

Identity Theft

I Am What I Do

How do you define success? We obviously all want to be successful. The dictionary says success is “the accomplishment of an aim or purpose; the attainment of popularity or profit.” In other words success is accomplishing goals, hitting the target.

How about significance? That’s something that seems to be at the core of what we long for. The dictionary defines significance as “the quality of being worthy of attention; importance.”

There’s nothing inherently wrong with success just like there’s nothing essentially wrong with significance. But now follow this lie. My significance is wrapped up in how successful I am in life.

This is week number 4 in a series we’re calling Identity Theft.

According to the Bible, when we realize that we’re sinners before a holy and righteous God, and then trust Jesus Christ as God’s provision for forgiveness, we pass from spiritual death to spiritual life.

The Bible says, God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus. (Ephesians 2:4-6)

To me that’s an absolutely mind boggling truth. I go from spiritual death (separation from God) to spiritual life because my Creator sent His Son to the cross. And now not only do I have new life but in the mind of God who lives outside of time, I’m sitting in heaven already.

I don’t have to hope I’m going to heaven some day. I’m as good as there because of my Savior. Not only that, but notice, I’m in Christ.

The Bible says and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith. (Philippians 3:9)

We can't get to God by our accomplishments. Not even by keeping His law. We will always be unrighteous if we depend on ourselves because we can't keep God's law perfectly. God is perfect and His standard is perfection.

We're not perfect , but Jesus is. By faith the Bible says we're placed in Christ.

Paper hidden in Bible illustration.

Those are spiritual truths. But the Bible tells us something else too. It tells us about one called Satan or the Devil.

In John 10:10 Jesus tells us something absolutely crucial about Satan This is what He said, *The thief does not come except to steal, and to kill, and to destroy. I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly.*

Jesus Christ came to give life. Satan only wants to bring death and destruction. Beyond that Jesus said this about the Evil One, *You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own resources, for he is a liar and the father of it.* (John 8:44)

Satan is a liar and a thief and he wants to rob us of our true identity in Christ. And nowhere does his lying become more evident than in the area we're looking at this morning, the lie that says, I am what I do. My significance is based on my successes.

I. The Belief That I Am What I Do Is Absolute Deception

Turn to Ecclesiastes 2 page 588

The wisest man who ever lived should have life figured out. That man was Solomon. I'd like you to see the conclusion he came to.

Read verses 10-11

Did you catch that? Solomon worked hard. He built his earthly kingdom. He had everything that money could buy. He was afforded every pleasure. I'm sure he was envied by thousands for his accomplishments.

But when he finally had it all, he took a hard look at where he'd come and said "Where did it all get me?" Trying to find real significance by what we do is just chasing the wind.

Think about how many people you know who spend years climbing to the top but never really find what they're looking for.

If we believe the lie, I am what I do, then some where along the line our identity, our value, our significance gets tied to things that ultimately don't have any lasting value. The problem is too many times we don't realize it until we've invested a whole lot of our life in the temporary.

In Luke 16 Jesus told a story about a beggar named Lazarus and an apparently ungodly rich man. They both die and the rich man ends up in hell. Timothy Keller writes, The rich man, unlike Lazarus, is never given a personal name. He is only called a rich man, strongly hinting that since he had built his identity on his wealth rather than on God, once he lost his wealth he lost any sense of self.

Unfortunately, if we're not careful, we can do the same thing. Our identity becomes our accomplishments, our accomplishments fade, and we're left wondering "Who am I and what is life really all about?"

I. The Belief That I Am What I Do Is Absolute Deception

II. The Belief That I Am What I Do Has It's Roots In Various Sources

This is the interactive part of the message this morning.

I'm going to mention some different areas and I'm going to ask you to admit if your identity comes from any or all of these areas. It might be a little uncomfortable raising your hand to some of these but we'll do this together. We can't get to where God wants us to be until we get real about where we are.

First one. We believe *the performance lie*, that our identity wrongly comes from what we have accomplished.

Where does this one start? It starts right from our earliest years. When you listen to mommy and daddy you get treats. When you disobey you sit in time out. Tow the line and everybody says, "You're such a good little girl." Mess up and nobody has to tell you, dad just gives you "the look."

Then we go to school. Get the right answer and you get a smiley face on your paper. Get a wrong answer and your paper is decorated with red. You win the spelling bee, get the perfect attendance award, make the classiest science project, win the football game, whatever, you get acknowledged and affirmed.

Later it's "I was the top salesman in my company last month. and so I feel good about myself." Or, "I was at the bottom of the sales pool, I feel like a loser. I got the promotion. I feel valued. I got laid off. I feel worthless."

We have children and the whole performance thing just continues. "My child got the good grades, or won the swim meet, or finished all their AWANA books. I must be a good parent. I take all the credit."

If they don't do well or get in trouble moms say, "You're just like your father!"

Now, not that it's wrong to do a good job or work hard at what we do, the Bible actually says that doing our best is a biblical imperative, but if you tend to wrongly receive your sense of worth from what you've accomplished, from what you do, I want you to raise your hand.

Here's another. This one might be a little harder to admit. I'll call this *the possession lie*. That's when our identity wrongly comes from what we own.

I think I mentioned this before but the last time I was in India seeing so many people who had so little, I had this revelation. It came to me with absolute clarity. There was no doubt in my mind.

I thought, "That's it. No more caring about what car I drive or what house I live in or what model laptop I own. How can I be anything but content? I am so blessed."

I wasn't back 2 weeks when I saw some cool car and I thought, "Man, that is awesome. I wish I was cruising around in one of those instead of my 13 year old Subaru." And instantly it hit me how quickly I had slipped right back into the distorted thinking that stuff really matters.

To show how deceptive this way of thinking is we have a whole movement in Christianity called "The Word of Faith Movement" or "The Prosperity Movement" that teaches that God wants us all to be rich and healthy.

It's got some big name proponents who have made millions convincing gullible people that God will make them wealthy if they send their money to the teacher.

We even had to deal with prosperity teachers in Nicaragua. A group with roots in Brazil and the US had some of the Nicaraguan pastors we try to help and support convinced that they should send money to the group.

These guys preach a sanctified form of the possession lie. It says, if I have money and stuff then God must be pleased with me. If I don't I must be a spiritual failure.

No matter what form it comes in, the idea that we get our identity from what we have is hard to shake.

How many would say, "I don't want to admit it, but it's true. I often let money or my lack of it determine my sense of personal self-worth?"

Then there's area number three. You could call this one *the reputation or the status lie*. This one says that our identity comes from what other people think about us.

This is another tough one that a lot of us struggle with. If most people like us or think we're special some how, we feel really good about life. But if people don't like us or reject us suddenly we feel like a failure. We're no good and probably won't amount to anything.

Lets see a show of hands on this one. "I often wrongly get my sense of identity and worth from what people think about me." This is so common!

Remember this. You are not what you did. You are not what you do. You are not what you will do. We are not our performance, or what we accomplish, or what we accumulate, or what others think of us. We are who God says we are.

I. The Belief That I Am What I Do Is Absolute Deception

II. The Belief That I Am What I Do Has It's Roots In Various Sources

III. The Belief That I Am What I Do Keeps Us From Serving God From The Heart

Listen to what the Bible says about God's love...

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. (John 3:16)

Here's how God loved the world. He sent His Son to die for our sins. Did He love the world because there were some godly people around? *As it is written: "There is none righteous, no, not one."* (Romans 3:10)

When we were still without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. For scarcely for a righteous man will one die; yet perhaps for a good man someone would even dare to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:6-8)

God loves the world of sinners. He proved it by sending His Son to die for sinners. When we believe in Christ we experience God's love in a saving sense. But the Bible wants us to use that as a springboard to understanding how unfathomable God's love for us as His children is.

Here's a prayer for Christians we looked at last week in Ephesians 3. That you *may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height--to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge.* (Ephesians 3:18-19)

For all eternity we'll never get to the outer edges of God's love. There are no outer edges. There are no limits.

That means something absolutely crucial to what we're trying to understand today. It means that there's nothing you can do to make God love you any more and there's nothing you can do to make God love you any less. We'll never "deserve" God's love. He made the choice to love us.

God's love doesn't depend on the object (which is us). God's love depends on the lover. The Bible says in I John 4:8 *God is love.*

If your ever trying to talk about your faith with someone and you're not sure where to go in the conversation, let me give you a great tool. I like asking questions and people usually like to give their opinion, so try this.

Ask them this simple question. "I your opinion, what is a Christian?" Usually people will respond something like this; "A Christian is someone who prays and goes to church."

What I would say at that point is, "Yea, those are things a Christian should do, but what is a Christian?"

At that point they may list a few more actions but if you keep pointing that out eventually they're going to ask you, "OK, you tell me. What is a Christian?"

The answer takes us back to John 3:16. A Christian is one who has believed that Jesus stood in his place on the cross to pay for his sins.

Here's where people get confused. They mix up the "who" and the "do."

Turn to Ephesians chapter 2 page 1038

If you say, "Ed we turn to Ephesians chapter 2 a whole lot of times. Are these your favorite verses?" My answer would be "Yes." They're the foundational verses of this church.

Read verses 8-9 The Bible is crystal clear here. It's not a matter of somebody's interpretation. The Bible couldn't be more definitive. Salvation, forgiveness, becoming part of God's eternal family, is not based on what we do.

But...read verse 10

We are God's what? We are God's workmanship. And we're created in Christ Jesus for what? We're created for good works.

God works don't get us to heaven. We're saved by grace through faith. But good works play a vital part in the plan of God.

Here's the point. Good works are the result of who we are, not the basis for who we are. What we do does not determine who we are. Who we are determines what we do.

This is an absolutely crucial distinction. If we say that what we do makes us acceptable to God, then we've just undermined the whole message of the gospel. We've just demolished the truth of grace.

If we believe that what we do makes us right with God then we won't serve out of a heart response to God's love. We won't love God because He first loved us. We'll have the whole thing turned upside down and we end up being the focal point instead of God.

Here's how Jesus put it, *Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.*(Matthew 5:16)

What we do shouldn't be about us. It shouldn't be about making ourselves feel good, or important, or significant. Our good works should be about making God's name important and God significant to the people around us.

This can be so subtle and we're so apt to fall to self-deception. I'm just like you are. I like praise. But look how than can fall out.

What do you suppose my sinful side wants to hear after a service? What would just pump up my old nature? How about, "Ed, that was a great sermon. You hit that one out of the ballpark. You're really a gifted communicator."

And by the way I can tell when I really bomb out on a Sunday. People kind of walk by quickly with their head down. Or they say, "See ya next Sunday." Anything to avoid having to comment on the sermon!

But my sinful nature wants to make everything about me. My pride wants to hear, "Ed you did a good job," because I can still fall for the performance lie.

I mean how absolutely contradictory is that. I didn't inspire the Bible. It's not Ed the Holy Spirit at work through the Word. But down inside I can still crave that recognition because if I don't get it I can feel insignificant.

You say, "Wait a minute. Is it wrong for a mom to want to hear some words of thanks from the family once in a while? Are we off course if we'd like to hear from the boss at work that we're doing our job well? Shouldn't we praise our kids when they really try and do well in school?"

If you look up the word "praise" in the Bible you'll find it's used over 250 times. One hundred fifty-two of those times are in the Psalms (that's 60%) and every reference is about praising God.

There's only a handful of uses in the book of Proverbs, but listen to what they say...

Let another man praise you, and not your own mouth; A stranger, and not your own lips. (Proverbs 27:2) That's obviously a wise warning about boasting in yourself.

There are 3 more references in chapter 31 that is all about a godly woman.

Her children rise up and call her blessed; Her husband also, and he praises her. (Proverbs 31:28) Charm is deceitful and beauty is passing, But a woman who fears the LORD, she shall be praised. (Proverbs 31:30) Give her of the fruit of her hands, And let her own works praise her in the gates. (Proverbs 31:28)

It looks to me like God is saying that there's a biblical place for acknowledging someone else's hard work and godly character.

Proverbs 12:25 says, *An anxious heart weighs a man down, but a kind word cheers him up.*

We just need to be careful of our motive when we praise someone. Are we just doing it to manipulate their future behavior? Like, so our kids will want to obey us, or our employee will want to work harder for the company, or our spouse will give us what we want?

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IV. An Understanding Of Who God Is And Who I Am In Him Will Free Me To Serve

Then He (Jesus) said to them all, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will save it. (Luke 9:23-24)

Within minutes they were bickering over who of them would end up the greatest. But Jesus intervened: "Kings like to throw their weight around and people in authority like to give themselves fancy titles. It's not going to be that way with you. Let the senior among you become like the junior; let the leader act the part of the servant. (Luke 22:24-26 The Message)

The whole performance lie that I am what I do focuses all the attention on me. God tells us to focus on serving Him and others. It's amazing how freeing that is.

Turn to Joshua 22 page 213

The book of Joshua tells what happened after Moses died and how God used Joshua to lead the people of Israel into the promised land. They went from slavery in Egypt to wandering in the wilderness because of their rebellion, to finally getting to their destination.

Read verse 5

Notice how this verse starts with the heart. Love God and walk in His ways because you love Him. Serve Him with all your heart and soul.

Realize that He's the Creator and Lord. He's the holy, all-powerful one who is also our deliverer. When you really get caught up with who God is, you don't try to earn anything from Him. You realize that He's already showered you with mercy which you don't deserve.

When the attention is off of us then we're not going to brag, we're not going to belittle ourselves, we're not going to exalt ourselves, we're not going to pity ourselves.

Jesus repeatedly talked about going to the cross. He repeatedly spoke and acted like a servant to His disciples. Yet right after the last supper when He said the bread and the cup were representing His body and blood the disciples were arguing about which of them was the greatest. That's after 3 years of walking with, eating with, listening to, and watching Jesus.

That's how strong the pull to self-focus is.

It took the reality of Jesus death and resurrection to finally turn their attention outward instead of inward.

That's the same reality we're confronted with. That's going to be what will finally break us completely away from the self-absorbed lie that we are what we do.

Hebrews 12:1 gives this challenge; *Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.*

Let's get out there and live for God. And not a short sprint. Let's do the long haul. This is an endurance race. Why? Because we have to impress God and other people? Is that what's going to keep us focused?

No, here's what it is (verse 2) ...*looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.*

Jesus the Holy One despised every moment of the cross where our sins we're thrust on Him. He endured the cross. But He was faithful because there was joy set before Him.

The joy was this, knowing that He had brought glory to His heavenly Father.

He's the one we have to keep our eyes on. He's the one who set the example of priority.

Our significance isn't wrapped up in how successful we are. Our significance flows out of His success. Our meaning and purpose are already settled in Him