rebel against Moses. The Lord was angry at the response of the people and told them that, since they did not trust Him, none of them, except Caleb and Joshua, would see the Promised Land.

In this situation, Joshua demonstrates his trust in the Lord and in His plans and demonstrates that his identity was secure in the Lord. On the other hand, the identity of the other ten spies was wrapped up in security and fearfulness. The Israelites complained, sometimes bitterly, about wandering in the wilderness. However, they were evidently more willing to deal with the "devil" they knew versus the "devil" they did not know.

When it became time for Joshua to begin taking on leadership of the Israelites, Moses took him, "a man in whom is the spirit of leadership," (Numbers 27:18) and laid hands on him and commissioned him to lead the community of Israel.

After Moses died, Joshua took charge and followed Moses' instructions on taking the Promised Land. The people greatly revered Joshua and he was committed to doing the Lord's will.

After the Israelites crossed the Jordan, Joshua began scoping out Jericho, planning how to conquer the first of many cities. As he was walking, Joshua looked up and saw a man standing in front of him with a drawn sword in his hand. The man was obviously a warrior and, likely, a menacing one at that.

Joshua was totally focused on his mission. He had forty thousand men armed for battle, waiting for the command to take Jericho. He had spent the last forty years preparing for this moment. Moses had commissioned him for just such a time as this. One can only imagine that his testosterone level and that of his armed men were off the charts.

Joshua, being a warrior himself, and on a mission for God, challenged the man: "Are you for us or for our enemies?" (Joshua 5:13) His response to the man standing in his way was that of a confident warrior on a mission with no time to waste. Joshua wanted to deal with it, one way or another, and get on with his mission.

Joshua was not about to give in to fear and cower or retreat or stand down. He had come too far and endured too much to backtrack now. He believed in his mission, had planned it over several decades, trusted in his skill and was confident that the Lord God was with him.

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The man's answer to Joshua's question was: "Neither, but as commander of the army of the Lord I have now come." (Joshua 5:14) In response, Joshua fell facedown to the ground in reverence and asked: "What message does the Lord have for his servant?" (Joshua 5:14) Joshua's response was nothing short of amazing!

What in the world would compel a mighty warrior to do such a thing? To begin with Joshua was not your run-of-the-mill military commander. Joshua was different. He had lived his life on purpose. He had accompanied Moses up the mountain. He was a great leader, but also a great follower. He had spent his life listening and obeying the Lord. He immediately realized that he was in the presence of the Lord and was able to put aside his emotions and the pressing need of the moment. He laid down his agenda. He knew that when you are on the Lord's team, the Lord is the absolute sovereign master.

Even though Joshua did not fear man or other warriors, he did have a profound reverence for the Lord. And, because of that, Joshua's response to the angel was to fall face down on the ground. This would be a difficult thing for a warrior to do. It is a very vulnerable position, one in which you could very likely literally lose your head.

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In a heartbeat, he switched from the one in charge to that of a follower, from one who knows the answer to one who is looking for the answer, from being totally confident of his mission to one of surrender of his mission (and life).

The commander of the Lord's army replied, "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy." (Joshua 5:15) And Joshua did so. Joshua had been here before in his life. Not at this physical location of course, but at this place in his relationship with the Lord. He knew the Lord's voice. He knew how to worship. His life was one of surrender. His identity was rooted in the Lord. In a heartbeat, he turned from mighty warrior, charged for battle – to surrender, to worship. Amazing! Only someone who had lived a life on purpose could do that.

The Lord goes on to instruct Joshua that He has an alternate plan to conquer Jericho. And, this plan would involve priests and trumpets and shouting, not swords and spears and arrows and fighting. Can you imagine Joshua going back to the 40,000 men and telling them about this new plan? Remember that they too had been waiting forty years for this moment. Once again, Joshua demonstrates his leadership and God's blessing on him and an identity that was secure in the Lord as he leads the army and the people with this new plan. And he shows his complete dependence (surrender) on the Lord. The life of Joshua is a model for us as we consider living a life on purpose, a life of surrender.

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At many points along the way, it would have been easy, almost understandable, for Joshua to place his trust and have his identity in other things; being a great warrior, being a great leader, following the law of Moses, accompanying Moses up the mountain, being unwilling to change his plans regarding attacking Jericho. And while Joshua was not perfect, we can see that in all these examples of Joshua's life, his identity was secure in the Lord.

What is the difference between our identity and the things we identify with?

In Corinthians, Paul says that, as Christians, apart from sin, we have great freedom in Christ. We have freedom to identify with many things; sport teams, eating, drinking, hobbies, towns, families, political parties, social causes, famous people, dancing (or not dancing). The list is pretty limitless! However, there are some guidelines/questions about who or what we identify with.

- Is it beneficial? I Corinthians 6:12
- Does it master me? I Corinthians 6:12
- Is it constructive? I Corinthians 10:23
- Is it for the glory of God? I Corinthians 10:31
- Does it harm the conscience of others? I Corinthians 10:28-29
- Can I give thanks to God for it? I Corinthians 10:30

In one sense, the sum of all the things we identify with make up our identity. For instance someone may say: "I'm an American, husband, father, conservative and I love to hunt." However, when we say that our identity is in Christ, we are saying that when the chips are down, and we are faced with significant life issues, we turn to Christ. Everything else dims in the light of Jesus. Our identity in Christ informs and moderates and filters who and what and how we identify with other things and people.

Our Identity in the Lord is Secure

Because of Christ's finished work on the cross, we have become the righteousness of God (2 Corinthians 5:20). As believers, we are a chosen people; each and every one of us is part of the royal priesthood. All of this is so that we may declare the praises of God to a world that is spiritually dying around us (1 Peter 2:9). As we surrender to Christ in the details of life, we grow in our identity in Him.

After becoming a Christian, the famous philosopher Søren Kierkegaard said: "Now, with God's help, I shall become myself." This may sound like psychobabble. However, it is a profound acknowledgement that we are being transformed from one degree of glory to another into Christ's likeness (2 Corinthians 3:18) and becoming the person God has intended for us to be from the beginning of time.

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Now, to be sure, none of us, short of heaven, will ever perfectly center our identity in Christ. We are, after all, sons and daughters of the first Adam. As an old hymn, *Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing*

says: “Prone to wander, Lord I feel it, prone to leave the God I love.” As we center our identity in Christ, we will experience the abundant life, the life we were intended to live.

Who are you becoming?

Going Deeper Reflections

See below for some thoughts on how to go deeper.

1. We all have the tendency to find our identity in things other than Christ; that is the nature of sin. Consider taking some time to honestly answer the questions below. As we do so, it will likely become evident where we find our identity, where we find our fulfillment, where our “addictions” reside. My answers will also reveal potential idols in my life.
 - a. When we face challenges and/or negative emotions, who or what do we turn to for escape or rescue or fulfillment? Do we turn to food, or entertainment, or work, or self-medicating, or social media, or pornography, or romance novels? What is it for you? For most of us, we likely have multiple things we turn to, at least from time-to-time.
 - b. What *really* offends me or makes me *really* angry? The anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God (James 1:20). Even if I have a righteous cause but despise those who are on the other side of the cause, I become like a noisy gong or clanging cymbal and it is of no benefit to me (I Corinthians 13). God cares about the details in our lives. He cares about the means as much as the ends.
 - c. When good things happen in life, who do I acknowledge?
 - d. What hill am I willing to die on? Jesus was willing to die on a hill for others. He is our model of self-sacrifice.
 - e. What am I “dull” about?
2. Consider listening to and meditating on the song *You Say* by Lauren Daigle:

I keep fighting voices in my mind that say I'm not enough
Every single lie that tells me I will never measure up
Am I more than just the sum of every high and every low
Remind me once again just **who I am** because I need to know
You say I am loved when I can't feel a thing
You say I am strong when I think I am weak
And you say I am held when I am falling short
And when I don't belong, oh You say **I am Yours**
And I believe
What You say of me
I believe
The only thing that matters now is everything You think of me
In You I find my worth, in You I find my identity
Taking all I have, and now I'm laying it at Your feet
You have every failure, God, You have every victory.
3. Review the “Guidelines/Questions” above in the section about the difference between our identity and the things we identify with. Look up the Scripture references and ask the Holy Spirit to reveal areas where you need to work on.