



---

## I AM \_\_\_\_?

---

### Part 1 of Ephesians

Pastor Mark Driscoll | January 13, 2013

### WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?

Who do you think you are? That question is identity-shaping, life-altering, eternity-affecting. How would you describe yourself? How do you introduce yourself? How do you perceive yourself? In mainstream pop psychology, they'll talk a lot about self-esteem, or self-image, or self-awareness. At Mars Hill, we like to use the language of identity. What's your identity? Who do you think you are? How would you answer this question, and it's an important question. It's the one thing that changes everything, because when you know who you are, then you know what to do. If you don't know who you are, then you don't know what to do.

How would you answer this question: I am "blank"? I am rich. I am poor. I am young. I am old. I am smart. I'm stupid. I'm loved. I'm hated. I'm single. I'm married. I'm married. I'm divorced. I'm desirable. I'm undesirable. I'm successful. I'm a failure. I have hope. I'm hopeless. Who do you think you are? How do you see yourself? How does your identity alter and affect your destiny?

We're going to spend sixteen weeks answering this question, and it's a question that we all ask ourselves, sometimes consciously, sometimes less consciously. Sometimes others answer it for us. It starts when you're little. Were you the first-born? Were you the baby in the family? Were you the middle child? What were you like? Were you the funny kid? Were you the chubby kid? Were you the athletic kid? Were you the arty kid? Were you the nerdy kid? Who were you?

What names did others give you? What nicknames did they give you? Did your parents have a nickname for you? Did your friends have a nickname for you? Was it a good nickname? Was it a bad nickname? How did they see you, and subsequently, how did you see yourself?

As we continue forward in life and we hit the teen years, then it becomes incredibly complicated. You hit junior high, you have no idea who you are. All of a sudden, you're in a new school. You have new relationships, and new responsibilities, and new authorities, and they're all giving you input regarding who they think you are, at least who they think you should be. All of a sudden, clothes become more important than ever, and hair care, and hair products, and how we appear, and how we size up to others. And "Have I hit my growth spurt yet?" and "Am I succeeding or failing? Am I one who is part of the crowd that I want to be a part of or always on the outside looking in?"

You hit college and all of a sudden you've got an opportunity to completely reinvent yourself. You go away from your family, friends, church, community, those who know you, and you get to start fresh—at least that's what you think. So, you make decisions about your wardrobe: "How will I present myself?" About your lifestyle: "Will I go to church? Will I not go to church? Will I drink? Will I not drink? Will I be sleeping around? Will I not be sleeping around? Will I join certain activities or not? What degree will I pursue? What life course will I put myself on? Who am I and who will I be?"

You graduate and it's an identity crisis. Now you're supposed to be an adult. You're not prepared for those responsibilities. "Will I get a job? Where will I work? Will I make enough money? What will I drive? How will I pay my bills? Will I be in a relationship? Will I be single forever?"

And then perhaps, one day, you get your career job. Then it consumes all of your identity. "Now I know who I am, and if I can succeed and thrive in this vocational path, that will define who I am."

And you get married, all of a sudden your identity gets very conflicted. You thought they were going to marry you to help you become who you want to be, and they were thinking the same thing, and suddenly two selfish people with separate identities collide into misery. We call that marriage. "What's our identity?" And for the woman sometimes, this is particularly difficult. "I was this kind of woman, maybe strong, maybe career-minded, maybe independent, and now I'm married, and now I was reading the Bible and it says that my husband is the leader and I need to respect him. And who am I and how does this work?"

And then you have children and all of a sudden your identity totally changes. And for the woman, it starts with a change in her appearance, which affects so much of her identity. Now she's showing and she's feeling different, and now she's turning into a mother, whole new identity. And the man feels that weight of responsibility, or at least he should, because now he is a father.

And all of a sudden, the child becomes this center around which the family orbits. They determine when you eat, when you sleep, if you do, how money is spent, and how vacations are planned, and how life is organized. And all of a sudden, your hobbies, your friendships, your free time, the things that defined who you were, they're gone, or altered, or affected in some particular way.

Your kids get older and all of a sudden they don't need you like they used to. They're starting to move away from home. You hit that empty nest season and suddenly your identity is shaken. "Who am I? Who are we? What's the center of our world? Why do we try? We used to try to hold the marriage together, or to make the money, or to be in the church for the sake of the children, but they're gone. Who are we and what are we doing?"

Sometimes then it crashes into divorce because the idol has left home and there's nothing to hold the family together. And you're widowed, you're alone, your spouse is deceased, your children have grown up and they've moved away. Maybe they don't live in the same city, or state, or country, and there are grandchildren that you're lucky to see once a year during the holidays.

Your identity is in total crisis, and conflict, and chaos all the time. Do you feel that? I do, do you? Who do you think you are? How would you answer the question: I am "blank"?

## **WHO DOES GOD SAY YOU ARE?**

Let's ask a different question: Who does God say that you are? Who does God say that you are? Here's what we see, in Genesis 1:26–28. Genesis means "beginnings." It's the first book of the Bible because it's the book of beginnings. And there, we find the beginning of everything, except for God, of course, because he is the Creator of all things. And there we find the beginning of our identity.

And here's what the Bible says: "Then God said, 'Let us.'" There's an allusion there to the Trinity: one God, three persons, us. "Make man." That's mankind, says the same thing in Genesis 5:1. That includes men and women. "In our image, after our likeness." I want you to see, that's identity language. Who are you? God says, "I've made you in my image and likeness." That's your identity. There's the identity statement.

"'And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.' So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." And I love this line: "And God," what? "Blessed them."

### **1. Revelation Receiver**

Who does God say you are? Four things. Number one, you are a revelation receiver. The God of the Bible is Trinitarian: Father, Son, and Spirit, here referred to as "us" and "our." "Let us make man in our image and likeness." There's the Trinitarian God of the Bible. So, God in his eternal nature, essence, is a community of love, affection, and communication. That God the Father, God the Son, God the Spirit have been communicating with one another forever, and they make us in their image and likeness, and they make us as revelation receivers. They speak to us, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit do. God speaks to us.

Now, here's the good news: you don't have to determine or decide what your identity is because God has already chosen to reveal it. God has, in his kindness, chosen to speak to us. What this means is we don't need the speculation of philosophy or religion. We need the revelation of God. We need God to tell us who he is, and we need God to tell us who we are. Need to know both: who God is, who you are, and the Bible provides both.

Here it tells us who God is and it tells us who we are. And the first is that we're revelation receivers, that God speaks to us primarily, and firstly, and most authoritatively through the Scriptures. And so I would ask you, this year, to be in the Word of God and to have the Word of God in you, because you were created as a revelation receiver, and God wants to speak to you through his Word, and he wants to hear from you through prayer.

### **2. Humbly Honored**

So, who are you? Well, number one, you're a revelation receiver. Number two, you are humbly honored. I want you to see here that there is God, and then lower creation. It talks about beasts of the field, and birds of the air, and fish of the sea. And between lower creation and God is mankind, men and women. We are below God, but above the animals.

And anytime we try to establish our identity and we do not understand it biblically, it results in tragedy. One of two things happen. We become people who think too much of ourselves and we believe we're God-like; that we're almost divine, or a spark of the divine is within us, or pantheism or panentheism; that we're part of some divine, cosmic consciousness; that we're somehow equal to God, or alongside of God, or part of God, or God. And if not, then we'll reincarnate and pay off our karma, and we'll escalate toward divinity.

Conversely, some say we're nothing more than highly evolved animals. We're just lucky animals with thumbs, that's all we are; that we're really not above lower creation, that we're just the luckiest among lower creation; that really all we are is just highly evolved animals. Well, that is to think too little of us. And conversely, some think too much of us.

Humility, the root of which literally means to know your place, is to know that your place is under God, but above lower creation. You're not an animal, you have dominion over them as God's image-bearer. You're also not God, you're a created being, and you're here because of his divine design.

### **3. Made to Mirror**

So, number one, you're a revelation receiver. Number two, you're humbly honored. You need God's help, but you're more than just a base animal. Number three, you're made to mirror. When he says that we are made in his image and likeness, and those two words are essentially synonymous, think of images in your life. Every morning, most of us get up and look in a mirror, and that mirror is reflecting back to us our image, our likeness, who we are, showing us, revealing to us who we are.

And what God says is that, though he is spirit, he wants his attributes to be visible on the earth. He wants creation to know something about him, and so he's made us as his mirrors. We were made to mirror. And so God is loving, and when we love, we reflect his love to others. God is truthful. When we tell the truth, we reflect his truthfulness to others. God is forgiving. When we forgive others, we're reflecting his grace and his mercy to others. God is generous, and when we're generous, we're reflecting his generosity to others.

And so our life is to be one of mirroring, that it doesn't begin with us, it begins with God. And the goal is not for the world to know us, but the goal is for the world to know him. And we are not the objects, he is. We are to reflect, to mirror, to show, to echo something of God's attributes to the world.

What that means is, then, the glory goes to God. "Oh, that was very loving of you." "Thank you, I loved you with God's love." "That was very generous." "Thank you, I gave you what God gave me." "That was very truthful of you." "Thank you, God is the one who tells the truth, and I'm happy to serve him." What that allows us to have, Mars Hill, is this courageous humility, to be bold, to be generous, to be loving, to be truthful, to have conflict as is holy and required, and always asking not, "What will this make me look like?" but "How does this rightly or wrongly reflect God?" Do you see the difference?

So many of our identity decisions are about, "How will this make me look?" That's the wrong question. "How could they see God?" That's the right question. "How could I reflect, image, mirror, who God is in this moment?" And we call that worship. That's what the Bible means by worship. It means reflecting, imaging, mirroring, showing to some limited, fallen, imperfect degree because we're not God, but we're a mirror that is to reflect God.

That's why Jesus is called the image of the invisible God. That's why Jesus says, "If you've seen me, you've seen the Father." What is he saying? He's the perfect mirror. He's the sinless mirror. Everything that could be seen about God's character is made visible on the earth through the life, death, burial, resurrection of Jesus. He is the image of the invisible God. If we've seen him, we've seen the Father. That's what he says, and in fact, that's why he dies, because he keeps making that claim. And he rises from death to show us the love of God, and the justice of God, and the forgiveness of God, and he continues to mirror, to reflect, to image, to show what the Father is like to the world that he's made.

#### **4. Blessed to Bless**

You are a revelation receiver, you are humbly honored, you're made to mirror, and you're blessed to be a blessing. What it says here is, "God blessed them." What it doesn't say is that they had yet done anything. At this point, Adam and Eve hadn't done anything. He just blessed them. They didn't earn their blessing. In fact, it wouldn't be grace if it was earned. God blessed them.

What this means is that God actively loved them with a Father's affection. So many of us have this very corrupted view of God that we need to make him bless us, manipulate him to bless us. Ours is a God who begins with blessing. Ours is a God who likes to bless his people. Ours is a God who is filled with grace, and filled with love, and filled with mercy, and in an infinitely perfect way, far superior to mine, he's a Father who adores his kids and would do anything for them. I have a bit of that heart for my five kids, but God is a perfect Father with limitless resources, and he blesses with a Father's affection.

You are blessed to bless. See, God is going to bless Adam and Eve so that they can be a blessing to their children and they can be a blessing to the world. Mars Hill, we are blessed to bless. Whatever God teaches you is so you might teach others. Whatever God gives you is that you might give to others. Whatever God does for you is so that you could learn to do that for others.

We are not the objects of worship, we're the mirror of the character and attributes of God so that others would worship him. Do you see that? Some of you say, "This doesn't sound like anything I've heard." Because the world is filled with lies, and it's why people are miserable, and it's not working. And I'm your pastor, and I love you, and I hope you trust me enough to let me teach you. This is who God says that you are.

Two things I want to say. Number one, your identity is received, it's not achieved. Adam and Eve didn't do anything to obtain this identity. God made them, God spoke to them, God defined them, and God blessed them. It's all God. Your identity is not achieved, it's received. It's not something you do, it's something God does. It's not what you earn, it's what he gives. I want you to see that.

It frees you up from the performance trap. It frees you up from the competitive trap. It frees you up from the bitterness, and the jealousy, and the coveting that marks our world. It lets you be who God made you to be, and rejoice in who God made them to be. And together, seeking to mirror and image him, because it's not about us, it's all about him.

Number two, you are not more valuable than anyone else and you are not less valuable than anyone else. All people equally bear the image and likeness of God. Male and female, young and old, black and white, rich and poor, first world and third world, born and unborn, healthy and sick. It's why, as Christians, we are the only ones who have a consistent worldview that believes in the dignity and equality of all people.

Some people are richer, some people are smarter, some people are tougher, some people are more competent, capable, and able, but all are made in the image and likeness and God, all have dignity, value, and worth. One of the great lies is that some people are more valuable than others. Let me say this: your net worth has nothing to do with your self-worth. Your net worth has nothing to do with your self-worth.

An unborn child, someone who is poor, someone who is in the third world, someone who is sickly, someone who cannot defend themselves is in every way equal in value to anyone else on the earth, because they, too, bear the image and likeness of God. That's why we don't kill the unborn. It's why we don't kill the elderly. It's why we don't believe in the survival of the fittest and the Darwinian evolution that those who are strong survive and those who are weak are worth less. It's why we don't believe in racism, and classism, and sexism, because all equally bear the image and likeness of God. Profound implications for not only how we see God, but ourselves and others.

### **WHO DOES SATAN SAY YOU ARE?**

Next question: who does Satan say that you are? What we see in Genesis 1 is that God tells us who he is and who we are, and then in Genesis 3, Satan tells us who he thinks God is and who he thinks we are. And I need you to know this: at Mars Hill, we believe in Satan, we believe in demons. If you don't, you will have a hard, let's say impossible, time explaining the world. You will have an impossible time explaining all of the evil, all of the injustice, all of the tyranny, all of the lies, all of the abuse, and all of the darkness if there is not personal evil behind it harming persons.

It's one thing that helps explain everything: the existence of personal evil, Satan. Not God, but a created being under God who rebelled against God, an angel. An angel who was, according to the Bible, dissatisfied with their identity. Their identity was created and under God to serve God. Angels are created as messengers and ministers of God, and the Bible says that Satan was an angel who became proud in his heart. He didn't want to be under God, he wanted to be alongside of God or over God. He didn't want to obey God, he wanted to do what he wanted to do.

He wanted a new identity and he rebelled, and his work on the world begins in Genesis 3, insofar as recorded history goes, with our first parents, Adam and Eve. And Satan shows up, and he speaks. The Bible says repeatedly that he's a liar, he's a deceiver, and he's a killer. He will talk to you, he will never tell you the truth, and everything he says will ruin you. The question is: will you believe him?

See, the power in a lie is this: it doesn't need to be true to destroy you. If I told you right now: "You have cancer. You will die on Tuesday at 3 o'clock," it's not true, but if you believe it is, it will change your entire life. The way a lie works is its power is ultimately contingent upon whether or not you believe it. That's why Jesus says elsewhere, "They'll know the

truth, and the truth will,” what? “Set them free.” Satan is responsible for his lie, you and I are responsible for our belief in his lies.

Here’s what Satan says to our first parents. Genesis 3:1, “Now the serpent.” This is also mentioned in Revelation 12 and 20: serpent, Satan, dragon. The Bible is using this powerful, frightening imagery to give us a real, right, respectful regard for Satan. “Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the other beasts of the field that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, ‘Did God actually say . . . ?’”

Adam and Eve are here together. If you’ve been at Mars Hill, you’ve heard this before, but Adam and Eve are together. Adam is silent, passive, and a coward. His is a sin of omission. He doesn’t lead his family. Eve’s is a sin of commission. She engages in a conversation she shouldn’t, and she believes a lie that she ought not. Paul says repeatedly in the New Testament that she was deceived.

But the first thing he does is he questions the authority of the Word of God. Starting next week, we’re going to get into the book of Ephesians. We’ll spend fifteen weeks together in what was John Calvin’s favorite book of the Bible. I’ve been anticipating preaching that book for five years, and to varying degrees, I’ve been working on that book for fifteen years. And I want you to believe it, I want you to start reading it and studying it, and, in Community Group, discussing it.

But know this: Satan is always going to question the clarity, the authority of the Word of God. I can teach, but you need to believe. I can study, but I need you to study as well. Just as Satan came to our first parents, he’s going to come to you. And whatever destruction he has intended for your life, it will begin with him trying to erode your confidence in the truthfulness and the helpfulness of the Word of God.

Sometimes this could be highly theological, where you have all kinds of reasons. Sometimes it’s you’re reading the wrong authors who are eroding your confidence in the Scriptures. Sometimes it’s because you have a fear of man, and you so highly regard others who are critical of the Scriptures, the professors you’ve had, or family who leans on you, that all of a sudden, you change the Word of God, you diminish the Word of God, you deny the Word of God, you disregard the Word of God.

Here’s what he says, Genesis 3:5, “For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be,” what? “Like God.” There’s the identity statement. “Knowing good and evil.” Here’s what he says. Satan shows up, “Adam and Eve, I have a way for you to be like God.” Do you see the temptation of pride? What did God just say in Genesis 1? “Let’s make them in our image and.” what was the word? “Likeness.” Satan comes along and says, “Here’s a way for you to be like God.” God says, “I already made you like me.”

I’ve read Genesis 3 now for a long time. I’m not good at math. I got saved at nineteen, I’ve been reading it ever since. I’ve studied Genesis 3 so many times, and I missed that until very recently.

God tells them their identity: “You bear my image and likeness.” Satan erodes their confidence in the Word of God and lies to them, tempting their pride, saying, “There is a way for you to be in the likeness of God.” Again, your identity is received, it’s not achieved. It’s something God gives, it’s not something you do. The essence of the lie that led to the original sin, which has infected and affected everyone and everything since, was rooted in the issue of identity.

Adam should have opened his mouth and he should have said, “God made us in his likeness. Our identity is received from God, it’s not achieved by us. We are already blessed, and now we need to trust.” Do you see it? It’s amazing, isn’t it? Satan is going to lie to you, and he is going to lie to you, telling you that in some regard, in some way, your identity can be achieved by you, not received from God.

And what we’re talking about here is naming. Naming has a very powerful history in the Scriptures. God names people, and their name establishes their life course. It’s why when Jesus comes to the earth, at his baptism, he’s coming out of the water—the second member of the Trinity is—and the Holy Spirit descends upon him in the form of the dove, and then the Father speaks from heaven and says, what? “This is my Son.” That’s an identity statement for the whole world to hear.

When Jesus says things like, “I am the vine. I am the good shepherd,” those are identity statements. “I am,” and Jesus knows who he is. One of the ways that Jesus was able to resist temptation, to overcome frustration, to endure suffering was he kept coming back to an understanding of his identity, who he was. See, to become a Christian is not to live a life that is pain- or suffering-free, but if your identity is in Christ, it’s pain- and suffering-proof.

Satan still names people, too. That’s why the Bible calls him a liar. That’s what Jesus calls him in John 8 I think it is. That’s why in Revelation 12:10, he’s called the accuser of the children of God. He’s a deceiver, the Bible says elsewhere. He’s going to try and name you, and he wants that name to become, for you, an identity.

I learned this painfully, very early on in ministry. When we started the church, we had a bunch of new Christians, mainly in their twenties, come from horrific backgrounds, lots of addiction and abuse. I had never been a member of a church, an elder in a church, I hadn’t had any formal theological education, and I was working a job on the side. I did not care for people as well as they should have been cared for. Some people today say, “Well, isn’t it hard in a big church?” No, we take better care of people than we ever have because now we have the specialists and the resources to train an army of people to love and care for people. But at the time, I did the best I could.

I’ll never forget, there was—I did all the counseling and such in the early years, and I was meeting with a young woman who had been abused growing up, and she ran away from home as a teenager, and she’d had a very difficult life, and she let men do the worst things to her. And I met with her, along with a woman leader in our church, and we were talking to her, trying to help her and serve her. And I looked at her, I said, “Why? Why do you do these things and why do you let other people do these things to you?” She said, quote, “I’m a dirty girl, so I do dirty things.” I could still hear it. I pray for her almost every day. I have now for almost fifteen years, and she’s still not walking with Jesus. That was a demonic lie that her grandfather told her, her first abuser. He used to tell her, “You’re a dirty girl, so I make you do dirty things,” and for the rest of her life, her identity was, “I’m a dirty girl. I do dirty things.” No, no, God made you and Jesus loves you, and there is no condemnation in Christ, but there is a new identity that leads to a new destiny.

I tell you these things because I really love you. And I know in my own life, in my family, in our church family, the people who do the most damage to themselves, it’s oftentimes rooted in a false understanding of their identity, and it’s because somewhere, the enemy has come to them, and he has whispered to them and told them that they are someone that they’re not. And the result is, then, they accept that lie of their identity, and then they live in light of it to their own destruction.

## **IDENTITY IDOLATRY**

This is what the Bible means when it speaks of idolatry. When we think of idolatry, we tend to think of, you know, shrines and pagan places where other religions go to worship their false god. Before idolatry exists out there, it exists in here. Ezekiel 14 says, "They brought their idols into their heart." The problem is not out there, the problem is in here.

Idolatry is when we take a good thing and we make it a God thing, which is a bad thing. Idolatry is when we take a created thing and we put it in the Creator's place. Idolatry is when we live for something or someone other than Jesus. Idolatry is when our identity, our hope, our joy, who we want to be, and who we want others to perceive us to be is something achieved, by us or others, and not received from him.

There are so many ways that people categorize themselves. The Bible does so really in two categories: worshipers and idolaters. Everyone is always worshiping; the only difference is who or what. What are they giving their life to? What are they giving their money to? What are they giving their emotion to? What are they devoted to? How do they define themselves?

Here's what it says in Romans 1:25. And you'll notice it's going to echo much of what we just read in Genesis 1 and 3, and this is a bit of a commentator perspective back on the opening chapters of the Bible and the effects of what happened through identity idolatry. Romans 1:25, "They exchanged the truth about God for the lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is forever blessed! Amen."

This is a common theme and thread in the teaching at Mars Hill Church. It works through our sermon series, and our Community Groups, and it's very prevalent in our Redemption Groups. But let me explain it again, because so many of you are new, and those of you who are not new, we tend to forget.

We are to worship the Creator and enjoy and steward created things. Our identity is to be received from God, not achieved by something we've done, or others have done to us or for us. This allows everything to be in its rightful place. Now we can love people without requiring them to be God to us. We can enjoy things without pretending that they're going to make it heaven on earth for us.

Idolatry is what happens when there is an inversion. Here, he uses the language of an exchange. All of a sudden, we're still passionate, we're still devoted, we're still committed, we're still concerned, we're still giving of ourselves, our time, talent, and treasure, but the center of our life, the source of our joy, the hope for our future, the establishing of our identity is not the Creator, the Lord Jesus Christ; it's creation, things that God has made, like the environment, or pets, or health, or our beauty, or things that we have made, like a house, or a car, or a grade point average, or a résumé. And we live for, we're devoted to, we give our life as a sacrifice to someone or something that is created rather than the Creator.

Now, I'm going to start to unpack, and I'll set this up for you, different categories of idols. Let me just say in advance, you are going to get defensive, and frustrated, and want to, at least emotionally or intellectually, fight with me. And let me say why: because people violently defend their idols. If you read the New Testament, let's say the book of Acts, Paul goes into a town, finds the idol, preaches against it, there's a riot, they try to kill him, he has to leave, and then somebody else plants what is probably a complicated church with the few people that did believe and now will be hated and opposed.

People violently defend their idols. What do you get angry about? What do you get defensive of? We may be starting to encroach on your idol, which means our Community Group discussions could get a little complicated. You may want to put turnbuckles in the living room at your apartment for the Community Group discussions that'll be forthcoming. You're going to find their idol, they're gonna find your idol, you're gonna find their idol, and people defend their idol. "Hey wait, I've got a reason. Let me explain. You don't understand. Don't go there. What about you? Let me change the subject." Right? Some of you call this family. But I love you. Idols make promises they never keep. Lies never bring life, they only bring death. And even if your identity idolatry is working as you would perceive it, it doesn't work forever. You need an identity that is eternal, because you are.

## **I – ITEMS**

First category is items. What this means is that consumerism is now a religion and stores are now pagan temples. Right now there are people walking through the mall, trying to figure out what their identity is. "What will I wear? What will the couch be at my house? How will this reflect on me as a person?" They are purchasing an identity, trying to present themselves, and that's what consumerism does.

This is where certain sociologists will speak of conspicuous consumption, meaning you buy something not because you need it, but because it establishes an identity for you as a person, like a car. "Will I take the bus to save the environment? Will I drive a truck because I'm a man? Will I drive an SUV because I'm a man with a family? Will I drive a minivan because I used to be a man until I got a family? What will I drive?" Because your car, it's not just transportation; it's identity formation. Some of you say, "I don't care. I don't care." So, you're your own idol. All you care about is what you think about yourself. Got you too, you're welcome. We're all in this together.

And clothes, boy, a lot of it's clothes. "Well, what am I going to wear?" Right, ladies? "Am I going to wear a skirt? Am I going to wear a dress? Am I going to wear pants? Am I going to be casual, semi-casual, formal? Where will my neckline be? Where will my hemline be? Will they meet? My hair, my makeup, my beauty, my spouse's beauty, my kids' beauty. When people come to my house, and they wash their hands, and they dry them on the towel, will they know the cotton fiber count on the towel? Is this Egyptian or is this—what will this say about me as a human being? Not to mention where I live, and what neighborhood, and what zip code. And do I own? Do I rent? Is it a condo? Is it a townhome? Is it a home?"

They also talk about competitive consumption. Your neighbor got something, you need to have it. Why? Because it's competitive. And now we watch television shows where we see the richest people in the world, and we assume that we need to have what they have, and do what they do, and then we get ourselves into debt, and then we have a crisis, and all of a sudden our identity idolatry has us in poverty, because we spend money we don't have to buy things we don't need to impress people we don't know.

## **D – DUTIES**

Duties. "I'm a student. I'm a first-born, responsible child. I'm the funny one. Every time things get difficult, I tell a joke. That's my job. I'm a lawyer. I'm an attorney. I'm an accountant. I'm a truck driver. I'm a construction worker. I'm a mom. I'm a dad. I'm a deacon. I'm an elder. I'm a Community Group leader." Duties.

Again, idols can be good things in a God place, which is a bad thing. It may not even be that you're doing the wrong thing. You're doing the right thing with the wrong heart. It's not to show the world God, but it's to show the world how glorious you are. What are your duties? What are your responsibilities? How are they going?

Here's what happens: if your identity is in your duty, you try to find your thing. "What's my thing? Am I arty? Am I musical? Do I paint? Am I hunting, fishing, biking? Am I a

caregiver? Am I an interior designer? Am I a good accountant? Am I a lawyer? What's my thing?" We're all looking for our thing. "Found my thing, now I want to become really good at my thing." And if you achieve it, you kind of become smug. "Look how good I am." And if you don't, you become depressed. "I'm not very good." It never leads to joy in any certain identity.

Here's the truth. Listen to this. Who you are determines what you do. Who you are determines what you do. Not what the whole world thinks: what you do determines who you are. It's not what you do determines who you are. Because, see, the whole self-help movement is this: do these things to change yourself. Lie. Come to Jesus, be born again, become a new you, and then who you are determines what you do, not what you do determines who you are.

## O – OTHERS

Others. Alright, now we're going to proceed to full-blown meddling in your life. I just tell you that in advance. I think one of the most common idols, if not the most common idol, is others. This can be individuals or groups. "What do they think? What do they want? What do they say? What do they need?" Proverbs 29:25 says, "The fear of man is a trap," or a snare. "I want them to like me. I want them to approve of me. I don't want them to punish me, I want them to bless me. I want them to never leave me, never forsake me. I want them to say, 'Well done, good and faithful servant.' I want them to say, 'You can be part of our community. You're always welcome here. You're one of us.'"

Whose words are far too powerful? If they praise you, your life is worth living. If they criticize you, you feel like dying. We should respect people, but not worship them. And this worship of others, sometimes it's your tribe, it's your nation, it's your state. Everything's bigger in Texas. It's your city. We're in Seattle, we smoke weed, do what we want. Portland they say, "We're not impressed. We used to do that before we got more liberal than you." Alright? What's your race? "Oh, we're Italian. We're Hispanic. We're Irish. We're Asian. This is who we are." Your gender, your income level, your sexual orientation, your hobby, your sports team, your favorite college football team, your favorite pro team, your political party.

Here's what happens, if you idolize, you will demonize. Jonathan Edwards, I believe America's greatest theologian historically, says, "If you idolize, you will demonize." You know why? "If I worship them, then I have to hate them. So, it's not just that I disagree with that political party, they're demonized. They're barely human. My sports team, we're like Jesus, and that sports team is like Satan." Okay, right? Any college football fans? I'm not making this up. The only thing I left out was the nachos. That's the only thing I left out.

It's okay to disagree, but you don't need to demonize people. If you idolize your group, you'll demonize the other group. That's what leads to all the conflict and all of the hostility. It's not just this is right, and this is wrong, and we disagree, and we've got to sort it out. It's that you are different than me, and I am wonderful and you are horrible, or we are wonderful and you are horrible.

And in the age of social media, this is more intense than ever. Social media's about creating an identity. How will you present yourself to the world? Any of you opened your first social media account? "What photos will I show?" There's a big decision. "Just me? Me and my pet? That says something. Me and my hobbies? Me in front of my car? Me with famous people? Me with rich people? Me in beautiful places? Or just photos of other people and things? I don't want to be in the photo. Single, married, complicated? Oh, I gotta—oh, I gotta—okay. Hobbies? I should say hiking because that's outdoors and active. I don't hike, but if I say hiking, then other people will think I'm a hiker, and health-conscious, and love—hiker! Hiker! What else? 'I love children.' I don't, but I want to meet a woman, so I'm going to say that."

Alright, and all of a sudden we start creating someone that we wish we were or we wish other people thought we were. We live in a world where we're always creating an identity and someone's always criticizing an identity, and that's the world we live in.

And then others have more power than they've ever had in the history of the world because communication now is instant, constant, global, permanent. "Once they say it, it's out there forever, and everybody sees it, and everybody's going to comment, and what will this mean for me? And worst yet, what if I put it all out there and nobody friends me, nobody follows me, and nobody cares? I check my status update, but I'm the only one."

## L – LONGINGS

Longings. This is not biblical hope, this is naive optimism. "Today is bad, but tomorrow will be great. Today I'm sick, tomorrow I'll be healthy. Today I'm unemployed, tomorrow I'm getting a job. Today I'm single, but tomorrow I'm going to meet somebody. Today my life is a wreck, but tomorrow is a new day because when God closes a window, he opens a door! It's not in the Bible, but I say it confidently because I don't know what I'm talking about and I'm nervous."

Or maybe you're really religious and spiritual. You're like, "Oh, I have verses. I have verses. I picked some. I just—it's not what they mean, but it's how I use them. 'We're more than conquerors in Christ!' Good, finally, now it sounds spiritual. 'He'll never leave you nor forsake you. He never lets the righteous go hungry.'" Just start pulling verses. "Claim the promises of God! Have faith! God wants you to be rich, and healthy, and successful!" Find a self-help teacher and a false prophet and let them give you a god who gives you your idol. Be careful. Your identity needs to work today and not just be something that you're hoping will work tomorrow. It needs to be something you have today, not something that you'll get tomorrow maybe.

Here's what happens: either that identity idolatry never comes, or it does come and it only disappoints. "I got better, I'm still sad. I got married, I'm not fully satisfied. We have kids, they're driving me nuts." The single people didn't laugh, and the married people know what I'm talking about. "I always wanted that job, I got that job, I don't like that job. Or I do like that job, but it's not a good religion. It makes a horrible god. That office isn't really a church. It's a good place to do some things, but it's not a place that ultimately reconciles my broken relationship with a Creator of the universe. It's not the place where I find out who God is and who I am."

Some of you, it's tomorrow. "When I graduate, when I get the job, when I get married, when we have kids, when we pay off debt, when we renovate the house, when we get all our bills paid off, when we can go on vacation. It's coming, it's almost there." Ecclesiastes calls it, "A chasing after the wind." It's a wild goose chase with no goose.

## S – SUFFERINGS

Here's the hardest one, maybe. Sufferings. We suffer emotionally. We suffer relationally. We suffer spiritually. We suffer financially. We suffer physically. And when we suffer, either because of sins we commit or others commit against us, we can have our worst day be our defining day. Let me say this: you're not your best day; you're not your worst day. Your identity, your righteousness is in Christ, not you.

It's hard when people are suffering because they will take their suffering as an identity. "I have cancer. I'm divorced. My spouse cheated on me. My kids betrayed me. My business partner robbed me. And I'm suffering, and I'm hurting." And the empathy, the love, the affection, the compassion that we have for people, that I have for you, wants to say, "I am so sorry. The Bible says that's sin. It's so bad Jesus died for it. That's the only way it can be forgiven, or there's eternal consequence for those who don't give it to him."

I want to be careful, because I know I can come off like tough jock, you know, full-throated prophet who just wants to breathe fire, and not come off as loving, and compassionate, father, pastor, brother. So, I want to say this carefully so that maybe I could serve you and maybe you could serve others. But, if we really love someone, we can't allow their suffering to become the source of their identity. You may have cancer, but you're not cancer. You may be divorced, but your identity is not divorcee. It's made in the image and likeness of God, that God made you and Jesus saved you.

We interviewed a lot of people for the book, and there was a gal, we call her name Tina, she had brain cancer. Horrible. Young, healthy woman, brain cancer. And the surgery and the trauma, it affects her motor skills, and speech, and all of her life. It's affected everything. And how others didn't love her, and didn't support her, and didn't surround her is horrible. And she has this amazing line that I was very honored to share. I felt like it was one of those Holy Spirit, wisdom through a sister, amazing gifts. She was talking about her suffering, and her cancer, and her hard life, and she said, I'm paraphrasing, "These things may explain me, but they don't define me." That's wisdom.

I want you to hear that. Your sufferings may explain you. Your income might explain you. Your health, your beauty, your life stage, your marital status, your IQ, your résumé, your GPA, your net worth, the car you drive, the clothes you wear—those things might explain you, but they don't define you. They don't define you.

And I say this as a corrective. We do Redemption Groups, which I love and appreciate, trying to help those who are struggling with sin and suffering, and it's a little different than the recovery moment. And I don't want to be overly critical, because the recovery movement is trying to help people, which as a pastor I'm all for, but when it's, "Hi, my name is so-and-so, and I'm an alcoholic," is that your identity? "Hi, my name's so-and-so, and I'm a drug addict." Is that your identity? "Hi, my name is so-and-so, and I'm a gambling addict." Is that your identity? And in thirty years, if you've not had a drink, is that still how you'll introduce yourself?

Because see, we don't believe in recovery, we believe in redemption. We believe that in Christ, you become a new person. You get a new identity, and a new power, and a new mind to live a new life, to have a new destiny, to leave a new legacy. We're not trying to recover your life before Christ, we're trying to redeem your life in Christ. You're not your worst day. You're not the worst thing you've done. You're not the worst thing that others have done to you. You are what Jesus has done for you: lived without sin, died for sin and suffering, rose to conquer death, and is coming again to end suffering.

## UNDERSTANDING YOUR IDENTITY CRISIS

I want to share with you a pattern I've witnessed in pastoral ministry. I love you with a father's affection, and I want you to—if I'm your pastor, listen to me. If I'm not your pastor, let me be your pastor for five minutes, because I love you and I want to help. And I see this pattern, and I want to share it with you. I see it in my own life; I've seen it in the lives of others.

Understanding your identity crisis. Most of us don't even know we have an identity idolatry until we have a crisis. Number one, you live in fear that your identity idolatry will fail you or be taken from you. "If I can just find a husband, if I could just find a wife, if we could just have a kid, if I could just finish college, if I could get a job, if I could get a job with benefits, if we could buy a house, if we could pay off our debt, then we'll be there, heaven on earth! We're almost to heaven! It's coming, it's right there! There's our blessing, there's our God." It's right there, but you know what? It's uncertain, it's tenuous, it could fail, it might not happen, it might not come. Or if it does, it might get taken away! And it's stress, and it's anxiety.

Number two, your identity idolatry crumbles under the weight of being in God's place in your life. "All I wanted my spouse to do is never leave me nor forsake me!" That's Jesus' job description. "I just wanted my kids to be little trophies that look like me, and have my last name, and reflect my glory to the earth." That's idolatry. "I just wanted my job to provide me an income and security so that I could have all that I think I need, or at least maybe even a little bit more than what I really want. Is that too much to ask?" And good things in God's place are invariably things that fail. Your spouse, your kids, your job, your beauty, your health, your friends, your church, it all starts to crumble under the weight of: "Can't you just be God?" No.

Number three, as your identity idolatry begins to crumble you become panicked. "Our marriage isn't doing well. We're getting older. I'm not as beautiful as I once was. I put on five pounds. I put on ten pounds. Our kids are leaving home. Our company is downsizing. They've changed the tax brackets. I had it all together and now it's all coming apart."

Number four, when your identity idolatry fails—and it's not if, it's when. It's not if, it's when. Some of you say, "Pastor Mark, it's working." Wait. You look for someone to blame.

Self-centered contempt: "I am a failure. I am a loser. I should have been able to keep that job. I should have been able to keep that relationship. My friends don't want to be with me because I'm worthless. We wanted to have a child, but we're infertile and we can't afford adoption. God must be punishing me. What have I done? I deserve this. I'm a terrible person. I am a failure."

For some of you, it's others-centered contempt. "You failed me. You cheated on me. You robbed me. You abandoned me. You betrayed me. You hurt me. You lied to me. You ruined my life. You are a despicable person. Look what you've done. Look at the mess you've made of my life. I had a great life and you ruined it." Some of you say, "I've never said that." God knows your thoughts. We've all said it.

If it's not self-centered contempt or others-centered contempt, it's God-centered contempt. "You said you loved me. You said you'd fix it. You said you'd change it. You said it wouldn't be like this. I read the Scriptures. I know what you say. You don't do what you say you do. God, I want my idol. Be a good God and give me my idol."

Have you been there? Are you there? You got two options, friend. You turn to Jesus Christ for a new eternal identity. Say, "Jesus, my life is built on idolatry. Who you are, who I am is not the truth. It isn't working, it isn't going to work. It's not too late. I can repent. I can invite you to forgive my sin because there's sin here. I can invite you to make me new, to give me a new identity, that God made me and Jesus saved me. My identity is secure. Now together, Jesus, we can make it through whatever I've got to go through because I have you and my identity's in you, my comfort is in you, my hope is in you, my security is in you, my courage is in you, my perseverance is in you." That's what I want for you. See, Jesus lived a life fully out of his identity, with no idolatry, and he died for us, and he rose and he lives with us.

Your second option, this is not what I want for you, where sadly, you just pick a new identity idolatry. "I was married, but now I'm going to be a great single person. I was going to have kids, but now I'll just find a way to be okay with no kids. I was healthy, but I'm okay with being sick, and now I'm sick. That's who I am."

I was going to read you all of them. You can just do it for yourself. It's January, the lying month. Every magazine, the cover is just another lie. You can be old and beautiful. You can be young and healthy. You can be a teenager who boys love. You can get your cat to obey. Your dog can be your best friend. You can look amazing and a boy will take you to prom. You can reuse your wardrobe without spending money, and be glorious, and attract a man. Your children can obey you. You can get rich from Obama. That's what it says. You can buy a new motorcycle and enjoy your toys. And while you're at it, you can find toys that you enjoy and have an exact replica for your kids so you can commit the same idolatry together. Every January, new year, new you. Old you, old lie. Only in Christ is there a new you.

## JESUS AND HIS PEOPLE

How about I end with this: my father-in-law died yesterday. After Christmas, Grandpa Gib, a pastor of forty-some years, my wife's dad, went on vacation with his wife and Grace's sisters over to Leavenworth, up in the mountains. He got sick and had to be rushed in for an emergency surgery. Grace was over there visiting him a few days ago, and I was going to take the kids on Friday after school to go see Grandpa Gib. We weren't sure if he was going to make a turn for the better or make a turn for the worst. He was in his eighties and bad health, and he was three hours away from home, over in Wenatchee.

Well, I got the text in the morning, he took a turn for the worst very suddenly. Basically, Grandpa wants to say goodbye to the grandkids, he's dying. So, I grabbed the kids out of school, gassed up the car, handed off my responsibilities, threw stuff together, and ran over to Eastern Washington, trying to explain to the kids death, and hospital visit, and Grandpa's going to have tubes, and we may be at the end, and he wants to—he can't talk very well because he'd had a tube in and it affected his vocal chords, but he can hear, he is coherent.

I mean, it was crazy. I knew I was pushing it, ran out of gas five miles away. The light never came on until the car turned off. I thought, "Man, it's close, but you know, the light hasn't come on." And it turns off, and then the light comes on. I was like, "That's not the order I was hoping." So, I'm over on the shoulder of the road, in 20-degree weather, with a stalled car on the freeway, with five kids, and a dying grandpa.

And the texts keep coming: "You better hurry. He's—he could go at any minute." So I tell Grace, "Well, don't come and get me. Stay at your father's side." So, we hitchhiked a ride with a complete stranger. Finally got to the hospital, ran in, and we were there to say goodbye to Grandpa Gib, and to pray for him, and to sing, and to spend our time together as a family, and he died Saturday morning, and we got back into town late last night.

And you know what people don't ask for on their death bed? A lot of the things that we use to establish our identity. "Hey, bring me all my trophies. I want to see them one last time. Hey, could you print out my resume? Read it to me again. Could you bring in my report card? I want to see my GPA. Could you bring a scale? I want to step on it and see if I finally lost that weight. Could you park my car out front? I'd like to sit in it while I die so that as people come and go, they can see me in this car that defines me as a person." Instead, what they say is, "Jesus and people." That's all that ultimately matters in the end, and the only thing that will be together forever is Jesus and his people. Amen?

Father God, I pray for your people. I pray against the enemy, his servants, their works, and effects. I pray against the lies we believe, God, and I pray against the lies that some are believing right now, that it's too late, they've gone too far, it's going to be okay. God, I pray for humility, and repentance, and truthfulness on behalf of your people. Lord, just because it's a new year doesn't mean it's a new you. Just because we get some new habits, and new tricks, and new insights doesn't mean it's a new you. Jesus, you've come that we might be born again. New creations, new people, new identity, new life, new purpose, new worship, new destiny. Lord, I pray for my friends, that they would all belong to the Lord Jesus. And for those who know him, I pray they would live out of their identity in Christ, that they would realize that their identity is received, it's not achieved. It's about God made us and Jesus saves us. And in light of that, we can be students, and workers, and teens, and singles, and marrieds, and grandparents, and divorced, and fertile, and infertile, and rich, and poor, and black, and white, and young, and old in Christ. And no, our life is not pain- and suffering-free. Our identity can be pain- and suffering-proof so that whatever circumstances we find ourselves in might be to your glory and others' good. We might be able to worship, and demonstrate, and reflect the goodness of the God who loves us well. And God, the most important day is the last day, and if we have our hope on anything or anyone other than Jesus, that will be the worst day. And so I pray for my friends, that their hope and their identity would be in Christ, and that the last day would be the best day. In Jesus' name, amen.

*Note: This sermon transcript has been edited for readability.*