



JESUS GIVES A BETTER IDENTITY

Part 6 of Esther

Pastor Mark Driscoll | Esther 5:1–14 | October 21, 2012

WHAT IS YOUR IDENTITY?

Howdy. If I were to meet you—this is one of the great joys of the job. You get to meet people and ask questions like, “Tell me a little bit about yourself.” What’s your standard, canned response? What’s your common line? How do you most frequently introduce yourself?

There’s a lot that gets revealed in there because when you’re trying to make a first impression, you’re trying to present yourself to someone in such a way that they’ll know who you are or at least who you want them to think you are. Right, single people? That’s how that works.

We call that—you’ll hear this a lot at Mars Hill. We call that our identity, how you perceive yourself, or at least how you present yourself to be perceived by others. Out in psychology, they’ll talk about your self-image or your self-esteem. What we’re talking about is who you perceive yourself to be or who you present yourself to be. That’s, in fact, your identity, and your identity really determines your destiny. Who you think you are determines how you live and the kinds of decisions you make, the things you decide you will do and you will not do.

And as we hit this point in Esther, we look at the fact that Jesus gives a better identity in Esther 5:1–14, and what you’re going to see is a case study with Esther and her identity, and a man named Haman and his identity.

And let me say that how we come to understand ourselves and our identity, it starts when you’re little. Were you the cute one, the not-so-cute one? Were you the chubby one, the skinny one? Were you the smart one? Were you the funny one? This can be in relation to your siblings or friends that you know. As you get a little bit older, are you the jock, the athletic one? Are you the artist, the creative one? Identity starts to get established. People start to give you nicknames, some of them negative, some of them positive. That helps to establish for you, yet again, the beginnings of an identity, who you are, who you perceive yourself to be.

You hit junior high and everybody’s confused about their identity. That’s one of the main objectives of junior high is absolute confusion and photos that you regret for the rest of your life. That’s junior high. And in junior high, you don’t know who you are. You’re like, “What am I? What group do I fit in?”

Because that becomes the age when people start to gather according to identity groups. So, it’s jocks over here... artists over there... creative kids over here... smart kids over here... smokers over there... non-smokers over here. Everybody organizes in groups.

And then you start approaching your teen years, your high school years, and now your identity is largely formed by, well, what’s your grade point average? Are you dating anyone? Are you single? What are your hobbies, your likes, your activities? And how do you dress to present yourself? And a lot of that helps establish for you an identity. That’s why sometimes students will have a crisis where they’re changing their appearance, hair color, clothing, to fit in with a different crowd, to be approved, to assume an identity so that then they can have a tribe to run with.

And what helps to sort of increase and exacerbate all this: social media. Instagram. What photos am I going to put up to show you who I am? And Facebook. What am I going to tell you I’m doing and not doing? Or Twitter. What am I going to link to or what things am I going to comment on? All of which is trying to create an identity. This is who I am and who I want you to perceive me to be.

It continues on into college, and then you have a chance to sort of reset. It’s like, well, maybe high school didn’t go well. I want to reinvent myself. I’m going to do things differently. And again, an identity gets established by dating relationships, and grade point average, and major, and performance in class and other activities, and groups.

And then you graduate and identity’s set by, well, what job did you get? Are you going on to grad school? Or are you in a relationship? Are you seeing anyone? Are you able to buy a condo? What kind of car do you drive? You paid off your school loans? Do you have a social life? What hobbies do you enjoy? Who do you hang with?

And it continues. You get married, now your identity’s in relation to someone else. And then it’s: can we have kids? Can we not have kids? If we have kids, do we like these kids? What are we going to do with these kids? Can someone please take these kids? And all of a sudden, you’ve got an identity crisis because you have a life change.

And what happens is some of us never really get clear on who we are, or at least who we’re supposed to be. And some of us are continually conflicted. It’s almost as if there’s an identity crisis.

ESTHER’S IDENTITY

Back to the case study in Esther. Esther is a woman who has two names in the book of Esther: Hadassah, which is her Hebrew name, and then Esther, which is her Persian name. And

throughout the book, it's as if she has a continual identity crisis and conflict. Who is she? Is she a Hebrew girl? Is she a Persian girl? Is she one of God's people or not one of God's people? Is her ultimate allegiance to King Xerxes or to the King of kings? Is she going to keep disobeying the Bible and eating the king's food or is she going to start obeying the Bible and not doing things the king wants? If she keeps disobeying the Lord, she'll have a comfortable life, but if she starts obeying the Lord, her life could be very difficult, perhaps her life even taken.

Throughout the book, it's as if, until this point in chapter 5, she really is duplicitous. She has dual identity. That's why, I believe, they give her two names. She has conflicted identity. How many of you are like that? Sometimes Christian, sometimes not. Sometimes holy, sometimes unholy. Sometimes living for God, sometimes hiding from God. Sometimes being generous, sometimes being greedy. Sometimes living for the glory of God, sometimes living for your own convenience. And there's a conflicted identity.

And what happens in chapter 5 is that a series of circumstances press Esther to arrive at an identity, and the same thing happens for Haman, and they both respond differently, so they make fantastic comparative case studies. We'll start with Esther's identity in Esther 5:1-8.

"On the third day Esther put on her royal robes and stood in the inner court of the king's palace, in front of the king's quarters, while the king was sitting on his royal throne." This dude's always sitting on his throne, usually with a drink, doing something nefarious. Alright? "Inside the throne room opposite the entrance to the palace."

According to historical records, this is a magnificent throne room. They had thirty-six pillars, sixty-five feet high, and in that day, without modern architecture, that's quite a feat. And it was entirely designed so that wherever you stood in the room, you would not have an obstructed view of the king's throne. This was all about the king on his throne, in his glory, living and acting like a little god. And she enters into that place.

Verse 2. "And when the king saw Queen Esther standing in the court, she won favor," or grace, "in his sight." The story of Christianity is that Jesus is our King, and we find favor, or grace, in his sight. There's a little bit of an echo here to how we come into relationship with God. "She won favor in his sight, and he held out to Esther the golden scepter that was in his hand. Then Esther approached and touched the tip of the scepter."

Here's what's going on: Xerxes is the King of Persia. He rules and reigns over the largest, most affluent, most powerful empire in the history of the world. He deposed his wife because she disobeyed him, but he had a foolish request for her to parade before a drunken mob of men. She said no. He just didn't like being disobeyed, so he divorced and banished her. Some four years later, he holds a competition and he spends one night with perhaps hundreds of women, one night at a time, and he takes the one that is his favorite and he announces her as queen. That's Esther.

And at this point, they've been married some five years, but they're not close. We read in chapter 4 that she had not seen him in thirty days, and it wasn't because he was off doing missionary work. They lived in the palace together. She's over in the women's quarters, he's over in the men's quarters, and that means he is bringing through different women from his harem, night after night, and has not had any contact with his queen for a month.

And during this season, what had happened was Xerxes had empowered a man named Haman to be a bit of a right-hand man, kind of a vice president if you will. And everyone bowed down to Haman based upon Xerxes' decree, everyone with the exception of a Jewish man named Mordecai. And as we've looked at it, Mordecai was really stubborn. It wasn't that big of a deal. In my opinion, he should have bowed down. It's just saluting the uniform and it's showing deferential respect.

Well, Mordecai decides when everyone else bows, he won't. Haman gets furious and Mordecai won't stop doing it. Is there something that you do to drive someone crazy and you keep doing it? Then you're like Mordecai. That's what he does. So then Haman decides he's not only going to destroy Mordecai, he's going to assassinate, he's going to murder, commit genocide on all the Jewish people. Mordecai's Jewish. Fifteen million people are going to be put to death in a holocaust.

Now, Esther's in the palace and she hears of this. This man, Mordecai, was her adoptive father, her older cousin. Her parents died when she was young, so she's an orphan girl. And since she, too, is Jewish, yet no one yet knows it. Her identity, her true identity, has been concealed. She has to devise a plan by which to try and save her people.

Now, because she is Persian royalty and Jewish ancestry, she has the opportunity to be a mediator of sorts and to represent the people before the king, kind of like Jesus does between us and God the Father. Him being both divinity and humanity, he's able to represent God to us and us to God. Esther's in a position like that. She's Persian royalty and Jewish ancestry, so she's in this position of mediating this conflict and alleviating this death sentence.

But here's the problem: the rule is, the law is you can only enter the king's presence if he invites you. This guy really doesn't like to get interrupted. So he sits on his throne in his majestic palace, and if you come before him seeking the presence of the king uninvited, he would have the scepter, the accouterment for reigning as a king in his hand, and if he tipped it toward you, you could walk forward, touch the end of it, and that was agreeing that he had invited you and that you had received his invitation to a meeting. If he didn't tip his scepter, they chopped your head off.

So, this is the kind of thing you don't just gamble on. You don't try to get a meeting with the king unless you really, really, really need one and you're fairly certain that he's going to take your appointment. And what Esther says is, "If I perish, I perish." That's what she says at the end of chapter 4. She, like Jesus, is willing to die to save her people.

Now here, what happens is, she dresses up in royal robes so she's respecting and honoring her husband king, even though he's not a particularly honorable or respectable man. She's a wise woman. She's demonstrating great wisdom here. Much of this scene between her and Haman is almost an illustration of the big ideas of Proverbs. Proverbs is about wisdom and folly, and Esther acts in a way that is very wise, and Haman acts in a way that is very foolish. They're illustrations of wisdom and folly.

So she's acting very wisely. She's been fasting and had her people fast before she seeks to have access to the king to appeal for the life of the people who are under death sentence. And she knows that the king cares a lot about appearances. In fact, the reason he got rid of his first wife, she, in his mind, dishonored him in front of others, and he doesn't like that. So, she dresses up in royal robes. This is respect. Ladies, you should influence your husband, and the easiest way to do that is respectfully. That's why the Bible says that a wife should respect her husband, not because it's trying to put women down, but it's trying to help women be more influential.

She is very respectful, and by dressing in royal robes, she knows that when she enters the king's court, everyone will be looking at her. "Why is she here? This is an unusual occurrence. We weren't expecting this. She's uninvited." It's a little tense. But as he looks at her, King Xerxes does, he sees a wife who's respectful.

She's not yelling at him. She's not screaming at him. She's not browbeating him. Alright? She doesn't have her hands on her hips and doing the chicken neck, giving it to him in front of the ten thousand Immortals who are his bodyguard. She's respectful. My assumption is that she's a gracious woman, and a kind woman, and that even the look on her face is not antagonistic or disrespectful.

And he extends the scepter and she receives it. Now she's going to go have this conversation. Verse 3. "And the king said to her, 'What is it, Queen Esther? What is your request? It shall be given you, even to the half of my kingdom.'" That was a fairly common statement. No one would ever take the king up on it, but he would throw that out there, just sort of appearing to be very generous. And if you took him up on it, it'd probably be a problem.

There's an occasion later where John the Baptizer suffers because a king makes a similar statement. "You can have up to half of my kingdom," and a young woman actually takes him up on it and says, "Well, I'll take John the Baptizer's head on a platter." So this was kind of common nomenclature among kings in ancient times. And people didn't generally take them up on the offer, but he tells her, "Half of my kingdom," which is maybe 1.5 million square miles. It's quite an offer.

"And then Esther said," verse 4, "'If it please the king.'" You notice she's respectful? She's direct, she's courageous, she's wise, she's bold, but she's respectful. There's so much to learn here for those of you who are under authority, how to engage with those in authority. This can be, if you are a young person, your parents. This can be, if you're an employee, your employer. This can be, if you're a church member, your elders. This can be, if you're a citizen, your governmental leaders.

Whatever the case may be, when you're under authority, even if you don't believe the authority's right—and here, Xerxes is not a good man. He's not a godly man. He's not a right man. But he's still a powerful man. And so what Esther does wisely, rightly, in a way that's exemplary, she approaches him respectfully. Do you see that? She approaches him respectfully.

"If it please the king, let the king and Haman," the guy who's set out the death sentence to murder 15 million Jewish people of which she is one, though they do not know. Her identity, at this point, is concealed. It's not yet been revealed. "Let the king and Haman come today to a feast that I have prepared for the king." Well, this is a nice request, right?

"Esther, you're here. What do you want?" "I would like to throw a magnificent dinner party for you and your right-hand men." How many of you are a little surprised that that's the request? What about all the people that are going to die?

How many of you, when there's something that's important, you emotionally get ahead of the circumstances and you make it worse? You talk about it too early. You haven't really gathered your thoughts. You haven't put a game plan together. You just leak and freak. You're just talking about it and getting really emotional. I call it leak and freak. All of a sudden, your frustration, your anxiety, it's welling out of you. "How are you doing?" "Not so good." People can see it on your face. "What are you so distressed about?" "Oh, let me tell you."

She's able to maintain her emotional composure. What she realizes is it's not yet time to tell the king to reverse the decision that Haman has issued to save 15 million lives because, "Ah ha! You're married to a Jew. Sorry I haven't told you that for the five years of our marriage. Whoops!" There's a lot here that's complicated. "I'm one of God's people. I think you're a false god. Do you like the robes? I hope so." You know? It's awkward, right? There's a lot of toothpaste to get back in this Persian tube. Right? Like, there's a lot that's just wrong.

And so rather than her launching in with, "I'm a Jew. He's Hitler. They're going to die. You need to do something," she's wise about it. She's trying to rebuild the relationship that is at least strained with her husband. She's not seen him in a month and he's not been faithful to her. And so she's trying to earn his trust, keep an eye on Haman, and put together a wise plan. It's good, when needed, to do something, but make sure you wisely do the right thing, at the right time, in the right way, with the right motive, or you could end up with the wrong result. She's very wise.

"So the king and Haman came to the feast that Esther had prepared." Who wouldn't come to a dinner party? That's pretty much all these guys do in the whole book. Almost every page, oh look, more wine, more food. Duh. These guys are fine with eating and drinking. That's what they love to do.

"As they were drinking wine after the feast, the king said to Esther, 'What is your wish?'" He's like, "Certainly, this can't be it. You risked your life to cook me dinner? There must be more." "It shall be granted to you. And what is your request? Even to the half of my kingdom." He loves public show. Right? Guys who are proud and arrogant, I mean, just—they love doing everything in front of a crowd. You give them a crowd and the more generous they become.

"'It shall be fulfilled.'" Then Esther answered, 'My wish and my request is—'" Everybody's leaning forward. What is it that she wants? "If I have found favor in the sight of the king, and if it please the king to grant my wish and fulfill my request, let the king and Haman come to the feast I will prepare for them, and tomorrow I will do as the king asked."

"What do you want?" "Let's all have dinner." Dinner comes. "What do you want?" "Let's have dinner again and we'll talk about it tomorrow." She's being loving, gracious, kind. She's demonstrating what Galatians calls the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, self-control. You see that?

One of God's People

Esther has come into her own faith. She's come into a maturing relationship with God. She is now starting to own her own faith. She's thinking of others and not just herself. She's active and not passive. She's speaking and not silent. She's taking a risk, which is faith, and she's not cowering in terror, which is fear.

And let me say this: what has happened for her is that she has received a new identity. It's no longer Hadassah and Esther. This woman has no longer a conflicted identity. Now, she's still a Persian princess, but that explains her, it does not define her. This is important for your identity.

I've been working on this a ton, and when we hit Ephesians, we're going to look at this, starting in January, for sixteen weeks. I wrote a whole book on it. We're going to look at identity. But let me say this: as we did interviews for the book, one woman in the church who had a very painful life story, she made a statement that was so profound I borrowed it for the book. And she said, "The things that have happened to me might explain me, but they don't define me." I thought that was brilliantly insightful from a very wise woman.

Now, Esther's parents died and she's an orphan. That may explain her, but it doesn't define her. Mordecai's not been the greatest adoptive father. That may explain her, but it doesn't define her. She entered a competition that was really unholy, and that may explain her, but it doesn't define her. She was the queen of Persia. That may explain her, but it doesn't define

her. Her identity has changed.

She now knows that she belongs to God. That's why in chapter 4, she asks people to be fasting for her, so that within three days, she would go before the king to try and save her people. Isn't it interesting that salvation takes three days? That's the same number of days that the Lord Jesus was in the tomb. It took three days for his resurrection and our salvation. It takes three days of them not feasting but fasting. The kingdom of God operates differently than the kingdoms of the world. While they're feasting, God's people are fasting, waiting the three days for Esther to enter into the presence of the king.

And our King Jesus is nothing like this. Our King Jesus welcomes us to come into his presence. The Bible calls his throne a throne of grace, so he's nothing like Xerxes. We don't have to cower in terror for the children of God coming before the presence of God.

But Esther's identity here has changed. She's one of God's people. See, if your identity is "I'm not one of God's people" versus "I'm one of God's people," it changes everything. If you're not one of God's people, then your identity's something that must be achieved by your beauty, your success, your income, your grade point average, your dating relationship, your marital status, your athletic performance, your parental approval, what clothes you wear, what car you drive, what neighborhood you live in.

If you're one of God's people, your identity is not achieved, it's received. You're loved, you're forgiven, you're cared for, you're blessed. You've found favor in the sight of God. You don't have to impress anyone. You don't have to do anything.

You know what happens to a child when they're born? The parents love them. The child hasn't performed yet, the child hasn't accomplished yet, the child hasn't achieved yet. They don't work for their identity, they work from their identity. They're loved, they're cared for, they're part of the family.

So it is when we're born again in Jesus Christ. We receive a new identity. And we don't live for our identity. That's the problem with the whole world, and marketing and advertising just pressures you to compete and to purchase so that you can produce an identity. We don't work for our identity, we work from our identity.

If God loves us, well, then we can just love others, and we don't need to manipulate them to love us so that we can be loved. If God cares for us, well, that means we don't so desperately need other people to be there for us, and when they fail us, we can forgive them, because we're still cared for because God cares for us. When we sin, it's not the end because God forgives sin, and he changes people, and there's hope for us. You see how it works? The whole world lives for their identity. Only a Christian can live from their identity. For the non-Christian, identity is something achieved. For the Christian, it's something received.

And what happens to those who pursue their identity in their own activity, it ends up in misery one of two ways. You set for yourself an identity you aspire to. "I want to be married. I want to have kids. I want to make money. I want to get a degree. I want to own a company. I want to buy a house. I want to be healthy. I want to lose weight." Whatever it is, your identity.

If you labor for that and you accomplish it, you're proud. You're going to see that in a moment with Haman. You're arrogant. "Look at what I've done." You're bragging, and self-righteous, and self-justified. And then you start to have contempt for other people. "Oh, they're not smart. They don't try. They don't work hard. I did it, so can they."

Or, if you try, and fail, you're depressed. "I got dumped." "I'm not valedictorian." "I didn't make varsity." "Nobody asked me out." "I'm getting older and I don't know if I'm ever going to get married." "We tried to have kids and we can't conceive or we keep having miscarriages. I don't know." "I thought they would never leave me nor forsake me and we'd be together forever, and I got served divorce papers." "I was going to be healthy and live a really long life and the doctor said it's cancer." Despair.

Her identity has changed, so she can say things like, "If I perish, I perish," meaning, "If I die, I die." Let me ask you a question. It's for discussion in your group or in your family. What is your identity? Back to my original question. If you were to introduce yourself, how would you present yourself or want yourself to be perceived? I'm not talking about your theoretical, theological identity. I'm talking about your practical identity. What's your functional identity?

And sometimes we don't even know that we have a false functional identity until it changes and life circumstances throw us off-kilter. And some of us have a conflicted identity just like Esther did. It's Hadassah and Esther, but she comes to a firm foundation of a new identity as someone who belongs to God, is loved by God, has found favor in the sight of God, is forgiven by God, is helped by God, is loved by God. And that changes how she perceives herself, and that changes how she lives her life.

What's your actual, factual, practical identity, not your functional, theological, theoretical identity. Who are you?

HAMAN'S IDOLATRY

Case study in Esther. Compare that. Case study with Haman. Haman's idolatry, Esther 5:9-14. "And Haman." Alright. This man loves glory, he loves power, he loves recognition, he loves control. His identity is in success. His identity is in public recognition. His identity is in public honor.

"And Haman went out that day," what? "Joyful and glad of heart." Why? Because Esther, the queen, invited him to dinner with the king. He's made it! He's so important, he's so successful. He's made it! His identity is in his idolatry and he's made it! He's Haman the Great. He's never been happier, he's never been prouder. I mean, his shoulders are high, his gaze is straight forward, he is smiling. There's a song in his heart and there is a quickening to his step. This is the best day of Haman's whole life. He was chosen by Xerxes the Great, the king of kings, lord of lords, to be the right-hand man. Xerxes says everyone needed to bow down before him and now he's going to dinner with Xerxes the king and the queen.

Imagine this was you. The phone rings. "Hello, who is it?" "It's the President." "What do you want?" "We were wondering if it would work for you to come over for dinner?" "Like, a huge event?" "No, just the three of us." Yes.

How quick would it take you to Twitter that? Right? You're like, "Hold on a sec. Tell the world I've made it. Look what I've done! Make sure I get a photo when I'm there. Got to put that on Instagram, let everybody know. There are only three of us."

"But when Haman saw Mordecai in the king's gate." So, he's leaving the party. This is kind of funny. He's leaving the king's party, who's he see? Mordecai, the guy who wouldn't bow down to him over, and over, and over, the guy who's made a real stink about it, the guy who's wearing sackcloth and ashes, the guy who's doing a public protest.

What do you think Mordecai's going to do? Okay, just something to kick around in your group. Do you think at this point, since there is a death sentence on 15 million people because he didn't bow, that it might be a good idea for Mordecai to start bowing right about now? Here goes Haman. "Hi, hi, hi, hi, hi." Like, I would be making up for lost bows. Right?

What do you think Mordecai's going to do? Here comes Haman. This is great. "He neither rose nor trembled before him." Just... Right? He's not bowing. "Haman! Haman! How you doing, buddy? No bow today. How was dinner? No bow." You kind of see a crowd of people around because it's outside, it's public. This is a big event. Everybody knows who Mordecai is now because a decree was sent out to kill 15 million people who are of the same race as him. I don't know if he's right and courageous or wrong and stupid. And let me say, that's a fine line. Amen? Stupid and courageous, it's a fine pencil line. You can cross it pretty easily.

Well, what is Haman going to do now? "Nevertheless, Haman restrained himself." Right? Oh, first of all, it says, "And he was filled with wrath against Mordecai," so he's—you can see it. Can you just see Haman's face? He's furious, he's unhappy, he's upset. "Mordecai. I just had dinner with the king and the queen, and now I see Mordecai, and he won't bow. I hate that guy." Okay? You can just see it. You can just see it. Right?

"And he was filled with wrath against Mordecai. Nevertheless, Haman restrained himself and went home, and he sent and brought his friends and his wife Zeresh." What's he going to do? Get a crowd. "Guys, let me tell you what happened to me. You'll never guess what I did." He gets his friends and his wife. The wives play a prominent role. Vashti with Xerxes, now Esther with Xerxes.

"And Haman recounted to them." What's he going to do? Brag. Brag. That's why he didn't assault Mordecai. As angry as he was at Mordecai, it was more important for him to rush home, while there was still time at night to gather a crowd and talk about how great he was and what he'd experienced that night.

"Haman recounted to them the splendor of his riches." See, we do this by the car we drive. We do this by the clothes we wear. We do this when we introduce ourselves. "Where do you live?" And then we want people to ask us, "Well, where do you live?" so we can tell them, "I live in," wherever we live. We have our own ways of displaying our splendor and our riches.

"The number of his sons, all the promotions with which the king had honored him, and how he had advanced him above the officials and the servants of the king." "I am so important. I am so rich. I am so close to the king and queen. You are so lucky to know me." He's audacious, he's boastful. God opposes the proud and he gives grace to the humble. It's just not going to go well for Haman.

"Then Haman said, 'Even Queen Esther,'" that he doesn't know is a Jew, "'let no one but me come.'" "The guest list was one. I'll give you two guesses who that might have been!" The guy's just full of himself, right? Like us. Like, "Mark, you have more people on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram." Okay, like me. Alright? Gosh, I've done this, man. A lot. Right? Like, "Here I am with so and so! Look what I've done! Hey, I've accomplished something! Let me tell everyone." Dang it. The hypocrisy of people like me, it's intolerable. Please let everyone know how humble I am in admitting that. That would help my cause.

And he goes on, "And tomorrow also I am invited by her together with the king." "And guess what I'm doing tomorrow night? Same thing. Guest list of one!"

Now, who do you admire the most? Like, who's your person? Right? It could be a rock star, politician, business leader. Like, on your bucket list is, "Before I die, if I could have dinner, a meeting, an hour with them." See, Haman, Xerxes is on his bucket list. "Yay! I got to have dinner with Xerxes." Xerxes and Esther invite him back to a second night. How many of you would be like this with Jay-Z, or Steven Spielberg, or the President, or, I don't know, whomever. An athlete, a rock star. That would be amazing. It could even be a spiritual leader. That would be amazing. This is Haman. Oh boy.

Verse 13. "Yet all this is worth," what? "Nothing to me." When you have idolatry, everything goes out of perspective and proportion. "So long as I see Mordecai the Jew sitting at the king's gate."

This guy's had the best day ever. Okay? Here's his day: "I'm the second most powerful man on the earth. I'm very, very rich. The king is my friend. His wife likes me. I keep eating dinner with them. I get to do whatever I want. Everything in my life is perfect. I even have a wife and some friends." There's a miracle, right? "But there's one thing that's not right. One guy in the whole kingdom won't bow down, and that ruins everything."

How many of you are like that? How many of you are like me? I'm the guy with the critical eye. Everything could be fine, one thing could not be fine, and I'm not fine. That's me. I'm the guy with the critical eye. "That's not right. That's not right. That's wrong. That wasn't supposed—everything's almost perfect." And I can obsess over the thing that was wrong, the thing that was missed, the offense that was made, the failure that occurred. I can obsess. I can get so narrow in my thinking, so frustrated in my feeling, that everything else loses perspective. That's Haman.

We're all prone to this, right? It's just one guy, and it's not even a very important guy. It's a guy with very little going on. Mordecai's not a big deal. Mordecai's not a big deal. The issue is not Mordecai. The issue is Haman's idolatry is respect, and honor, and recognition. And Mordecai just happens to be the one who exposes his idol.

"Then his wife Zeresh and all his friends said to him." So, they're going to give counsel. Ladies, feel free to counsel your husband, but if he's an idiot, give him good counsel, not bad counsel. They're going to give him bad counsel.

How many of you have friends like this? You pick your friends because they agree with you. That's your definition of smart. Let that one sit. It's like a grenade. I just pulled a pin. It's going to go off in a minute and hit you, right? Like, we tend to think, "Oh, I need people like me that are smart, who agree with me." If your spouse and your friends only ever agree with you, they're not helping or loving you.

So, here's what they're going to tell them. "Let a gallows fifty cubits high be made." Okay. That's seventy-five feet. Alright? King Solomon's palace was thirty feet high. This is huge. They don't have cranes. Seventy-five feet high is huge. It's so huge that some of the commentators are like, "That must be a hypothetical number. That must be an allegory. That can't be an actual number. That is gigantic. Gigantic."

Why does he want it so high? Well, I'll tell you what he's going to do. He wants to crucify Mordecai on it, so he wants it as high as possible so everybody sees. Don't disobey Haman. He's making a public spectacle. That's the goal. How many of you, in your rage, you want to make it public? In your vengeance, you want to make it public. You don't just want them to hurt and suffer, you want them to hurt and suffer in front of an audience. Bitter people do horrible things.

"Let a gallows fifty cubits high be made, and in the morning tell the king to have Mordecai hanged upon it. Then go joyfully with the king to the feast." "Tomorrow will be a perfect day if I can not only have dinner with the king and the queen, but if I can crucify Mordecai." "This idea pleased Haman." He was happy again. "And he had the gallows made."

When we think of the gallows, as I told you earlier in the book, we tend to think of, like, the Old West, where there's a platform, and a trap door, and a noose that goes around someone's neck, and the floor falls out. In that day, this would have been a high, high pole. It literally means to be hung on a tree. Kind of like Deuteronomy says, "Cursed is everyone who's hung on a tree."

And the Persians, as I told you in a previous sermon, they invented crucifixion and the Romans mastered it in the days of Jesus. And it started with impaling, running somebody through, and then hanging them up in display. So here, his plan was to either impale Mordecai and hang him up or crucify him and hang him up. Either way, it's fair to say that Haman was going to crucify Mordecai, seventy-five feet up, for everyone to see.

Good Things Become God Things

Here's Haman's idolatry. You and I will form an identity, and if our identity is in our idolatry, it leads to our misery. That's the way that it works. And what idolatry is this: idolatry is the problem in the Bible. A great biblical counselor, David Powlison, says that it is, quote, "The problem in the Bible." Underlying sin is idolatry. And what happens is we take good things and we make them God things.

What's Haman's idolatry? What's his identity idolatry? Power, control, recognition, respect, obedience, deference. He would call himself a leader, but he's really just an idolater.

Now, here's what happens: good things become God things, and that's a bad thing. Is it bad for a man to appreciate respect and honor? Yes or no? Yes, it's a good thing. That's why the Bible says, "Children, honor your mother and father." Church members, honor your pastors and leaders. Citizens, honor your governing officials. The Bible's not against honor, but we can take something like honor, or obedience, or deference and have it be such an identity for us that we worship it, we live for it.

And here's what happens: if you idolize one thing, you demonize the other thing. That's what Jonathan Edwards said, the greatest theologian, I believe, in the history of the United States of America. He said, "If you idolize, you demonize."

Do you know what Haman has done? He's idolized his race, the Persians. You know what he's going to do? Demonize the Jews. That's how racism comes into being. Haman is going to idolize honor, and so he's going to demonize Mordecai who dishonored him. He idolizes public recognition, so he's going to demonize Mordecai for not recognizing him publicly. And what he's going to do, then, is seek to crucify him publicly, to make him suffer, to make him pay.

This is the root of so much human conflict and strife. We idolize our nation, we demonize other nations. We idolize our race, we demonize other races. We idolize our religion, and we demonize all other people, and we don't love them. We don't have to agree with them, but we don't love them. We idolize our income, we demonize anyone who would do anything that might reduce our bottom line. We idolize comfort, we demonize anyone who would cause us to be uncomfortable. We idolize love, and if they should fail us, we demonize them.

See, Esther is growing and maturing. She's got wisdom, and patience, and prudence, and self-control, and a wise plan for the good of others, because Esther's identity is in "child of God." Haman's identity is in his performance and others' perception of him. Haman's identity is in his idolatry, and what happens is people violently defend their idols.

We see this throughout the book of Acts, why there are riots around Paul and why there's so much conflict around Christianity. Because Christianity comes along to reset your identity and to remove your idolatry. And people violently defend their idols. You don't, oftentimes, know what your idol is until it's under threat of being taken.

You're dating someone, and all of sudden you feel like the relationship is shaky, and you go to a very dark place. God gives you a child, you love them as you ought and should, but you don't perhaps recognize that so much of your identity is established in parenting that all of a sudden, the child gets sick or diagnosed with something, or they get hurt, or there's a threat of them not living, and you go to a very dark place. And I'm not talking just grieving, I'm talking warring against God or others.

What do you get emotional about? What frustrates you? What causes you to get angry? What causes you to seethe? What causes you to get depressed? What causes you to get happy, overjoyed? We've just seen the emotional spectrum in Haman. When his idol is fed, he is so happy. When his idol is threatened, he is so violent. Some in our culture will be diagnosed bipolar. Sometimes they're idolatrous, which causes their emotional instability. When their idol is flourishing, they are overjoyed. When their idol is threatened, they become violent.

WHAT IS YOUR IDOLATRY?

Haman is a case study in idolatry. You ready for your question? What's your idolatry? If you're not sure, follow your emotions. Where do you get happy? Where do you get sad? Where do you get overjoyed? Where do you get really depressed? What are you afraid of losing? Who are you afraid of losing? Where are you afraid of failing? What, if it was made public about you, would destroy you?

I love you. I'm your pastor. I get to teach the Bible. The final line of 1 John, he says to his church, "Dear children of God, keep yourselves from idols." That's the invitation of a loving pastor who wants the best for his people. He wants them not to use God to feed their idolatry, but to remove their idolatry and be satisfied in their identity as children of God. This is the one thing that changes everything.

I have good news for you. You don't have to live with your identity in your idolatry. You don't have to. Haman never changes. That's sad. He never repents. You're going to read it in the coming weeks, but his life ends miserably and tragically, shamefully, and the one thing he didn't want: publicly. Because idols lie. They promise a heavenly, peaceful existence that they cannot deliver.

Now, Esther, in comparison, back to our case study, she has a change of identity and her life doesn't end in brutal, shameful tragedy and misery. It's not perfect, but it's noble. She's not

so consumed with herself, she's concerned about others. She's willing to lose her life if others might be saved. In a tragic, weird twist, Haman wants to take everyone else's life and he ends up losing his own, whereas Esther was willing to lose her life, but God allowed her to be spared.

What's your idolatry? Let me say this: idolatry is usually a good thing in a bad place. Being healthy is a good thing. Being in a loving relationship is a good thing. Being married is a good thing. The Bible says, "He who finds a wife finds what is good." Children are a blessing. It's good to be a parent. Having a job is a good thing. It's a noble, good thing to work. Performing well in school is a good thing. Maximizing your abilities, whatever they might be, artistic or athletic, that's a good thing. Our idolatry is usually a good thing in a God place, which is a bad thing.

Let me close with this: Jesus gives a better identity. Haman lived for his glory, but Jesus lives for the glory of God. Haman made God's people his enemy, but Jesus makes his enemies his friends. Amen? There's good news. Thank you Lord Jesus, you don't treat us like Haman treated Mordecai. Thank you Lord Jesus that though we've not bowed down to you, you don't declare war on us.

Haman would not forgive one man for one thing, but Jesus will forgive anyone for anything. Haman made a cross to hang a man upon, but Jesus came as a man to hang upon a cross for all men. Haman forced people to bow to him in fear, but Jesus invites people to bow to him in love. Haman boasted about what he had done, which is pride, but when we boast of what Jesus has done, it is worship. Haman sought to achieve his identity through his works, but in Jesus, we receive a new identity, through his works.

Esther waited three days to leave her chambers and save her people, but Jesus waited three days to leave his tomb and save his people. Esther was clothed in royal robes, but in Jesus Christ, we are clothed in the splendor of the righteousness of our King. Esther was welcomed into the presence of King Xerxes but once, but because of King Jesus, we are welcome into the presence of God continually. Esther prepared a lavish banquet for King Xerxes, but King Jesus is preparing a more lavish banquet for us. And Xerxes offered Esther half his kingdom, but our King Jesus offers us his entire kingdom.

Lord Jesus, we thank you that in you, there's a better identity. Lord God, I thank you for the practical insights of Scripture, the God-given wisdom of Esther, the demonically empowered foolishness of Haman. God, as we read the story, we know we're all capable, and even in varying ways, at various times, to various degrees have been like Haman. But God, I pray for us all, that we would experience that change of identity as Esther did, that we would no longer be hypocritical or duplicitous. God, we find great encouragement that she's referred to as Hadassah and Esther, almost double-minded, inconsistent, not wholeheartedly committed. We're so much like her. So that, God, when she has a change of heart, and a change of mind, and a change of life, and a change of conviction, it gives us hope that if we turn from sin and trust in you, Lord Jesus, you will not respond to us as Haman did, and seek to murder us because you died for us. That we don't need to approach your throne with the kind of terror that she did before Xerxes, that your throne of grace is always open. And God, I pray for these considerations and conversations among our people. Holy Spirit, I invite you to work in their hearts and their minds, to know that who they are is not marked by what they've done or what's been done to them, but rather what Jesus has done for them. And God, we thank you for a new identity, and we confess, apart from this new identity, we just trade one idolatrous identity for another. We go from one false promise to another. We go from one fatal misery to another. And Lord Jesus, we thank you that you save us from a foolish, fruitless, fateful life. Lord Jesus, our hearts are glad because you're our King, and I pray for my friends that we would now respond to you in worship and receive from you an understanding of who we are in Jesus' good name, amen.

Note: This sermon transcript has been edited for readability.