



IDENTITY

**13 small group
sessions on
IDENTITY**

closing the gap between belief and action, knowledge and practice



General Conference of Seventh-day Adventist® Church



YOUTH MINISTRIES DEPARTMENT

Youth Ministries Department General Conference of Seventh-day Adventist® Church

Prepared by the General Conference Youth Ministries Department as part of the 2011 theme “Identity.”

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YEAR OF IDENTITY
2011

Small Group Discussions for Adventist Youth

ABOUT THIS MANUAL

The year 2011 has been designated by the General Conference Youth Ministries Department as a year of Identity. This is part of the yearly themes for the youth around the world.

This year, the Seventh-day Adventist church around the world will be focusing on Identity through Discipleship, Leadership, Evangelism, and Service. The young people will learn how to close the gap that exists between belief and action, knowledge and practice.

These small group discussions have been developed to be used during Youth Meetings when youth meet for their weekly programs. There are enough programs for the entire year.

It is the prayer of the General Conference Youth Ministries team that these discussions will help youth to grow in love with Jesus Christ and become an extension cord for Him, allowing His love to flow through them straight into the lives of others.

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QUOTABLE QUOTES

“Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body” (*1 Corinthians 6:19,20, NIV*).

“A new commandment I give you; Love one another as I have loved you, so you must love one another. All men will know that you are my disciples if you love one another” (*John 13:35, NIV*).

“You each have an identity of your own, but in that identity there must be a unity. There is constantly to be a development of the faculties that God has given you, that you may improve, improve, and that you may indeed be looked upon by the heavenly angels with commendation.... Let the light of heaven shine right in the home – and we believe it will – in every word and in every action” (*10 Manuscript Release, 179.1*).

“The religion of Christ does not require us to lose our identity of character, but merely to adapt ourselves, in some measure, to the feelings and ways of others. Many people may be brought together in a unity of religious faith, whose opinions, habits, and tastes in temporal matters are not in harmony. But with the love of Christ glowing in their bosoms, looking forward to the same heaven as their eternal home, they may have the sweetest and most intelligent communion together, and a unity of the most wonderful” (*Bible Echo, December 1, 1886, par. 13*).

Wherever you may be placed, you must be fortified by firm principle. Enter life determined by the help of God to cleave close to whatsoever things are honest, true, lovely, and of good report. The fear of God, united with the love of that which is noble, pure, and elevating, will guard you from a dishonest action.... How pleasant, how satisfactory, will be the recollection all through life that thought exposed to many and fierce temptations, your hands were unstained by dishonesty, and your heart undefiled by cherishing temptation...” (*Christ Triumphant, 97.2*).

There are rights which belong to every individual. We have an individuality and an identity that is our own. No one can submerge his identity in that of any other. All must act for themselves, according to the dictates of their own conscience. As regards our responsibility and influence, we are amenable to God as deriving our life from Him. This we do not obtain from humanity, but from God only. We are His by creation and by redemption. Our very bodies are not our own, to treat as we please, to cripple by habits that lead to decay, making it impossible to render to God perfect service. Our lives and all our faculties belong to Him. He is caring for us every moment; He keeps the living machinery in action; if we were left to run it for one moment; we should die. We are absolutely dependent upon God (*Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers, 1923, 422.2*).

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“Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are — yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need” —Hebrews 4:14-16 (NIV).

i-den-ti-ty [ahy-den-ti-tee] The set of behavioral or personal characteristics by which an individual is recognizable as a member of a group (American Heritage Dictionary via Websters.com).

“Identity” — We are unique. We have character.

Having an identity means having purpose and meaning to our existence. Identity is intentional and is formed through guidance and instruction. As a Christian we are to be distinct. What does this mean? Are we going to follow the crowd or make our own choices? How do we obtain direction and purpose in our lives? How do we change our personalities to be more Christ-like? We will seek to understand what God’s answer is for each of us during this year.

Identity through:

- **Leadership**
- **Discipleship**
- **Evangelism**
- **Service**

Introduction

LEADERSHIP

Essence

Once you become aware that the main business that you are here for is to know God, most of life's problems fall into place of their own accord. The world today is full of sufferers from the wasting disease which Albert Camus focused as absurdism ("life is a bad joke"), and from the complaint which we may call Marie Antoinette's fever, since she found the phrase that describes it ("nothing tastes"). These disorders blight the whole of life: everything becomes at once a problem and a bore, because nothing seems worthwhile. But absurdist tapeworms and Antoinette's fever are ills from which, in the nature of the case, Christians are immune, except for occasional spells of derangement when the power of temptation presses their minds out of shape – and these, by God's mercy, do not last.

What makes life worthwhile is having a big enough objective, something which catches our imagination and lays hold of our allegiance; and this the Christian has in a way that no other person has. For what higher, more exalted, and more compelling goal can there be than to know God?

– J.I Packer, *Knowing God*, pp. 33-34

Wise men and women have long held that happiness lies in being yourself without inhibitions. Let the Great Rabbi hold you silently against His heart. In learning who He is, you will find out who you are: Abba's child in Christ our Lord.

– Brennan Manning, *Abba's Child*

Breakout time (divide into small groups)

Discuss: What I really lack is to be clear in my mind what I am to do, not what I am to know, except in so far as a certain understanding must precede every action. The thing is to understand myself, to see what God really wants me to do.

If an *existing* person relates himself with passion to eternal happiness, then his life will express the relation. If the eternal does not absolutely transform his existence, then he is not relating himself to it.

– Søren Kierkegaard, *Provocations*, p. 266

How does knowing God help the Christian know his own identity?

Is there a difference between knowing God and knowing *about* God? Does it matter in the case of understanding one's identity? Why or why not?

Throughout the year, we'll be looking at what the Bible has to say about our identity. Compile a preliminary list from what the group already knows.

Scripture

Questions of identity raise the great questions of life, namely, “What was I made for?” and “What is my purpose in life?” Look up the following scriptures and note the answers the Bible has for some such questions:

John 17:3 – What is the “eternal life” that Jesus gives? _____

Jer 9:23-24 – What is the best thing in life, bringing more joy, delight and contentment than anything else?

Hos 6:6 – What, of all the states God ever sees man in, gives God most pleasure?

In what ways do the following verses demonstrate how God knows our potential and secures our purpose?

Daniel 1:3-6, 17-19 _____

Psalms 139:13 _____

Jer 1:5 _____

Php 2:13 _____

Notes

Introduction

DISCIPLESHIP

Essence

What matters supremely, therefore, is not, in the last analysis, the fact that I know God, but the larger fact which underlies it – the fact that *he knows me*. I am graven on the palms of his hands. I am never out of his mind. All my knowledge of him depends on his sustained initiative in knowing me. I know him because he first knew me, and continues to know me. He knows me as a friend, one who loves me; and there is no moment when his eye is off me, or his attention distracted from me, and no moment, therefore, when his care falters.

This is momentous knowledge. There is unspeakable comfort – the sort of comfort that energizes, be it said, not enervates – in knowing that God is constantly taking knowledge of me in love and watching over me for my good. There is tremendous relief in knowing that his love to me is utterly realistic, based at every point on prior knowledge of the worst about me, so that no discovery now can disillusion him about me, in the way I am so often disillusioned about myself, and quench his determination to bless me.

There is, certainly, great cause for humility in the thought that he sees all the twisted things about me that my fellow humans do not see (and am I glad!), and that he sees more corruption in me than that which I see in myself (which, in all conscience, is enough). There is, however, equally great incentive to worship and love God in the thought that, for some unfathomable reason, he wants me as his friend, and desires to be my friend, and has given his Son to die for me in order to realize this purpose. We cannot work these thoughts out here, but merely to mention them is enough to show how much it means to know not merely that we know God, but that he knows us.

– J.I Packer, *Knowing God*, pp. 41-42

Breakout time (divide into small groups)

Discuss: “how much it means to know not merely that we know God, but that he knows us.”

What is the implication for understanding our identity that God “knows me as a friend...and there is no moment when his eye is off me, or his attention distracted from me, and no moment, therefore, when his care falters”?

Discuss the idea that we can be disillusioned about ourselves, but nothing can disillusion God about us. What are the implications? Does God’s “knowledge of the worst about me” bring comfort? Why/why not? [Consider journaling more in depth on this question personally than you can likely discuss within the group.]

Scripture

Contrast how the following individuals were perceived with the image God presented:

Gen 27:36/Mal 1:2 _____

Gen 3:11/Num 12:6-8 _____

Judges 6:15/Judges 6:12 _____

Mt 4:18/Mt 4:19 _____

Notes

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

Introduction

EVANGELISM

Essence

There is no peace like the peace of those whose minds are possessed with full assurance that they have known God, and God has known them, and that this relationship guarantees God's favor to them in life, through death and on for ever.

This is the peace of which Paul speaks in Romans 5:1...and whose substance he analyzes in full in Romans 8....

This is the peace which Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego knew; hence the contentment with which they stood their ground in face of Nebuchadnezzar's ultimatum (Dan 3:15)....Their reply (3:16-18) is classic. "O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter." (No panic!) "If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king." (Courteous, but unanswerable – they knew their God!) "But even if he does not" – if no deliverance comes – "We want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods." (It doesn't matter! It makes no difference! Live or die, they are content.)

The comprehensiveness of our contentment is another measure whereby we may judge whether we really know God.

First Steps

Do we desire such knowledge of God? Then two things follow.

First, we must recognize how much we lack knowledge of God. We must learn to measure ourselves, not by our knowledge about God, not by our gifts and responsibilities in the church, but by how we pray and what goes on in our hearts. Many of us, I suspect, have no idea how impoverished we are at this level. Let us ask the Lord to show us.

Second, we must seek the Savior. When he was on earth, he invited ordinary people to company with him; thus they came to know him, and in knowing him to know his Father. The Old Testament records pre-incarnate manifestations of the Lord Jesus doing the same thing.... The Lord Jesus Christ is now absent from us in body, but spiritually it makes no difference; still we may find and know God through seeking and finding Jesus' company. It is those who have sought the Lord Jesus till they have found him – for the promise is that when we seek him with all our hearts, we shall surely find him – who can stand before the world to testify that they have known God.

– J.I Packer, *Knowing God*, pp. 31-32

Breakout time (divide into small groups)

Read and discuss Romans 5:1 and 8 in light of the "peace of which Paul speaks" referred to in the passage above.

While the Hebrew boys' reply to the king is not primarily evangelistic in its thrust, discuss the evangelistic effect it likely had on those who witnessed this. How might your own principled stands have the same unintended effect?

Discuss what the following verses have to say about your identity. Are you actively portraying or hiding the characteristics of these? Discuss the implications for yourself and those to whom you are called to witness:

Matthew 5:13 _____

Matthew 5:14-16 _____

Notes

[illegible]

Introduction

SERVICE

Note

Future weeks focusing on service will include possible service project ideas, and less “study,” but this introductory lesson should be used to explore the role of service in the Christian’s life and to plan future service projects.

Involve the youth in the identification of appropriate projects and discuss the need for various types of service, and how essential commitment and follow-through are in starting any given service project.

Quotable Quotes

“Paradoxically, we attain self-awareness, not by self-analysis, but by the leap of commitment. According to Viktor Frankl, a person finds identity only to the extent that “he commits himself to something beyond himself, to a cause greater than himself.” The meaning of our lives emerges in the surrender of ourselves to an adventure of becoming who we are not yet.”

– Brennan Manning, *Abba’s Child*

“The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others.”

– Mahatma Gandhi

“The purpose of our lives is to find the purpose of our lives.”

– Thomas Merton

“What can we gain by sailing to the moon if we are not able to cross the abyss that separates us from ourselves? This is the most important of all voyages of discovery, and without it, all the others are not only useless, but disastrous.”

– Thomas Merton

“Only you can be yourself; no one else is qualified for the job.”

– Bits and Pieces

“When one is out of touch with oneself, one cannot touch others.”

– Anne Morrow Lindbergh

“Armed with self understanding and knowledge of where we can make the greatest contribution, anything is possible.”

– Al Watts

“No amount of human having or human doing can make up for a deficit in human being.”

– John Adams

“Think more about who you are and less about what you do, for if you are just, your ways will be just.”

– Meister Eckhart

Scripture

1. Look up the following texts and note what they reveal about the example Jesus sets for us:

Matthew 4:23-25 _____

Matthew 6:1-4 _____

Matthew 10:1; 7-8 _____

Matthew 19:13-15 _____

Mark 1:35-39 _____

Mark 6:31-34 _____

2. Look up the following texts and note how the early church continued in service after Christ's death and resurrection:

Acts 4:32-35 _____

Acts 6:1-7 _____

Acts 9:36 _____

Acts 11:27-30 _____

3. Read Matthew 10:24-25. In following Jesus' example, what is one thing we can expect to encounter?

4. Read Mark 10:13-15. How can service / interaction with the world help us in our Christian walk?

Consider

Discuss together the role of service in the Christian church, reflecting on the introductory quote and the texts you've just read. Make plans for how you can serve others more effectively, both individually and corporately.

Edenic Identity

LEADERSHIP

Essence

In the Garden of Eden, humanity was crowned with glory!
In the Garden of Eden, we received the promotion that the devil wanted!
In the Garden of Eden, we became God's beloved favorites!
In the Garden of Eden, somebody didn't like it!!!

But it was On The Cross our Identity was Restored
On The Cross we gained Abundant Life
On The Cross the identity thief was rendered Powerless
On The Cross we gained Authority to Identify with Christ

I thank God for my Identity
I know who I am and Whose I am
I want the world to point at me and say, "He's just like his Father"
Looks like his Father
Talks like his Father
Walks like his Father

My Father sits high and looks low

– adapted from Wayne A. Lawson, *Identity Theft*, www.sermoncentral.com

Breakout time (divide into small groups)

Review the first chapters of Genesis and discuss – bringing other Scriptures to bear, as well – God's intended identity for humankind before sin. What are the implications on our understanding of our identity today?

Discuss: How would you respond if I asked you this question: "Do you honestly believe God likes you, not just loves you because theologically God *has* to love you?" If you could answer with gut-level honesty, "Oh, yes, my Abba is very fond of me," you would experience a serene compassion for yourself that approximates the meaning of tenderness.

– Brennan Manning, *Abba's Child*

My dignity as Abba's child is my most coherent sense of self.

– Brennan Manning, *Abba's Child*

Scripture

While we most often think of God as “Father,” He also presents Himself maternally throughout the Bible. Discuss the implications of one such presentation in Isaiah 49:15.

Further exploring my biblical identity:

Ephesians 2:10 _____

Ephesians 1:3 _____

Ephesians 1:4 _____

Notes

[illegible]

Edenic Identity

DISCIPLESHIP

Essence

“...that they may be one just as We are one...” (John 17:22).

Personality is the unique, limitless part of our life that makes us distinct from everyone else. It is too vast for us even to comprehend. An island in the sea may be just the top of a large mountain, and our personality is like that island. We don't know the great depths of our being, therefore we cannot measure ourselves. We start out thinking we can, but soon realize that there is really only one Being who fully understands us, and that is our Creator.

Personality is the characteristic mark of the inner, spiritual man, just as individuality is the characteristic of the outer, natural man. Our Lord can never be described in terms of individuality and independence, but only in terms of His total Person – “I and My Father are one” (John 10:30). Personality merges, and you only reach your true identity once you are merged with another person. When love or the Spirit of God come upon a person, he is transformed. He will then no longer insist on maintaining his individuality. Our Lord never referred to a person's individuality or his isolated position, but spoke in terms of the total person – “...that they may be one just as We are one...” Once your rights to yourself are surrendered to God, your true personal nature begins responding to God immediately. Jesus Christ brings freedom to your total person, and even your individuality is transformed. The transformation is brought about by love – personal devotion to Jesus. Love is the overflowing result of one person in true fellowship with another.—Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost for His Highest*, December 12

Breakout time (divide youth into small groups)

Discuss: “We don't know the great depths of our being, therefore we cannot measure ourselves. We start out thinking we can, but soon realize that there is really only one Being who fully understands us, and that is our Creator.”

Discuss the distinction made in the passage above between personality and individuality.

Discuss: “...you only reach your true identity once you are merged with another person.”

Discuss what Chambers posits happens to individuality surrendered to God. Discuss in light of Paul's analogy of the body...do individual parts lose their unique functions? Explain.

Discuss: “If there is even a trace of individual self-satisfaction left in us, it always says, “I can't surrender,” or “I can't be free.” But the spiritual part of our being never says “I can't”; it simply soaks up everything around it. ...We are designed with a great capacity for God, but sin, our own individuality, and wrong thinking keep us from getting to Him. God delivers us from sin – we have to deliver ourselves from our individuality. This means offering our natural life to God and sacrificing it to Him, so He may transform it into spiritual life through our obedience.

...Don't say, “Oh, Lord, I suffer from wandering thoughts.” *Don't* suffer from wandering thoughts. Stop listening to the tyranny of your individual natural life and win freedom into the spiritual life.

“If the Son makes you free....” Do not substitute *Savior* for *Son* in this passage. The *Savior* has set us free from sin, but this is the freedom that comes from being set free from myself by the *Son*. It is what Paul meant in Galatians 2:20 when he said, “I have been crucified with Christ....” His individuality had been broken and his spirit had been united with his Lord; not just merged into Him, but made one with Him. “...you shall be free indeed” – free to the very core of your being; free from the inside to the outside. We tend to rely on our own energy, instead of being energized by the power that comes from identification with Jesus. –Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost for His Highest*, November 18

Notes

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Edenic Identity

EVANGELISM

Essence

Henri Nouwen stated, “All I want to say to you is, ‘You are the Beloved,’ and all I hope is that you can hear these words as spoken to you with all the tenderness and force that love can hold. My only desire is to make these words reverberate in every corner of your being – ‘You are the Beloved.’” Anchored in this reality, our true self needs neither a muted trumpet to herald our arrival nor a gaudy soapbox to rivet attention from others. We give glory to God simply by being ourselves.

God created us for union with Himself: This is the original purpose of our lives. And God is defined as love (1 John 4:16). Living in awareness of our belovedness is the axis around which the Christian life revolves. Being the beloved is our identity, the core of our existence. It is not merely a lofty thought, an inspiring idea, or one name among many. It is the name by which God knows us and the way He relates to us.

...If I must seek an identity outside of myself, then the accumulation of wealth, power, and honors allures me. Or I may find my center of gravity in interpersonal relationships. Ironically, the church itself can stroke the imposter by conferring and withholding honors, offering pride of place based on performance, and creating the illusion of status by rank and pecking order. When belonging to an elite group eclipses the love of God, when I draw life and meaning from any source other than my belovedness, I am spiritually dead. When God gets relegated to second place behind any bauble or trinket, I have swapped the pearl of great price for painted fragments of glass.

“Who am I?” asked Merton, and he responded, “I am one loved by Christ.” This is the foundation of the true self. The indispensable condition for developing and maintaining the awareness of our belovedness is time alone with God. In solitude we tune out the nay-saying whispers of our worthlessness and sink down into the mystery of our true self. Our longing to know who we really are – which is the source of all our discontent – will never be satisfied until we confront and accept our solitude. There we discover that the truth of our belovedness is really true. Our identity rests in God’s relentless tenderness for us revealed in Jesus Christ.

– Brennan Manning, *Abba’s Child*

Breakout time (divide into small groups)

How do you understand Nouwen’s statement within the Garden of Eden, both pre- and post-sin?

How do we get back to the “original purpose” of our lives?

How would the understanding of one’s identity “being the beloved” be transformative? Give concrete examples of how this kind of understanding would change *your* sense of self.

What other identities allure you? Explore what the attraction is.

Discuss: “Our identity rests in God’s relentless tenderness for us revealed in Jesus Christ.”

Discuss the ideas presented in the above passage specifically in light of their implications for evangelism. Discuss not only how such ideas would affect those to whom you are witnessing, but also the effect on your witness if you were to fully accept your own identity as “the beloved.”

How does your understanding of being “the beloved” *enhance* your witness to another of being “the beloved,” rather than compete with it?

Consider

Spend time alone with God contemplating your identity as the beloved and this being the way in which God knows and relates to you.

Notes

Edenic Identity

SERVICE

Quotable Quotes

“[W]e unwittingly project onto God our own attitudes and feelings toward ourselves. ... Thus, if we feel hateful toward ourselves, we assume that God feels hateful toward us.

But we cannot assume that He feels about us the way we feel about ourselves – unless we love ourselves compassionately, intensely, and freely. In human form Jesus revealed to us what God is like. He exposed our projections for the idolatry that they are and gave us the way to become free of them. It takes a profound conversion to accept that God is relentlessly tender and compassionate toward us just as we are – not in spite of our sins and faults (that would not be total acceptance), but with them.”

– Brennan Manning, *Abba's Child*

“One of the keys to real religious experience is the shattering realization that no matter how hateful we are to ourselves, we are not hateful to God. This realization helps us to understand the difference between our love and His. Our love is a need, His is a gift.”

– Thomas Merton, as quoted in Brennan Manning, *Abba's Child*

“Define yourself radically as one beloved by God. This is the true self. Every other identity is illusion.”

– Brennan Manning, *Abba's Child*

“Since you are like no other ever created since the beginning of time, you are incomparable.”

– Brenda Ueland

“Every human being is intended to have a character of his own; to be what no other one is, and to do what no other can do.”

– Channing

SERVICE PROJECT IDEAS

Visit an orphanage; sing and/or perform skits.

Identify children of prisoners to mentor.

Identity Theft

LEADERSHIP

Essence

.. According to the Federal Trade Commission, [in 2004] alone, approximately 10 million Americans were victims of identity theft. The cost was nearly \$ 50 billion. ... As we speak thousands of people are being harassed and robbed because they did not know how to protect themselves from this terrible crime.

...I want to talk about an identity theft that can cost you more than money and reputation. There is thief who works night and day trying to rob Christians of their identity in Christ. The robbery takes place in the believer's mind and the damage not only affects that Christian but it also affects a whole lot of other people. When we are confused about who we are our families suffer, our church suffers, unbelievers suffer because of what they don't receive from us. Most of all we suffer all kinds of turmoil, anxiety, and loss of joy. Has the Devil tried to rob you of your identity in Christ? Has he tried to convince you that you are not what God has said you are?

... the Devil Challenges our Identity in Christ...by pointing out your past. For some he will zero in on what would seem to be defining moments—major blunders, failed marriages, dishonorable acts, regrettable decisions. And even though those sins are under the blood he will try to use the memory of them to define who you are. He will try to use abuse, rejection, whatever he can find in your past as a basis for his definition. He will use those things like a wicked club to beat you down into despondency. And if we don't know in our spirit that “the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses from all sin” we can easily get ensnared by the Devil's accusations. I want to declare with all boldness that the blood of Jesus is just as effectual in cleansing sin for the believer as it is for the person receiving Christ for the first time. [1 John 1:7]...

Don't let Satan define you by your past failures. Let God define you by your current relationship with Him.

The Accuser of the Brethren will also use your current struggles to define you. You don't pray enough. You could be a better wife or husband or father or mother, etc. When the Devil is talking it is never good enough. Not only is it never good enough but there's no hope of it ever changing. When God addresses sin in our lives He does not leave us under a cloud of despondency. He calls us to Himself. He calls us to confess specific sin and forsake it. He offers His cleansing and love and full acceptance. God has the perfect solution to all our troubles and all our shortcomings.

I am not just speaking from the scripture but also from my own experience. I know personally how disheartening it is when the Devil is calling you a failure and has a whole list of things with which to prove his point. I know how hard it is to press forward when the Devil has convinced you that you are one of those people who will never go forward.

But the Devil is not authorized to define our identity. God has marked you by the Holy Spirit as His own. He has not destined you to wrath but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. Nothing can separate you from His love (Rom 8).

Listen to your identity according to the word of the Lord. 1 Peter 2:9-10, “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. 10 Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.” ...

We all behave out of our self-perception. That's why God is careful to tell us who we are. That's why the Devil is busy trying to confuse us about who we are. The battle is primarily something that goes on in our own minds even though there are a lot of other things involved. The bottom line comes down to this. Will you believe God or will you believe the Accuser? Will you allow God to define your identity or will you allow the Devil to do it?

– Richard Tow, *Identity Theft Prevention*, www.sermoncentral.com

Breakout time (divide into small groups)

Discuss various ways in which Satan tries to “steal our identity” and have us “esteem’ ourselves contrary to what the Father has accounted us to be.” In what ways are shame, guilt, and fear used as tools in Satan’s arsenal? What else does he use? What attacks do you find yourself most susceptible to? How can knowing this help you counter future attacks? What tools does God give us to withstand these attacks? [Mt 4; Eph 6]

Discuss more in depth the above identity given in 1 Peter 2:9-10. What do the following aspects mean to you individually and corporately?

Chosen people

Royal priesthood

Holy nation

People belonging to God

People having received mercy

Continue on to verse 11 and discuss the application made.

Discuss: As the Accuser of the Brethren, the Devil will often belittle believers in order to cow them down and keep them from fulfilling their calling in Christ. If he can keep us confused about our identity and the basis of our authority we will not be able to function effectively in ministry. Victory in this area is usually found in embracing scripture that declares who we are in Christ and in maintaining a fellowship with God so that He can continually affirm us in the Spirit.

Discuss: “The Devil is not authorized to define our identity.”

Discuss: “We all behave out of our self-perception.”

Scripture

Review the temptations of Jesus in Luke 4, noting the timing of the temptations and their nature. What do these temptations suggest about the way the enemy will tempt us? What parallels do you see to Satan’s approach in Genesis 3? What role does the question of identity play in these temptations? What affirmations of identity occur on either side of Jesus’ temptations? Discuss the significance.

Consider

Know what the battle is about and don’t let yourself buy into the suggestions of your adversary.

Know what God has said about your identity. Be able to reply, “It is written” when the enemy challenges your identity.

Spend time in prayer—precious time for Him to affirm your identity.

Write on pieces of paper things from your past or things that can be used to “accuse” or cause you to doubt the identity God lays out for you as His child. Burn the pieces of paper and commit to never allowing the things written to have power over you again. Trust that the Lord has cast these things into the Sea of Forgetfulness...and DON’T go fishing!!!

Identity Theft (Sin)

DISCIPLESHIP

Essence

Many Christians...find themselves defeated by the most psychological weapon that Satan uses against them. This weapon has the effectiveness of a deadly missile. Its name? Low self-esteem. Satan's greatest psychological weapon is a gut level feeling of inferiority, inadequacy, and low self-worth. This feeling shackles many Christians, in spite of wonderful spiritual experiences and knowledge of God's Word. Although they understand their position as sons and daughters of God, they are tied up in knots, bound by a terrible feeling of inferiority, and chained to a deep sense of worthlessness.

– David Seamands, as quoted in Brennan Manning, *Abba's Child*

Breakout time (divide into small groups)

Discuss the above passage and how you can be secure in God's revelation of your identity and steer clear of the enemy's traps.

Discuss the difference between the world's teaching of "self-esteem" and what Oswald Chambers terms "God-esteem" – the proper esteem in which Christians should hold themselves in relation to God and in light of the identity His Word reveals for His children.

Consider

Is it true that God is love to me as a Christian? If so, certain questions arise.

Why do I ever grumble and show discontent and resentment at the circumstances in which God has placed me?

Why am I ever distrustful, fearful or depressed?

Why do I ever allow myself to grow cool, formal and halfhearted in the service of the God who loves me so?

Why do I ever allow my loyalties to be divided, so that God has not all my heart?

John wrote that "God is love" in order to make an ethical point, "Since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another" (1 Jn 4:11). Could an observer learn from the quality and degree of love that I show to others – ...my family? My neighbors? people at church? people at [school]? – anything at all about the greatness of God's love to me?

Meditate upon these things. Examine yourself.

– J.I Packer, *Knowing God*, pp. 127

Identity Theft (Sin)

EVANGELISM

Essence

Our Identity in Christ

We live in a world that is full of people who are lost... where many believe that they simply don't fit in. We live in a world where many people are searching for a sense of belonging to someone or something... We live in a time where many are experiencing an identity crisis...! The same problem is facing many Christians today. In other words, we don't know who we are...! We've lost our identity...

Too many young people gain their identity from the latest fashions, trends, or popular expectations from their peers.

Many Christians gain their identity more from their family background, work, or human relationships than they do from who they are in Christ.

No wonder Paul emphasized that we are in Christ throughout his epistles.

Could it be that one of the greatest problems facing Christians today revolves around an identity crisis?

Results of Identity Crisis

1. We have been conditioned to expect the ordinary, the routine.

When life seems to be filled with the routine, the possibility of some extremely good thing happening to us seems remote. Sadly, we not only can't believe it when it does happen, we can't believe it may happen. We easily find ourselves saying, "I can't believe it!"

We may not be able to believe it, but it is true.

2. We have been conditioned to believe we are less than God says we are.

In Christ we Are significant.

When Christ died on the Cross, He paid the penalty for our sin.

He died there to put to death our old self.

He died to enable us to receive His life.

As we surrender to Him, He gives us His life in exchange for ours.

He becomes our life. We live by His life. He is in us, and we are in Him.

Now we live from this new level of life. His righteousness is made ours. When God looks at us, He sees us in Christ.

3. We have been conditioned that we have nothing to offer.

In Christ we are sufficient.

As we enter into a relationship with the Shepherd, He empowers us to speak and act as He Himself spoke and acted.

As we diminish, He increases in us.

As we let go of our own understanding, His truth grows in us.

As we acknowledge our weakness, His power is magnified in us.

As we follow Him, His life giving word is able to go forth from us.

And as He was able to expose and cast out the unclean spirits, so we too will be ones who bring healing to and wholeness to the world.

4. We have been conditioned to see everything familiar and ordinary.

And when things become ordinary they sometimes seem to lose their importance.

And when things begin to lose their importance, there is the temptation for them to be neglected.

There is the temptation to do just enough to get by.

There is the temptation to do things with our eyes “half-open” . . . to do them “half-heartedly” . . . and to go only “half-way.”

There is this lifelong and pervasive temptation to do things “half-way.”

And that temptation not only affects our work, but it affects our relationships, our church, and our spiritual condition.

The goal of the enemy is to steal the identity of the believers. . . . Satan is threatened by our identity.

The demonic forces of Satan’s army are deployed everywhere in our culture. They infiltrate every segment of society, both secular and ecclesiastical. They have but one purpose: to destroy God’s work. Their attack takes many forms. They attack God’s work directly and indirectly. They are after you and your walk with God. They are after your family and your relationships with others. They attack you through your emotions and your circumstances. And they do not sleep.

It is a very real and personal struggle. In our own strength we are over-matched.

You see, there are armies armed for battle that are not of this earth. While the threat of the Soviet Union eliminated, and the fear of nuclear holocaust reduced, there is a much more dangerous enemy with whom we must contend. This is no new foe. This enemy has been around since the beginning of time.

And in this conflict there is more at stake than there was in all our wars combined.

– adapted from Mark Roper, *Our Identity in Christ* , <http://www.sermoncentral.com>

Breakout time (divide into small groups)

What is the Christian role in helping others who are lost? What happens when Christians are facing the same kinds of identity crises?

From what do you gain/seek your identity – good, bad, or indifferent?

The Gospel is good news. Discuss different parts that modern-day man might find “too good to be true.”

Discuss how things seeming to lose their importance can affect relationships, church, spiritual condition.

If you can divide into four groups, consider having each group discuss in greater depth one of the main points regarding conditioning in the above passage, reconvening as a larger group to share insights.

Expecting the ordinary, the routine;

Believing we are less than God says we are;

Thinking that we have nothing to offer;

Seeing everything as familiar and ordinary.

Discuss ways individual Christians and the corporate body alike are threats to Satan.

Discuss the matter of spiritual warfare. If we are overmatched in and of ourselves, how are we to engage? In whom does the victory rest? Why is this so important to remember?

Scripture

Read Ephesians 1:4-14. Write down what you find in each verse, and then summarize the passage in your own words:

4	_____
5	_____
6	_____
7	_____
8	_____
9	_____
10	_____
11	_____
12	_____
13	_____
14	_____

SUMMARY _____

Read Ephesians 6:10-13. Identify the offensive and defensive weapons outlined. What does the ratio of offensive to defensive tell you regarding how the Christian is to engage in battle?

Consider

How do you see yourself as a Christian?

Do you see yourself as powerful? Or do you see yourself as impotent?

Do you understand the true extent of what it means to have the Son of God living inside of you?

Do see yourself as a person who can do all things through Jesus Christ?

Do see yourself as a person who has the same mission as Jesus Christ?

Identity Theft (Sin)

SERVICE

Quotable Quotes

“What is required is to become the Beloved in the common places of my daily existence and, bit by bit, to close the gap that exists between what I know myself to be and the countless specific realities of everyday life. Becoming the Beloved is pulling the truth revealed to me from above down into the ordinariness of what I am, in fact, thinking of, talking about, and doing from hour to hour.”

– Henri Nouwen, as quoted in Brennan Manning, *Abba's Child*

“Over the years, I have come to realize that the greatest trap in our life is not success, popularity, or power, but self-rejection. Success, popularity, and power can indeed present a great temptation, but their seductive quality often comes from the way they are part of the much larger temptation to self-rejection. When we have come to believe in the voices that call us worthless and unlovable, then success, popularity, and power are easily perceived as attractive solutions. The real trap, however, is self-rejection. As soon as someone accuses me or criticizes me, as soon as I am rejected, left alone, or abandoned, I find myself thinking, “Well, that proves once again that I am a nobody.” ... [My dark side says,] I am no good... I deserve to be pushed aside, forgotten, rejected, and abandoned. Self-rejection is the greatest enemy of the spiritual life because it contradicts the sacred voice that calls us the “Beloved.” Being the Beloved constitutes the core truth of our existence.”

– Henri J.M. Nouwen

“Fixing your objective is like identifying the North Star - you sight your compass on it and then use it as the means of getting back on track when you tend to stray.”

– Marshall E. Dimock

“It is good to feel lost... because it proves you have a navigational sense of where “Home” is. You know that a place that feels like *being found* exists. And maybe your current location isn't that place but, Hallelujah, that unsettled, uneasy feeling of lost-ness just brought you closer to it.”

– Erika Harris

SERVICE PROJECT IDEAS

Read to individuals who are blind or have low vision.

Help to refurbish a group home for individuals with developmental or other disabilities; spend time with the residents.

Identity Crisis

LEADERSHIP

Essence

We live in a world that is full of people who are lost... We live in a world where many believe that they simply don't fit in... We live in a world where many people are searching for a sense of belonging to someone or something...

We live in a time where many people, both in and out of the body of Christ are experiencing an identity crisis... In other words, we don't know who we are...! We've lost our identity... We don't know who or what we are... And so consequently, we struggle everyday with this concept of being carnal chameleons one day and super-spiritual saints the next... Today we're saved and tomorrow we're slip-slidin' away... We've lost our identity...! And as a result we're walking around like spiritual zombies trying to find life in any and everything around us...! Because of our identity crisis, we are faced with a very unfortunate dilemma that we must deal with... There are some issues that arise due to our lack of ability to know who we really are that we must deal with... In light of our identity crisis, we must deal with the pre-conceived opinion of...

WHO THE WORLD THINKS WE ARE

It's no secret of what the world really thinks about those who live for Christ (TV, newspaper, etc)...

And as a result of their thoughts about us, our witness becomes ineffective...! We can't tell them anything, because they see us doing the same thing...! We can't tell them not to do something because we're doing everything... And because this spiritual identity crisis has been going on so long, it does not matter what we do to try and show them different... They're not buying it...!

Because so many have been hurt, rejected, and made fun of by the church, they refuse to hear anything that we have to say...

The world thinks that we're just putting on a show, pretending to be something that we're not... (2 Timothy 3:5) Many folks "have a form of godliness but they deny its power..." In other words, they're faking and shaking and it causes a detrimental effect on the entire body of Christ... Likewise I discovered that many people try to live up to what the world thinks... "The world says I should..."

And because of this, many are in the midst of a spiritual identity crisis... we get caught up in...

WHO WE BELIEVE WE ARE

Many people have been led into believing that once you are saved, that's it...! Once you accept Jesus Christ as your personal savior, there's nothing left to do but just sit back and wait for Jesus to return... Many folks believe that once saved, we won't have to worry about anything... No more pain... No more heartache... No more rough times... In other words, we believe that we are immune to trials and tribulations...

But I came to bust your bubble... I've got to let you know that just because you're saved doesn't mean that you won't go through... Just because you're saved doesn't mean you won't experience some midnight hours...! If you don't believe me, just ask Job... Just ask Paul...

Many have been taken on the belief that they are a product of their own selves... In other words, "You are who/what you are because of your own power... because of your own ability... because of who your parents are... because of your education... because of your position in the community..." But the truth of the matter is you are who/what you are because of God...!

You see before you even had the sense to know who you were or what you wanted to be, God had already predestined (ordained, predetermined) your life... In fact He said, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart... (Jeremiah 1:5)" God knew you before you knew you...!

Because we're so hung up on who we believe we are... Often times we find ourselves trying to conform to our so-called beliefs without regard to if our beliefs are in the will of God...! And because you're so busy conforming from belief to belief, and transforming from one thing to another... You'll find yourself trapped in a state of amnesia, because you've lost track of who you are supposed to be at the present time...! (Rom 12:2) "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind..."

You see you must understand that it's a mind thing... And until you change your thinking to God's way of thinking... Until you change your mindset into a Godly mindset... Until you change your beliefs and believe in what God says... You will be stuck in the constant state of a spiritual identity crisis...!

If you want to overcome a Spiritual Identity Crisis... Don't worry about who the world thinks you are... Don't worry about who you believe you are... But stand on and rest in...

WHO CHRIST SAYS WE ARE

In spite of who the world thinks you are... Who you believe you are... You've got to know who Christ says you are....

Chosen Generation: Selected, Elected, and Preferred

Royal Priesthood: Regal, Majestic

Holy Nation: God's holy nation

Peculiar People: God's very own possession...

– Kirk DeVine, *Dealing With A Spiritual Identity Crisis*, www.sermoncentral.com

Scripture

Consider the identity issues that surrounded Jesus Christ:

Matthew 16:13-16 _____

Matthew 11:2-6 _____

Matthew 12:22-28 _____

Further exploring my biblical identity:

John 15:14 _____

Romans 6:18 _____

Romans 6:22 _____

1 Cor 6:17 _____

1 Cor 12:27 _____

2 Cor 5:17 _____

2 Cor 5:18-19 _____

Eph 4:1 _____

Col 3:12 _____

1 Th 5:5 _____

Romans 5:1 _____

Romans 6:2-6 _____

Col 1:13 _____

Romans 8:1-2 _____

1 Cor 6:19-20 _____

Eph 2:8 _____

Col 1:13 _____

Col 1:14 _____

Consider

Are you unsure of your role in life? Do you feel like you don't know the real you? If you answer yes to these questions, you may be experiencing what is known as an identity crisis. Theorist Erik Erikson coined the term "identity crisis" and believed that it was one of the most important conflicts people face in development. According to Erikson, an identity crisis is a time of intensive analysis and exploration of different ways of looking at oneself. Researchers have found that those who have made a strong commitment to an identity tend to be happier and healthier than those who have not.

Those with a status of identity diffusion tend to feel out of place in the world and don't pursue a sense of identity.

In today's rapidly changing world, identity crises are more common today than in Erikson's day. We have so much more competing for our attention.

Exploring different aspects of yourself in the different areas of life, including your role at work, within the family, and in romantic relationships, can help strengthen your personal identity.

– Wayne A. Lawson, *Identity Crisis*, www.sermoncentral.com

Haunted by feelings of unworthiness, would you allow the darkness to overcome you or would you let Jesus be who He is – a Savior of boundless compassion and infinite patience, a Lover who keeps no score of our wrongs?

– Brennan Manning, *Abba's Child*

Identify biblical characters who did not allow their unworthiness and past mistakes to overcome them. How can you follow their example in your own life?

Notes

[illegible]

Identity Crisis

DISCIPLESHIP

Story

Overcoming Your Heritage

Stefan can tell you about family trees. He makes his living from them. He inherited a German forest that has been in his family for 400 years. The trees he harvests were planted 180 years ago by his great-grandfather. The trees he plants won't be ready for market until his great-grandchildren are born.

He's part of a chain.

"Every generation must make a choice," he told me. "They can either pillage or plant. They can rape the landscape and get rich, or they can care for the landscape, harvest only what is theirs, and leave an investment for their children."

Stefan harvests seeds sown by men he never knew.

Stefan sows seeds to be harvested by descendants he'll never see.

Dependent upon the past, responsible for the future; he's part of a chain.

Like us. Children of the past, are we. Parents of the future. Heirs. Benefactors. Recipients of the work done by those before. Born into a forest we didn't seed.

Which leads me to ask, how's your forest?

As you stand on the land bequeathed by our ancestors, how does it look? How do you feel?

Pride at legacy left? Perhaps. Some inherit nourished soil. Deeply rooted trees of conviction. Row after row of truth and heritage. Could be that you stand in the forest of your fathers with pride. If so, give thanks, for many don't.

Many aren't proud of their family trees. Poverty. Shame. Abuse. Such are the forests found by some of you. The land was pillaged. Harvest was taken, but no seed was sown.

Perhaps you were reared in a home of bigotry and so you are intolerant of minorities. Perhaps you were reared in a home of greed, hence your desires for possessions are insatiable.

Perhaps your childhood memories bring more hurt than inspiration. The voices of your past cursed you, belittled you, ignored you. At the time, you thought such treatment was typical. Now you see it isn't.

And now you find yourself trying to explain your past.

...We can't choose our parents, but we can choose our mentors....

Maybe your past isn't much to brag about. Maybe you've seen raw evil. And now you...have to make a choice. Do you rise above the past and make a difference? Or do you remain controlled by the past and make excuses?

Many choose the latter.

Many choose the convalescent homes of the heart. Healthy bodies. Sharp minds. But retired dreams. Back and forth they rock in the chair of regret, repeating the terms of surrender. Lean closely and you will hear them: "If only." The white flag of the heart.

"If only..."

"If only I'd been born somewhere else..."

"If only I'd been treated fairly..."

"If only I'd had kinder parents, more money, greater opportunities..."

"If only I'd been potty-trained sooner, spanked less, or taught to eat without slurping."

Maybe you've used those words. Maybe you have every right to use them. ...

If such is the case, let me show you where to turn....Go to John's gospel and read Jesus' words: "Human life comes from human parents, but spiritual life comes from the Spirit" (John 3:6).

Think about that. Spiritual life comes from the Spirit! Your parents may have given you genes, but God gives you grace. Your parents may be responsible for your body, but God has taken charge of your soul. You may get your looks from your mother, but you get eternity from your Father, your heavenly Father.

By the way, he's not blind to your problems. In fact, God is willing to give you what your family didn't....

God has not left you adrift on a sea of heredity....you cannot control the way your forefathers responded to God. But you can control the way you respond to him. The past does not have to be your prison. You have a voice in your destiny. You have a say in your life. You have a choice in the path you take.

– Max Lucado, *When God Whispers Your Name*, pp. 97-104

Breakout time (divide into small groups)

What spiritual – and other – legacies have you inherited? What legacies do you seek to leave? Discuss concrete ways you can go about ensuring you leave a positive legacy.

Have you inherited “if only”s? How do you get past these and keep from focusing on them? How can you avoid your own “it might have been”s?

*For of all sad words of tongue or pen, the saddest are these:
“It might have been.” – John Greenleaf Whittier*

Read and discuss the story of King Josiah [2 Kings 21:16, 22:1-23:25] in light of the above reading. What are the implications for your own life?

Discuss: The question of where to live and what to do is really insignificant compared to the question of how to keep the eyes of my heart focused on God. I can be teaching at Yale, working in the bakery at the Genesee Abbey, or walking around with poor children in Peru, and feel totally useless, miserable, and depressed in all these situations.

There is no such thing as the right place, the right job, the right calling or ministry. I can be happy or unhappy in all situations. I am sure of it because I have felt distraught and joyful in situations of abundance as well as poverty, in situations of popularity and anonymity, in situations of success and failure. The difference was never based on the situation itself, but always on my state of mind and heart. When I knew I was walking with God, I always felt happy and at peace. When I was entangled in my own complaints and emotional needs, I always felt restless and divided.

It is a simple truth that comes to me now, in a time when I have to decide about my future. Deciding to do this, that or the other for the next five, ten or twenty years is no great decision. Turning fully, unconditionally, and without fear to God is. Yet this awareness sets me free.

– Henri J.M. Nouwen

Consider

Choose a spiritual mentor.

Identity Crisis

EVANGELISM

Essence

The Obstinate Toy Soldiers

The Son of God became a man to enable men to become sons of God....

...the present state of things is this. The two kinds of life are now not only different (they would always have been that) but actually opposed. The natural life in each of us is something self-centred, something that wants to be petted and admired, to take advantage of other lives, to exploit the whole universe. And especially it wants to be left to itself: to keep well away from anything better or stronger or higher than it, anything that might make it feel small. It is afraid of the light and air of the spiritual world, just as people who have been brought up to be dirty are afraid of a bath. And in a sense it is quite right. It knows that if the spiritual life gets hold of it, all its self-centredness and self-will are going to be killed and it is ready to fight tooth and nail to avoid that.

Did you ever think, when you were a child, what fun it would be if your toys could come to life? Well suppose you could really have brought them to life. Imagine turning a tin soldier into a real little man. It would involve turning the tin into flesh. And supposed the tin soldier did not like it. He is not interested in flesh: all he sees is that the tin is being spoilt. He thinks you are killing him. He will do everything he can to prevent you. He will not be made into a man if he can help it.

What you would have done about that tin soldier I do not know. But what God did about us was this. The Second Person in God, the Son, became human Himself: was born into the world as an actual man – a real man of a particular language, weighing so many stone. The Eternal Being, who knows everything and who created the whole universe, became not only a man but (before that) a baby, and before that a *foetus* inside a Woman's body. If you want to get the hang of it, think how you would like to become a slug or a crab.

The result of this was that you now had one man who really was what all men were intended to be: one man in whom the created life, derived from His Mother, allowed itself to be completely and perfectly turned into the begotten life. The natural human creature in Him was taken up fully into the divine Son. Thus in one instance humanity had, so to speak, arrived: had passed into the life of Christ. And because the whole difficulty for us is that the natural life has to be, in a sense, 'killed', He chose an earthly career which involved the killing of His human desires at every turn – poverty, misunderstanding from His own family, betrayal by one of His intimate friends, being jeered at and manhandled by the Police, and execution by torture. And then, after being thus killed – killed every day in a sense – the human creature in Him, because it was united to the divine Son, came to life again. The Man in Christ rose again: not only the God. That is the whole point. For the first time we saw a real man. One tin soldier – real tin, just like the rest – had come fully and splendidly alive.

– C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, pp. 178-180

Breakout time (divide into small groups)

In what ways do we fight becoming “real men”?

What might this “real man” look like? Act like? Do? Say?

Why do we too often resist the transformation to becoming a “real man,” thinking only that what we are is “being spoilt”? What parts of yourself are you particularly reluctant to give over to God?

Notes

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

Identity Crisis

SERVICE

Quotable Quotes

“He who floats with the current, who does not guide himself according to higher principles, who has no ideal, no convictions – such a man is a mere article of the world’s furniture – a thing moved, instead of a living and moving being – an echo, not a voice.”

– Amiel

“It is a poor and disgraceful thing not to be able to reply, with some degree of certainty, to the simple questions, ‘What will you be? What will you do?’ “

– John Foster

“If a person does not become what he understands, then he does not understand it either....Between understanding and willing lie excuses and evasions.”

– Søren Kierkegaard, *Provocations*, p. 267

SERVICE PROJECT IDEAS

Adopt a nearby park to clean up.

Help an elderly community member clean their house and make minor repairs.

Multiple Identities

LEADERSHIP

Story

Sanctity lies in discovering my true self, moving toward it, and living out of it....

John Eagan, who died in 1987, was an ordinary man. An unheralded high school teacher in Milwaukee, he spent thirty years ministering with youth. He never wrote a book, appeared on television, converted the masses, or gathered a reputation for holiness. He ate, slept, drank, biked cross-country, roamed through the woods, taught classes, and prayed. And he kept a journal, published shortly after his death. It is the story of an ordinary man whose soul was seduced and ravished by Jesus Christ. The introduction reads, “The point of John’s journal is that we ourselves are the greatest obstacle to our own nobility of soul – which is what sanctity means. We judge ourselves unworthy servants, and that judgment becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. We deem ourselves too inconsiderable to be used even by a God capable of miracles with no more than mud and spit. And thus our false humility shackles an otherwise omnipotent God.”

Eagan, a flawed man with salient weaknesses and character defects, learned that brokenness is proper to the human condition, that we must forgive ourselves for being unlovable, inconsistent, incompetent, irritable, and potbellied, and he knew that his sins could not keep him from God. They had all been redeemed by the blood of Christ. In repentance he took his shadow self to the Cross and dared to live as a forgiven man. In Eagan’s journey one hears echoes of Merton: “God is asking me, the unworthy, to forget my unworthiness and that of my brothers, and dare to advance in the love which has redeemed and renewed us all in God’s likeness. And to laugh, after all, at the preposterous ideas of ‘worthiness.’”

Struggling to shrink the illusory self, Eagan pursued a life of contemplative prayer with ruthless fidelity. During his annual, silent eight-day directed retreat the revelation of his true self hit with sledgehammer force. On the morning of the sixth day, he was visiting with his spiritual director:

That day Bob says with great clarity, striking the table with his fist:...John, this is your call, the way God is calling *you*. Pray for a deepening of this love, yes, savor the present moment where God is. Indulge the contemplative in you, surrender to it; let it be, search for God....”

Then he states something that I will ponder for years; he says it very deliberately. I ask him to repeat it so that I can write it down. “John, the heart of it is this: to make the Lord and his immense love for you constitutive of your personal worth. *Define yourself radically as one beloved by God.* God’s love for you and his choice of you constitute your worth. Accept that, and let it become the most important thing in your life.”

We discuss it. The basis of my personal worth is not my possessions, my talents, not esteem of others, reputation...not kudos of appreciation from parents and kids, not applause, and everyone telling you how important you are to the place.... I stand anchored now in God before whom I stand naked, this God who tells me “You are my son, my beloved one.” (emphasis added)

The ordinary self is the extraordinary self....

– Brennan Manning, *Abba’s Child*

Breakout time (divide into small groups)

Discuss: “Sanctity lies in discovering my true self, moving toward it, and living out of it.” – Manning

Discuss: “The highest spiritual development [is] to be “ordinary,” ‘to become fully a man, in the way few human being succeed in becoming so simply and naturally themselves...the measures of what others might be if society did not distort them with greed or ambition or lust or desperate want.’ [Merton]”– Manning

Discuss: “The point of John’s journal is that we ourselves are the greatest obstacle to our own nobility of soul – which is what sanctity means. We judge ourselves unworthy servants, and that judgment becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. We deem ourselves too inconsiderable to be used even by a God capable of miracles with no more than mud and spit. And thus our false humility shackles an otherwise omnipotent God.”

Discuss: “God is asking me, the unworthy, to forget my unworthiness and that of my brothers, and dare to advance in the love which has redeemed and renewed us all in God’s likeness. And to laugh, after all, at the preposterous ideas of ‘worthiness.’”

Discuss: “The ordinary self is the extraordinary self.”

What does it mean to live as a forgiven man?

List and share the many different ways in which “who you are” can be defined (e.g., so-an-so’s son or such-and-such’s sister, etc.). Share ways in which this has changed over time (if you are the eldest sibling, for example, you gained a new identity with the birth of the second sibling). Discuss the implications of the fact that who *you* are does not change, but the way in which you are identified *does*. Conduct the same exercise, listing all the ways your group can think of that Jesus was identified. Discuss the significance.

Scripture

Further exploring my biblical identity:

Romans 8:35-37 _____

1 Cor 15:10 _____

Compare/contrast “I AM” with “I am what I am.”

Multiple Identities

DISCIPLESHIP

Story

It took only a few hours of silence before I began to hear my soul speaking. It only took being alone for a short period of time for me to discover I wasn't alone. God had been trying to shout over the noisiness of my life, and I couldn't hear Him. But in the stillness and solitude, his whispers shouted from my soul, "Michael, I am here. I have been calling you, but you haven't been listening. Can you hear me, Michael? I love you. I have always loved you. And I have been waiting for you to hear me say that to you. But you have been so busy trying to prove to yourself you are loved that you have not heard me."

I heard him, and my slumbering soul was filled with the joy of the prodigal son. My soul was awakened by a loving Father who had been looking and waiting for me. Finally, I accepted my brokenness.... I had never come to terms with that. Let me explain. I knew I was broken. I knew I was a sinner. I knew I continually disappointed God, but I could never accept that part of me. It was a part of me that embarrassed me. I continually felt the need to apologize, to run from my weaknesses, to deny who I was and concentrate on what I should be. I was broken, yes, but I was continually trying never to be broken again – or at least to get to the place where I was very seldom broken....

... it became very clear to me that I had totally misunderstood the Christian faith. I came to see that it was in my brokenness, in my powerlessness, in my weakness that Jesus was made strong. It was in the acceptance of my lack of faith that God could give me faith. It was in the embracing of my brokenness that I could identify with others' brokenness. It was my role to identify with others' pain, not relieve it. Ministry was sharing, not dominating; understanding, not theologizing; caring, not fixing.

What does all this mean?

I don't know...and to be quite blunt, that is the wrong question. I only know that at certain times in all of our lives, we make an adjustment in the course of our lives. This was one of those times for me. If you were to look at a map of my life, you would not be aware of any noticeable difference other than a slight change in direction. I can only tell you that it feels very different now. There is an anticipation, an electricity about God's presence in my life that I have never experienced before. I can only tell you that for the first time in my life I can hear Jesus whisper to me every day, "Michael, I love you. *You are beloved.*" And for some strange reason, that seems to be enough.

– Mike Yaconelli (founder of Youth Specialties), as quoted in Brennan Manning, *Abba's Child*

Breakout time (divide into small groups)

Read and reflect on the Parable of the Prodigal Son. Be sure to explore both sons' relationships to their father and to one another. How can those who identify more with the older brother come to accept their own brokenness and what the father has to offer them?

Discuss the transformative nature of God's love. How have you seen this played out in your own life? Are there times when you have not allowed the transformation to take place? What things keep you from accepting God's loving transformation?

In what ways do we try to prove we are loved and miss accepting the very love God has to offer, which need not be proved?

In what ways do you agree/disagree with the following statement? Explain: “It was my role to identify with others’ pain, not relieve it. Ministry was sharing, not dominating; understanding, not theologizing; caring, not fixing.”

Consider

What might God be trying to shout above the busyness of your life? Take time in silence to *listen*. Are you willing to make an adjustment in the course of your life in response to what you might hear?

Notes

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Multiple Identities

EVANGELISM

Essence

When we see someone holding an axe wrong and chopping in such a way that he hits everything but the block of firewood, we do not say, “What a wrong way for the woodcutter to go about it,” but we say, “That man is not a woodcutter.”

Now for the application. When we see thousands and thousands and millions of Christians whose lives do not resemble in the remotest way what – and this is decisive – the New Testament calls a Christian, is it not tampering with the meaning to talk as one does in no other situation and say: “what a mediocre way, what a thoroughly inexpressive way these Christians have.” In any other situation would one not say, “These people are not Christians.” Now be earnest about it and say: We are not Christians. Let this become ordinary language usage and you will have a world-transformation.

– Søren Kierkegaard, *Provocations*, pp. 280-81

Breakout time (divide into small groups)

What does the New Testament call a “Christian”?

In what ways are you living up to the name “Christian”? In what ways are you not?

Name different identities within the New Testament church. What identity trumped? Why? How? Could you say the same of your church (local and at-large)? Why/why not?

Notes

Multiple Identities

SERVICE

Quotable Quotes

“Every individual is a meeting ground for many different allegiances, and sometimes these loyalties conflict with one another and confront the person who harbors them with difficult choices”

— Amin Maalouf (*In the Name of Identity: Violence and the Need to Belong*)

“At every moment you choose yourself. But do you choose **your** self? Body and soul contain a thousand possibilities out of which you can build many I’s. But in one of them is there a congruence of the elector and the elected. Only one--which you will never find until you have excluded all those superficial and fleeting possibilities of being and doing with which you toy, out of curiosity or wonder or greed, and which hinder you from casting anchor in the experience of the mystery of life, and the consciousness of the talent entrusted to you which is your **I**.”

— Dag Hammarskjöld (*Markings*)

“I feel with some passion that what we truly are is private, and almost infinitely complex, and ambiguous, and both external and internal, and double- or triple- or multiply natured, and largely mysterious even to ourselves; and furthermore that what we are is only part of us, because identity, unlike “identity”, must include what we do. And I think that to find oneself and every aspect of this complexity reduced in the public mind to one property that apparently subsumes all the rest...is to be the victim of a piece of extraordinary intellectual vulgarity.”

— Philip Pullman

SERVICE PROJECT IDEAS

Start a scholarship fund to send young people in your community to camp for the summer who wouldn’t otherwise have the opportunity.

Leave gift baskets of non-perishable food anonymously for those in your community that might need it – Thanksgiving and Christmas baskets are traditionally done, but imagine the unmet need in the middle of the year!

Family Identity (Heirs)

LEADERSHIP

Story

Let's Pretend

May I once again start by putting two pictures, or two stories rather, into your minds? One is the story you have all read called *Beauty and the Beast*. The girl, you remember, had to marry a monster for some reason. And she did. She kissed it as if it were a man. And then, much to her relief, it really turned into a man and all went well. The other story is about someone who had to wear a mask; a mask which made him look much nicer than he really was. He had to wear it for years. And when he took it off he found his own face had grown to fit it. He was now really beautiful. What had begun as disguise had become a reality. I think both these stories may (in a fanciful way, of course) help to illustrate what I have to say.... I want to talk about practice.... What difference does all this theology make?...

[The] very first words [of the Lord's Prayer] are *Our Father*. Do you now see what those words mean? They mean quite frankly, that you are putting yourself in the place of a son of God. To put it bluntly, you are *dressing up as Christ*..., a piece of outrageous cheek. But the odd thing is that He has ordered us to do it.

Why? What is the good of pretending to be what you are not? Well, even on a human level, you know, there are two kinds of pretending. There is a bad kind, where the pretence is there instead of the real thing; as when a man pretends he is going to help you instead of really helping you. But there is also a good kind, where the pretence leads up to the real thing. When you are not feeling particularly friendly but know you ought to be, the best thing you can do, very often, is to put on a friendly manner and behave as if you were a nicer person than you actually are. And in a few minutes, as we have all noticed, you will be really feeling friendlier than you were. Very often the only way to get a quality in reality is to start behaving as if you had it already. ...

Now, the moment you realise 'Here I am, dressing up as Christ,' it is extremely likely that you will see at once some way in which at that very moment the pretence could be made less of a pretence and more of a reality. You will find several things going on in your mind which would not be going on there if you were really a son of God. Well, stop them. Or you may realise that, instead of saying your prayers, you ought to be downstairs writing a letter, or helping [someone]. Well, go and do it.

You see what is happening. The Christ Himself, the Son of God who is man (just like you) and God (just like His Father) is actually at your side and is already at that moment beginning to turn your pretence into a reality. This is not merely a fancy way of saying that your conscience is telling you what to do. If you simply ask your conscience, you get one result; if you remember that you are dressing up as Christ, you get a different one. There are lots of things which your conscience might not call definitely wrong (specially things in your mind) but which you will see at once you cannot go on doing if you are seriously trying to be like Christ. For you are no longer thinking simply about right and wrong; you are trying to catch the good infection from a Person. It is more like painting a portrait than like obeying a set of rules. And the odd thing is that while in one way it is much harder than keeping rules, in another way it is far easier.

The real Son of God is at your side. He is beginning to turn you into the same kind of thing as Himself. He is beginning, so to speak, to 'inject His kind of life and thoughts...into you....

– C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, pp. 187-189

Breakout time (divide into small groups)

What difference would it make in your life if you were more conscious of putting on Christ, acting toward God as your *Abba, Father*, and living up to your role as a member in the family of God?

Discuss the difference between simple right and wrong and being like Christ.

Discuss: “And the odd thing is that while in one way it is much harder than keeping rules, in another way it is far easier.”

Scripture

Further exploring my biblical identity:

John 1:12 _____

Romans 8:14,15 _____

Romans 8:16,17 _____

Eph 2:19 _____

1 John 3:1-2 _____

Eph 1:5 _____

Eph 2:18 _____

Heb 2:11 _____

Notes

Family Identity (Heirs)

DISCIPLESHIP

Essence

...the entire Christian life has to be understood in terms of [adoption]. Sonship must be the controlling thought – the normative category, if you like – at every point. This follows from the nature of the case, and is strikingly confirmed by the fact that all our Lord's teaching on Christian discipleship is cast in these terms.

It is clear that, just as Jesus always thought of himself as Son of God in a unique sense, so he always thought of his followers as children of his heavenly Father, members of the same divine family as himself. Early in his ministry we find him saying, "Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother" (Mk 3:35). And two Evangelists note how after his resurrection he called his disciples his brothers....(Mt 28:9-10; Jn 20:17-18). The writer to the Hebrews assures us that the Lord Jesus regards all those for whom he has died, and whom he makes into his disciples, as his brothers....(Heb 2:12-13). As our Maker is our Father, so our Savior is our brother, when we come into the family of God.

Now, just as the knowledge of his unique Sonship controlled Jesus' living of his own life on earth, so he insists that the knowledge of our adoptive sonship must control our lives too. This comes out in his teaching again and again, but nowhere more clearly than in his Sermon on the Mount. Often called the charter of God's kingdom, this sermon could equally well be described as the royal family code, for the thought of the disciple's sonship to God is basic to all the main issues of Christian obedience with which the Sermon deals....

– J.I Packer, *Knowing God*, pp. 209-210

...Do I, as a Christian, understand myself? Do I know my own real identity? My own real destiny? *I am a child of God. God is my Father; heaven is my home; every day is one day nearer. My Savior is my brother; every Christian is my brother too.* Say it over and over to yourself first thing in the morning, last thing at night, as you wait for the bus, any time when your mind is free, and ask that you may be enabled to live as one who knows it is all utterly and completely true. For this is the Christian's secret of – a happy life? – yes, certainly, but we have something both higher and profounder to say. This is the Christian's secret of a *Christian* life, and of a *God-honoring* life, and these are the aspects of the situation that really matter. May this secret become fully yours, and fully mine.

...God humble us; God instruct us; God make us his own true children.

– J.I Packer, *Knowing God*, pp. 228-229

Breakout time (divide into small groups)

What would a God-honoring life look like, in which you fully understood your role within the family of God, as a child of God and sibling of Christ and every other Christian?

Consider

Do I understand my adoption? Do I value it? Do I daily remind myself of my privilege as a child of God?

Have I sought full assurance of my adoption? Do I daily dwell on the love of God to me?

Do I treat God as my Father in heaven, loving, honoring, and obeying him, seeking and welcoming his fellowship, and trying in everything to please him, as a human parent would want his child to do?

Do I think of Jesus Christ, my Savior and my Lord, as my brother too, bearing to me not only a divine authority but also a divine-human sympathy? Do I think daily how close he is to me, how completely he understands me, and how much, as my kinsman-redeemer, he cares for me?

Have I learned to hate the things that displease my Father? Am I sensitive to the evil things to which he is sensitive? Do I make a point of avoiding them, lest I grieve him?

Do I look forward daily to that great family occasion when the children of God will finally gather in heaven before the throne of God, their Father, and of the Lamb, their brother and their Lord? Have I felt the thrill of this hope?

Do I love my Christian brothers and sisters with whom I live day by day, in a way that I shall not be ashamed of when in heaven I think back over it?

Am I proud of my Father, and of His family, to which by his grace I belong?

Does the family likeness appear in me? If not, why not?

– J.I Packer, *Knowing God*, pp. 228-229

Notes

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Family Identity (Heirs)

EVANGELISM

Essence

What is a Christian? The question can be answered in many ways, but the richest answer I know is that a Christian is one who has God as Father....

The gift of sonship to God becomes ours not through being born, but through being born again.... (Jn 1:12-13).

Sonship to God, then is a gift of grace. It is not a natural but an *adoptive* sonship, and so the New Testament explicitly pictures it. In Roman law, it was a recognized practice for an adult who wanted an heir, and someone to carry on the family name, to adopt a male as his son – usually at age, rather than in infancy, as is the common way today. The apostles proclaim that God has so loved those whom he redeemed on the cross that he has adopted them all as his heirs, to see and share the glory into which his only begotten Son has already come....

The revelation to the believer that God is his Father is in a sense the climax of the Bible, just as it was a final step in the revelatory process which the Bible records. ...

[In the New Testament,] God and religion are not less than they were; the Old Testament revelation of the holiness of God, and its demand for humility in man, is presupposed throughout. But something has been added. A new factor has come in. New Testament believers deal with God as their Father. *Father* is the name by which they call him. *Father* has now become his covenant name – for the covenant which binds him to his people now stands revealed as a family covenant. Christians are his children, his own sons and daughters, his heirs. And the stress of the New Testament is not on the difficulty and danger of drawing near to the holy God, but on the boldness and confidence with which believers may approach him: a boldness that springs directly from faith in Christ, and from the knowledge of his saving work.... To those who are Christ's, the holy God is a loving Father; they belong to his family; they may approach him without fear and always be sure of his fatherly concern and care.

– J.I. Packer, *Knowing God*, pp. 200-203

Breakout time (divide into small groups)

Discuss the parallel given with Roman law. In the analogy, the Roman was one in need of an heir, but God the Father and Son choose to *share* their inheritance where there is no need and certainly no obligation!

Discuss how the Old and New Testament revelations of God are one and the same, but that *perspective* makes a difference. There is a famous picture of JFK, Jr. as a little boy playing under his father's desk in the White House. It is natural for a son to want to be in close proximity to his father, while others' relationships to that same person – in this case, the President of the United States – would forbid such actions. Likewise, how does the unique perspective of God as Father change one's approach? Give concrete examples of how a proper understanding of your being God's child changes your relationship with God.

Discuss: Joachim Jeremias wrote, "Abba, as a way of addressing God, is *ipsissima vox*, an authentic original utterance of Jesus. We are confronted with something new and astounding. Herein lies the great novelty of the gospel." Jesus, the beloved Son, does not hoard this experience for Himself. He invites and calls us to share the same intimate and liberating relationship.

– Brennan Manning, *Abba's Child*

Scripture

Explore the following verses, setting out adoption as the highest privilege of the Christian:

Gal 4:1-7 _____

John 1:12 _____

John 20:17 _____

1 Jn 3:1-2 _____

Eph 1:5 _____

What do the following verses tell us is a result of our status in the family of God?

Eph 3:12 _____

Heb 10:19-22 _____

Explore some of the following verses to get a better understanding of the revealed perfect father relationship with the incarnate Son, what God's fatherhood implied for Jesus, and what it now implies for Christians:

1 Jn 3:1 _____

1 Jn 2:15; 5:1-3 _____

1 Jn 2:9-11; 3:10-17; 4:7,21 _____

1 Jn 2:13,23-24 _____

1 Jn 2:29; 3:9-10; 5:18 _____

1 Jn 3:3 _____

Jn 6:38; 17:4; 5:19; 4:34 _____

Jn 5:20; 15:9-10 _____

Jn 16:32; 8:29 _____

Jn 17:1; 5:22-23 _____

1 Jn 5:1, 3 _____

Jn 16:27 _____

1 Jn 1:3 _____

Jn 12:26 _____

Jn 17:24 _____

Family Identity (Heirs)

SERVICE

Essence

The Call of the Natural Life

“When it pleased God...to reveal His Son in me...” (Galatians 1:15-16).

The call of God is not a call to serve Him in any particular way. My contact with the nature of God will shape my understanding of His call and will help me realize what I truly desire to do for Him. The call of God is an expression of His nature; the service which results in my life is suited to me and is an expression of my nature. The call of the natural life was stated by the apostle Paul – “When it pleased God...to reveal his Son in me, that I might *preach* Him [that is, *purely and solemnly express* Him] among the Gentiles...”

Service is the overflow which pours from a life filled with love and devotion. But strictly speaking, there is no *call* to that. Service is what I bring to the relationship and is the reflection of my identification with the nature of God. Service becomes a natural part of my life. God brings me into the proper relationship with Himself so that I can understand His call, and then I serve Him on my own out of a motivation of absolute love. Service to God is the deliberate love-gift of a nature that has heard the call of God. Service is an expression of my nature, and God’s call is an expression of His nature. Therefore, when I receive His nature and hear His call, His divine voice resounds throughout His nature and mine and the two become one in service. The Son of God reveals Himself in me, and out of devotion to Him service becomes my everyday way of life.

–Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost for His Highest*, January 17

SERVICE PROJECT IDEAS

Build a “Habitat for Humanity” house.

Go out of your way to seek out a non-Christian and witness to them *only* through service.

Cultural/National Identity

LEADERSHIP

Essence

The command of Jesus to love one another is never circumscribed by the nationality, status, ethnic background, sexual preference, or inherent loveliness of the “other.” The other, the one who has a claim on my love, is anyone to whom I am able to respond, as the parable of the good Samaritan clearly illustrates. “Which of these three, in your opinion, was neighbor to the man who fell in with the robbers?” Jesus asked. The answer came, “The one who treated him with compassion.” He said to them, “Go and do the same.”

This insistence on the absolutely indiscriminate nature of compassion within the Kingdom is the dominant perspective of almost all of Jesus’ teaching.

What is indiscriminate compassion? “Take a look at a rose. Is it possible for the rose to say, ‘I’ll offer my fragrance to good people and withhold it from bad people?’ Or can you imagine a lamp that withholds its rays from a wicked person who seeks to walk in its light? It could do that only by ceasing to be a lamp. And observe how helplessly and indiscriminately a tree gives its shade to everyone, good and bad, young and old, high and low; to animals and humans and every living creature – even to the one who seeks to cut it down. This is the first quality of compassion – its indiscriminate character.”

– Brennan Manning, *Abba’s Child*

Breakout time (divide into small groups)

Review the parable of the Good Samaritan. Note how Jesus shifts the focus from the initial question of “who is my neighbor,” to his own of “who was neighbor to the man.” Discuss the significance.

Discuss the “absolutely indiscriminate nature of compassion.” Identify concrete ways in which you can demonstrate this individually and corporately in the week ahead.

Discuss in light of Revelation 14:4: “Living a life of faith means never knowing where you are being led. But it does mean loving and knowing the One who is leading.” –Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost for His Highest*, March 19

Scripture

Review the story of Moses in the first three chapters of Exodus. Discuss his identification with the Jewish people despite being raised in Pharaoh’s household. What modern-day parallels can you think of? What are the implications for individual Christians today? What can we learn from both Moses’ proper identification and improper attempt to fulfill God’s calling on his life in his own way and time?

Review the call of Abram in Genesis 12. Discuss the role national/cultural and family identity played. How would Abraham’s not-quite-so-perfect obedience in the family area play itself out later? In what ways is the separation Christ called us to in Luke 14:26 similar to/different from that demanded of Abram? Explain.

Cultural/National Identity

DISCIPLESHIP

Essence

My identity as Abba's child is not an abstraction or a tap dance into religiosity. It is the core truth of my existence. Living in the wisdom of accepted tenderness profoundly affects my perception of reality, the way I respond to people and their life situations. How I treat my brothers and sisters from day to day, whether they be Caucasian, African, Asian, or Hispanic; how I react to the sin-scarred wino on the street; how I respond to the interruptions from people I dislike; how I deal with ordinary people in their ordinary unbelief on an ordinary day will speak the truth of who I am...

...We are sons and daughters of the Most High and maturing in tenderness to the extent that we are for others – all others – to the extent that no human flesh is strange to us, to the extent that we can touch the hand of another in love, to the extent that for us there are no “others.”

This is the unceasing struggle of a lifetime. It is the long and painful process of becoming like Christ in the way I choose to think, speak, and live each day.

– Brennan Manning, *Abba's Child*

Breakout time (divide into small groups)

Discuss the idea that “there are no ‘others.’”

If we truly believe the creation story and that we are all descended from Adam and Eve, then we are all truly brothers and sisters in far more than the spiritual sense in which we usually mean it. What implications does this have for how I treat my neighbor? My enemy? My friend? My family? My co-worker? My classmate?

Discuss: “How I deal with ordinary people in their ordinary unbelief on an ordinary day will speak the truth of who I am...” Keep in mind that you never know where someone else is in their life. Your ordinary day may be anything from ordinary for those you encounter. How much more important that they see Christ in you!

What changes would occur in your life as a result of truly embracing your identity as Abba's child as “the core truth of [your] existence”?

Notes

Cultural/National Identity

EVANGELISM

Story

God knows we sometimes miss the signs. Maybe that's why he has given us so many....

The most poignant sign, however, was found on the cross. A trilingual, hand-painted, Roman-commissioned sign. [John 19:19-22]

Why is a sign placed over the head of Jesus? Why does its wording trouble the Jews, and why does Pilate refuse to change it? What are the words written in three languages, and why is the sign mentioned in all four Gospels?

Of all the possible answers to these questions, let's focus on one. Could it be that this piece of wood is a picture of God's devotion? A symbol of his passion to tell the world about his Son? A reminder that God will do whatever it takes to share with you the message of this sign? I suggest that the sign reveals two truths about God's desire to reach the world.

There is no person he will not use.

Please note that the sign bears immediate fruit. Remember the response of the criminal? Moments from his own death, in a maelstrom of pain, he turns and says, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom" (Luke 23:42)....

Luke seems to make the connection between the reading of the sign and the offering of the prayer....

...If so, the sign was the first tool used to proclaim the message of the cross. Countless others have followed, from the printing press to the radio.... But a crude wooden sign preceded them all....

Pilate did not intend to spread the gospel. In fact, the sign said in so many words, "This is what becomes of a Jewish king; this is what the Romans do with him. The king of this nation is a slave; a crucified criminal: and if such be the king, what must the nation be whose king he is?" Pilate had intended the sign to threaten and mock the Jews. But God had another purpose...

There is no person he will not use. And,

There is no language God will not speak.

Every passerby could read the sign, for every passerby could read Hebrew, Latin, or Greek – the three great languages of the ancient world. "Hebrew was the language of Israel, the language of religion; Latin the language of the Romans, the language of law and government; and Greek the language of Greece, the language of culture. Christ was declared king in them all." God had a message for each. "Christ is king." The message was the same, but the languages were different. Since Jesus was a king for all people, the message would be in the tongues of all people.

– Max Lucado, *He Chose the Nails*, pp. 40-45

Breakout time (divide into small groups)

Discuss the significance of the sign hung on Christ's cross.

Discuss the significance of God's being willing to use anybody. While His church is usually the instrument of salvation, many a person has come to Christ by those who do *not* profess His name. Identify other biblical examples of God's using people outside of His covenant community. Why must we be careful, then, not to judge how people come to God?

Discuss the significance of God's speaking any language. There has been much controversy over the term "Allah," but speaking strictly linguistically, this is simply the Arab translation for "God," which both Christians and Muslims use in worship. Identify other examples in the Bible where God uses other languages to reach people. Does this have implications for the controversy over which version of the Bible is used? Why/why not?

Notes

Cultural/National Identity

SERVICE

Quotable Quotes

Since my childhood, prejudice, bigotry, false beliefs, racist and homophobic feelings and attitudes have been programmed into the computer of my brain along with orthodox Christian beliefs. They are all defense mechanisms against loving....

Homophobia and racism are among the most serious and vexing moral issues of this generation, and both church and society seem to limit us to polarized options.

The anything-goes morality of the religious and political Left is matched by the sanctimonious moralism of the religious and political Right. Uncritical acceptance of any party line is an idolatrous abdication of one's core identity as Abba's child. Neither liberal fairy dust nor conservative hardball addresses human dignity, which is often dressed in rags.

Abba's children find a third option. They are guided by God's Word and by it alone....They hold fast to their freedom in Christ to live the gospel – uncontaminated by cultural dreck, political flotsam, and the filigreed hypocrisies of bullying religion.

– Brennan Manning, *Abba's Child*

You cannot fully understand your own life without knowing and thinking beyond your life, your own neighborhood, and even your own nation.

– Johnnetta Cole

Man can starve from a lack of self-realization as much as... from a lack of bread.

– Richard Wright, *Native Son*

An identity would seem to be arrived at by the way in which the person faces and uses his experience.

– James Baldwin

SERVICE PROJECT IDEAS

Conduct a recycling drive.

Organize a “clean-up day” for a neighborhood park.

Gender Identity

LEADERSHIP

Story

Desperate People

Mark 5:25-34

To see her hand you need to look low. Look down. That's where she lives. Low to the ground. Low on the priority list. Low on the social scale. She's low.

Can you see it? Her hand? Gnarled. Thin. Diseased. Dirt blackens the nails and stains the skin. Look carefully amid the knees and feet of the crowd. They're scampering after Christ. He walks. She crawls. People bump her, but she doesn't stop. Others complain. She doesn't care. The woman is desperate. Blood won't stay in her body.... Twelve years of clinics. Treatments. Herbs. Prayer meetings. Incantations.

...No health. No money. And no family to help. Unclean, according to the Law of Moses....The hand you see in the crowd? The one reaching for the robe? No one will touch it.

Wasn't always the case. Surely a husband once took it in marriage....

A family once relied on this hand. To cook, sew. To wipe tears from cheeks, tuck blankets under chins. Are the hands of a mother ever still?

Only if she is diseased.

Maybe the husband tried to stay with her, carting her to doctors and treatment centers. Or maybe he gave up quickly, overwhelmed by her naps, nausea, and anemia....

So she has nothing. No money. No home. No health. Dilapidated dreams. Deflated faith. Unwelcome in the synagogue. Unwanted by her community. For twelve years she has suffered. She has nothing, and her health is getting worse.

...She is desperate. And her desperation births an idea.

"She had heard about Jesus" (v. 27 NLT). Every society has a grapevine, even – or especially – the society of the sick. Word among the lepers and the left out is this: Jesus can heal. And Jesus is coming. By invitation of the synagogue ruler, Jesus is coming to Capernaum.

Odd to find the ruler and the woman in the same story. He powerful. She pitiful. He in demand. She insignificant. He is high. She is low. But his daughter is dying. Tragedy levels social topography. So they find themselves on the same path in the village and the same page of the Bible.

...She extends her hand [and] touches the robe of Jesus, and "immediately the bleeding stopped, and she could feel that she had been healed!" (v. 29 NLT).

...The woman feels power enter. And Jesus? Jesus feels power exit....

...“Who touched my clothes?”...

Can we fault this woman's timidity?...

But she has one reason to have courage. She is healed. "The woman, knowing what had happened, knowing she was the one, stepped up in fear and trembling, knelt before him, and gave him the whole story" (v. 33 MSG).

"The whole story." How long had it been since someone put the gear of life in Park, turned off the key, and listened to her story? But when this woman reaches out to Jesus, he does. With the town bishop waiting, a young girl dying, and a crowd pressing, he still makes time for a woman from the fringe. Using a term he gives to no one else, he says, "Daughter, your faith has made you well. Go in peace. You have been healed" (v. 34 NLT).

And Christ moves on.

And she moves on.

But we can't. We can't because we've been there. Been her. Are there. Are her. Desperate. Dirty. Drained.

Illness took her strength. What took yours?...Take heart. Your family may shun it. Society may avoid it. But Christ? Christ wants to touch it. When your hand reaches through the masses, he knows. Yours is the hand he loves to hold.

– Max Lucado, *Next Door Savior*, pp. 29-31

Breakout time (divide into small groups)

Note how in this case, strict application of the Mosaic Law (meant to protect) left the woman not untouched but untouchable. Are there modern-day examples of the same?

Discuss the role of women within your own society and the church.

Note the parallels between this “Daughter” and the daughter of Jairus to whom Jesus is traveling. (For example, one has been sick as long as the other has been alive!)

Discuss how Jesus’ taking time for one does not negate his time and attention for others in need. This is not a zero-sum game...Jesus always has time to hear our stories!

Notes

Gender Identity

DISCIPLESHIP

Mary of Magdala, II

Mary of Magdala always saw Easter
from the perspective of person.
How often she must have Returned
to the Rock near the Tomb.
Just to be there. Alone.

Friday, Saturday, Sunday
reverted to Ordinary Time;
and earth resumed tilting and turning
in all shades of color
from darkness to light.

Mary absorbed that dyeing of living.
But Three Days spanned a lifetime
that was never the same.
The staying power of love
that Easter could not cling to
secured self-esteem,
recharged her commitment.

“Woman, why are you weeping? Who are you looking for?”
As Easter took on the new life of church,
the second Mary chosen to bear the Good News
would muse on the words...

Jesus had sent her
to tell what she saw and heard
in their great moment together.
Moment got small. Peter kept complaining.
She soon became *that* woman –
who sounded as if Jesus continued to confide in her.

Mary always leaned to the Rock,
and refused to crouch again in fear.

Years after Life Came in a Tomb,
we can sense Mary there,
coming to firm up her belief in herself,
to hear again the music of that call.

What might have happened,
there at the Rock?...

The glimpse that was given
slipped softly away.
It was not hers
to touch or to hold;
for an instant Mary was jolted by the pang of Easter.
Again, the Turning: this time to a sister.
And the music of call
reverberated over time and space.

Apostleship
stayed on course at its Source.
She came down from the mountain humming.
For Mary, it was written on rock
that the truth of true love
was to give it away.

Her gift with people
Proved a lifetime mission.
She always Returned
To the unwanted and unworthy.

A cutting edge of church,
Mary scratched the soul
of patriarchal sexism
because she knew who she was,
where she had been,
and who had her ear.

Rooted,
she routes us
to converge on the vision;
to see what might be,
not what might have been.

From her hardy First Bloom,
a flower spreads into wildflowering,
a daystar gives way to high noon.
The Edge of the Canvas
was cut early One Morning.
To behold it,
a world yearns to believe
from the perspective of person....

– Mary Lou Sleeve, *Women of the Word*, pp. 99-102

Gender Identity

EVANGELISM

An enduring, endearing feature
of an anonymous woman
was that she didn't apologize for herself.

Jesus, tired from a long, hot journey.
sat down alone by a well.
A woman with a jar came by to draw water.
"Give me a drink," he opened, that simply.

He surprised her by speaking,
and she was just as direct:
"How is it you ask me for something to drink?"
When silence was golden,
these were no standard lines.
Among his countrymen who bypassed the region,
water in the jar of a Samaritan woman
was considered impure.

Her eyes were not downcast,
her look asked, "Who *are* you anyway?"
It is an ongoing personal question.
Pivotal.

Pursuant to relationship,
it breaks through stiff or safe or shallow
communication.

Jesus, the Outsider,
was the first among equals
to evangelize an outsider, a woman.

One without identity
was among the first persons he told who he was,
in one of his longest conversations
with anyone in the gospels.
The Man-without-a-bucket
offered her Living Water.
Amazement fastened her eyes on him.
A skeptic well-acquainted with ways of religion,
she evaded his offer at first.

Warily and wearily,
she brought her real everyday earthy water.
And she stayed with the dialogue,
even pushed it along.

Then he spoke the truth about her lifestyle
and neither turned away.

It was a Turning Point.
She talked, at the juncture, of sacred places.
He went beyond, to spirit and truth,
and struck at her core.
“I know the Messiah is coming,” she ventured.

The woman herself is the earthen vessel
over whom Jesus, the Word of God, replied:
“I who speak to you am he.”

It was a Consecrating word.
Scripture’s Sword of the Spirit
penetrated the darkness where she beheld herself.
A groundswell
broke through the mortar that held her unclean.

How much welled up inside her!
Unworthiness was placed in his hand
as an offering of gift.
She traded it in, and he drank it all in.
Living Water in return
was perhaps the first water
she had ever been given.
Entrusted, she was trustworthy.
And from where she stood,
Displaced,
The greater risk was hers.

She left the water jar...drawn up.
She ran off to bring back a town.
Jesus needed that groundswell.
It was pure and extraordinary refreshment.

Unique to this story of a woman with shadows,
repentance is not the theme.
She became a first evangelist
through a capacity for belief she could not contain.

But then,
did Jesus ever meet a woman
whom he chided for unbelief?

Weariness had been plunged into the Old Well
every day,
almost as long as salvation itself.

Anonymity identifies all of us
who are tired from the journey.

there's a well
at a juncture
where there's Jesus.
"Who *are* you anyway?"
"Who are *you* anyway?"
"Give me a drink."

– Mary Lou Sleeve, *Women of the Word*, pp. 45-48

Breakout time (divide into small groups)

Discuss:

"Entrusted, she was trustworthy..."

"...did Jesus ever meet a woman whom he chided for unbelief?"

"Anonymity identifies all of us who are tired from the journey"

"Who *are* you anyway?"

"Who are *you* anyway?"

Notes

Gender Identity

SERVICE

Quotable Quotes

“It is easier to live through someone else than to complete yourself. The freedom to lead and plan your own life is frightening if you have never faced it before.”

– Betty Friedan

“Too many women throw themselves into romance because they’re afraid of being single, then start making compromises and losing their identity. I won’t do that.”

– Julie Delpy

SERVICE PROJECT IDEAS

Provide food and clothing to individuals who are homeless.

Pay rent (anonymously) for someone who is in need.

Have a clothing drive – ask each participant from the church to not only use the opportunity to get rid of old things, but to either donate new items or one of their favorite outfits. Take the opportunity to talk about *sacrificial* giving.

Generational Identity

LEADERSHIP

Essence

Against the Crowd

We warn young people against going to dens of iniquity, even out of curiosity, because no one knows what might happen. Still more terrible, however, is the danger of going along with the crowd. In truth, there is no place, not even one most disgustingly dedicated to lust and vice, where a human being is more easily corrupted – than in the crowd.

Even though every individual possesses the truth, when he gets together in a crowd, untruth will be present at once, for the crowd *is* untruth. It either produces impenitence and irresponsibility or it weakens the individual's sense of responsibility by placing it in a fractional category. For instance, imagine an individual walking up to Christ and spitting on him. No human being would ever have the courage or the audacity to do that. But as part of a crowd, well then they somehow have the “courage” to do it – dreadful untruth!

The crowd is indeed untruth. Christ was crucified because he would have nothing to do with the crowd (even though he addressed himself to all). He did not want to form a party, an interest group, a mass movement, but wanted to be what he was, the truth, which is related to the single individual. Therefore everyone who will genuinely serve the truth is by that very fact a martyr. To win a crowd is no art; for that only untruth is needed, nonsense, and a little knowledge of human passions. But no witness to the truth dares to get involved with the crowd. His work is to be involved with all people, if possible, but always individually, speaking with each and every person on the sidewalk and on the streets – in order to split apart. He avoids the crowd, especially when it is treated as authoritative in matters of the truth or when its applause, or hissing, or balloting are regarded as judges. He avoids the crowd with its herd mentality more than a decent young girl avoids the bars on the harbor. Those who speak to the crowd, coveting its approval, those who deferentially bow and scrape before it must be regarded as being worse than prostitutes. They are instruments of untruth.

For this reason, I could weep, even want to die, when I think about how the public, with its daily press and anonymity, make things so crazy. That an anonymous person, by means of the press, day in and day out can say whatever he wants to say, what he perhaps would never have the courage to say face-to-face as an individual or another individual, and can get thousands to repeat it, is nothing less than a crime – and no one has responsibility! What untruth! Such is the way of the crowd.

– Søren Kierkegaard, *Provocations*, pp. 23-24

Breakout time (divide into small groups)

Are you a thermostat [one who impacts your world] or a thermometer [merely an indicator of what the climate is]?

Discuss the implications of the above passage's reading on the individual versus the crowd. Have you seen any of this to be true in your own experience?

What are the implications of the above passage for evangelism, in the suggested individual versus group approach? With this in mind, compare/contrast biblical examples of evangelism with some modern-day techniques.

What are the implications of the last paragraph, given modern technology, blogging, and social media channels? What is your responsibility in all venues to promote truth?

Scripture

Read and discuss Daniel 1 in light of the above passage. What lessons can you glean from the life of Daniel? How can you apply those to your life today?

1 Corinthians 1:25 _____

Romans 10:11 _____

Matthew 24:35/ Mark 13:31/ Luke 21:33 _____

Notes

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Generational Identity

DISCIPLESHIP

Story

The Road Is *How*

There is a generally accepted metaphor that compares life to a road. To compare life to a road can indeed be fruitful in many ways, but we must consider how life is unlike a road. In a physical sense a road is an external actuality, no matter whether anyone is walking on it or not, no matter how the individual travels on it – the road is the road. But in the spiritual sense, the road comes into existence only when we walk on it. That is, the road *is* how it is walked.

It would be unreasonable to define a highway by how it is walked. Whether it is the young person who walks it with his head held high or the old decrepit person who struggles along with head bowed down, whether it is the happy person hurrying to reach a goal or the worrier who creeps slowly along, whether it is the poor traveler on foot or the rich traveler in his carriage – the road, in the physical sense, is the same for all. The road is and remains the same, the same highway. But not the road of virtue. We cannot point to the road of virtue and say: There runs the road of virtue. We can only show how the road of virtue is walked, and if anyone refuses to walk that way, he is walking another road.

The dissimilarity in the metaphor shows up most clearly when the discussion is simultaneously about a physical road and a road in the spiritual sense. For example, when we read in the Gospel about the good Samaritan, there is mention of the road between Jericho and Jerusalem. The story tells of five people who walked “along the same road.” Spiritually speaking, however, each one walked his own road. The highway, alas, makes no difference: it is the spiritual that makes the difference and distinguishes the road. Let us consider more carefully how this is.

The first man was a peaceful traveler who walked along the road from Jericho to Jerusalem, along a lawful road. The second man was a robber who “walked along the same road” – and yet on an unlawful road. Then a priest came “along the same road”; he saw the poor unfortunate man who had been assaulted by the robber. Perhaps he was momentarily moved but went right on by. He walked the road of indifference. Next a Levite came “along the same road” but was walking his way, the way of selfishness and callousness. Finally a Samaritan came “along the same road.” He found the poor unfortunate man on the road of mercy. He showed by example how to walk the road of mercy; he demonstrated that the road, spiritually speaking, is precisely this; *how* one walks. This is why the Gospel says, “Go and do likewise.” Yes, there were five travelers who walked “along the same road,” and yet each one walked his own road.

The question “how one walks life’s road” makes all the difference. In other words, when life is compared to a road, the metaphor simply expresses the universal, that which everyone who is alive has in common by being alive. To that extent we are all walking along the road of life and are all walking along the same road. But when living becomes a matter of truth, then the question becomes: How shall we walk in order to walk the right road on the road of life? The traveler who in truth walks life’s road does not ask, “Where is the road?” but asks how one ought to walk along the road. Yet, because impatience does not mind being deceived it merely asks where the road is, as if that decided everything as when the traveler finally has found the highway. Worldly wisdom is very willing to deceive by answering correctly the question where is the road? While life’s true task is omitted, that spiritually understood the road is: how it is walked.

Worldly sagacity teaches that the road goes over Gerizim, or over Moriah, or that it goes through

– Søren Kierkegaard, *Provocations*, pp. 55-57

Discuss: “On the one hand, we are called to play the Good Samaritan on life’s roadside, but that will be only an initial act. One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho Road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life’s highway. True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring.”

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Generational Identity

EVANGELISM

Essence

The Voice of the Nature of God

*“I heard the voice of the Lord, saying: ‘Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?’”
(Isaiah 6:8).*

When we talk about the call of God, we often forget the most important thing, namely, the nature of Him who calls. There are many things calling each of us today. Some of these calls will be answered, and others will not even be heard. The call is the expression of the nature of the One who calls, and we can only recognize the call if that same nature is in us. The call of God is the expression of God’s nature, not ours. God providentially weaves the threads of His call through our lives, and only we can distinguish them. It is the threading of God’s voice directly to us over a certain concern, and it is useless to seek another person’s opinion of it. Our dealings over the call of God should be kept exclusively between ourselves and Him.

The call of God is not a reflection of my nature; my personal desires and temperament are of no consideration. As long as I dwell on my own qualities and traits and think about what I am suited for, I will never hear the call of God. But when God brings me into the right relationship with Himself, I will be in the same condition Isaiah was. Isaiah was so attuned to God, because of the great crisis he had just endured, that the call of God penetrated his soul. The majority of us cannot hear anything but ourselves. And we cannot hear anything God says. But to be brought to the place where we can hear the call of God is to be profoundly changed.

—Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost for His Highest*, January 16

Scripture

Explore the calls heard by the following people – old and young alike – in the Bible. How might their focusing on their own personal desires and temperament have caused them to miss the call of God altogether?

Abraham (Genesis 12:1-8)

Joseph (Genesis 37:5-11)

Moses (Exodus 3)

Samuel (1 Samuel 3)

David (1 Samuel 16:13)

Mary (Luke 1:26-38)

Simeon (Luke 2:25-35)

Anna (Luke 2:36-38)

Paul (Acts 9:1-19)

Generational Identity

SERVICE

Quotable Quotes

“To know what you prefer, instead of humbly saying “Amen” to what the world tells you you ought to prefer, is to keep your soul alive.”

– Robert Louis Stevenson

“...enervating fear of our peers can create an appalling mediocrity.”

– Brennan Manning, *Abba's Child*

SERVICE PROJECT IDEAS

Sponsor a joint service project with a church of a different racial composition than your own; plan a social activity after the service project to enable people maximum time to interact with those from different backgrounds.

Make and distribute welcome packets to area schools/colleges.

Religious Identity

LEADERSHIP

Story

Nicodemus is impressive. Not only is he one of the six thousand Pharisees, he is a ruler, one of seventy men who serve on the high council. Think of him as a religious blue blood. What the justices are to the Supreme Court, he is to the Law of Moses. Expert. Credentials trail his name like a robe behind a king. Nicodemus, Ph.D., Th.D., M.S., M.Div. universities want him on their board. Conferences want him on their platform. When it comes to religion, he's loaded. When it comes to life, he's tired.

As a good Jew, he's trying to obey the Talmud. No small endeavor. He has twenty-four chapters of laws regarding the Sabbath alone....

Can a scientist study stars and never weep at their splendor? Dissect a rose and never notice its perfume? Can a theologian study the Law until he decodes the shoe size of Moses but still lack the peace needed for a good night's sleep?

Maybe that's why Nicodemus comes at night. He is tired but can't sleep. Tired of rules and regulations but no rest. Nicodemus is looking for a change. And he has a hunch Jesus can give it.

Though Nicodemus asks no question, Jesus offers him an answer. "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God" (v. 3).

This is radical language. To see the kingdom of God you need an unprecedented rebirth from God. Nicodemus staggers at the elephantine thought. "How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born, can he?" (v. 4).

Don't you love those last two words? *Can he?* ...What causes the question? What makes Nicodemus add those two words? Old Nick should know better. He wasn't born yesterday.

But maybe he wishes he had been. Maybe he wishes he could be born today. Maybe those last two words – "can he?" – emerge from that part of Nicodemus that longs for strength. Youthful vigor. Fresh wind. New legs.

Nicodemus seems to be saying, "Jesus, I've got the spiritual energy of an old mule. How do you expect me to be born again when I can't even remember if figs can be eaten on the Sabbath? I'm an old man. How can a man be born when he is old?" According to Christ, the new birth must come from a new place. "The truth is, no one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit. Humans can reproduce only human life, but the Holy Spirit gives new life from heaven" (vv. 5-6 NLT).

Could Jesus be more direct? "*No one* can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit." You want to go to heaven? Doesn't matter how religious you are or how many rules you keep. You need a new birth; you need to be "born of water and the Spirit."

God gives no sponge baths. He washes us from head to toe. ...

But more is needed. God is not content to clean you, he indwells you....

...This is the part that stunned Nicodemus. Working for God was not new. But God working in him? *I need to chew on that a bit.*

Maybe you do, as well. Are you a Nicodemus? Religious as Saint Peter's Square, but feeling just as old? Pious but powerless? If so, may I remind you of something?

When you believe in Christ, Christ works a miracle in you. "When you believed in Christ, he identified you as his own by giving you the Holy Spirit" (Eph. 1:13 NLT). You are permanently purified and empowered by God himself. The message of Jesus to the religious person is simple: It's not what you do. It's what I do. I have moved in. and in time you can say with Paul, "I myself no longer live, but Christ lives in me" (Gal. 2:20 NLT). ...

...*If I'm born again, why do I fall so often?*

Why did you fall so often after your first birth? Did you exit the womb wearing cross-trainers? Did you do the two-step on the day of your delivery? Of course not. And when you started to walk, you fell more than you stood. Should we expect anything different from our spiritual walk?

...The stumbles of a toddler do not invalidate the act of birth. And the stumbles of Christian do not annul his spiritual birth.

Do you understand what God has done? He has deposited a Christ seed in you. As it grows, you will change. It's not that sin has no more presence in your life, but rather that sin has no more power over your life. Temptation will pester you, but temptation will not master you. What hope this brings.

Nicodemuses of the world, hear this. It's not up to you! Within you abides a budding power. Trust him!

...Religious rule keeping can sap your strength....No prison is as endless as the prison of perfection. Her inmates find work but never find peace. How could they? They never know when they are finished.

Christ, however, gifts you with a finished work. He fulfilled the law for you. Bid farewell to the burden of religion. Gone is the fear that having done everything, you might not have done enough. You climb the stairs, not by your strength, but his. God pledges to help those who stop trying to help themselves.

"He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (Phil. 1:6 NIV)....

– Max Lucado, *Next Door Savior*, pp. 66-70

Breakout time (divide into small groups)

Discuss: "Can a scientist study stars and never weep at their splendor? Dissect a rose and never notice its perfume? Can a theologian study the Law ...but still lack the peace needed for a good night's sleep?" Are you missing some of the forest for the trees? How can you step back, rekindle the relationship, and put the details in their proper perspective?

Review the discussion in John 3. How does Jesus get to answering a question that was not asked?

Discuss: "Working for God was not new. But God working in him?..."

Discuss: "It's not up to you! Within you abides a budding power. Trust him!"

Discuss: "Some of us believe that God is almighty and can do everything; and that he is all-wise and may do everything; but that he is all-love and will do everything – there we draw back." – Julian of Norwich, as quoted in Brennan Manning, *Abba's Child*

Discuss: "Religious rule keeping can sap your strength....No prison is as endless as the prison of perfection. Her inmates find work but never find peace." Contrast with Jesus' promise to give those who follow Him rest. Note Christ's strongest condemnations were for religious rulers/elite of His day. What lessons must we learn about true religion and keeping it from becoming a burden?

Discuss: "God pledges to help those who stop trying to help themselves." (NOTE: "God helps those who help themselves" is neither found in the Bible nor is it biblical.)

Scripture

Further exploring my biblical identity:

John 15:15 _____

1 Cor 3:16; 6:19 _____

Gal 4:6-7 _____

1 Cor 1:2 _____

1 Peter 2:5 _____

Eph 1:13-14 _____

Col 2:11 _____

2 Tim 1:9 _____

Notes

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Religious Identity

DISCIPLESHIP

Story

The Tax Collector

In Luke's Gospel we read: "But the tax collector stood far off and would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner" (Lk. 18:13). The tax collector stood far off. What does this mean? It means to stand by himself, alone with himself and God. Only when you are literally alone with God do you discover how far off you are. Oh, even though you are not as sinful as the tax collector, when you are alone with yourself before God, you also stand far off. And this is as it should be. For as soon as there is somebody between you and God, you are easily deceived, as though you were not so far off. You too easily use a deceitful standard of measurement, the standard of human comparison. It is as though you think you could measure how far away you are, which, of course, is never that far.

But the Pharisee also "stood by himself." Was he not also standing far off? Yes, if he had stood by himself. But the Gospel says that he stood by himself and thanked God "that he was not like other men." He did not stand by himself, for when we have others in view, we do not stand by ourselves. The Pharisee's pride consisted just in this – that he proudly used others to measure his distance. He held this thought fast, in order to stand proudly by himself in contrast to the rest. But this indeed is not to stand by yourself, least of all to stand by yourself before God.

The Pharisee stands by himself, the tax collector stands afar off – and yet, and yet, the Pharisee saw the tax collector but the tax collector did not see the Pharisee. When the Pharisee came home he knew very well that this tax collector had been in church, but this tax collector knew nothing of this Pharisee's having been in church. Proudly the Pharisee found satisfaction in seeing the tax collector; humbly the tax collector saw no one. With eyes cast down and turned inward he was in truth before God.

And so, "the tax collector went down to his house justified." With regards to this tax collector, the Scripture says of all tax collectors and sinners, that they draw near to Christ – just by standing afar off they draw near to him (whereas the Pharisee with presumptuous insolence stood far, yes far off). Thus the picture is inverted. It begins with the Pharisee standing near, the tax collector afar off; it ends with the Pharisee standing far off, the tax collector near. The tax collector went to his house justified. For he cast down his eyes; but such eyes *see* God, and in seeing God the heart is lifted up.

– Søren Kierkegaard, *Provocations*, pp. 183-184

Breakout time (divide into small groups)

Discuss the distinction made between standing "far off" and standing "by oneself."

What is the danger in being too aware of others, as the Pharisee was aware of the tax collector, but not vice versa? Have you ever fallen prey to contemplation/comparison of others in worship rather than concentration on God and your own personal standing with Him? How can you avoid falling into this trap?

Religious Identity

EVANGELISM

Essence

[Christ] works on us in all sorts of way: not only through what we think our 'religious life'. He works through Nature, through our own bodies, through books, sometimes through experiences which seem (at the time) *anti-Christian*. . . . But above all, He works on us through each other.

Men are mirrors, or 'carriers' of Christ to other men. Sometimes unconscious carriers. This 'good infection' can be carried by those who have not got it themselves. People who were not Christians themselves helped me to Christianity. But usually it is those who know Him that bring Him to others. That is why the Church, the whole body of Christians showing Him to one another, is so important. You might say that when two Christians are following Christ together there is not twice as much Christianity as when they are apart, but sixteen times as much.

But do not forget this. At first it is natural for a baby to take its mother's milk without knowing its mother. It is equally natural for us to see the man who helps us without seeing Christ behind him. but we must not remain babies. We must go on to recognise the real Giver. It is madness not to. Because, if we do not, we shall be relying on human beings. And that is going to let us down. The best of them will make mistakes; all of them will die. We must be thankful to all the people who have helped us. We must honour them and love them. But never, never pin your whole faith on any human being: not if he is the best and wisest in the whole world. There are lots of nice things you can do with sand: but do not try building a house on it.

And now we begin to see what it is that the New Testament is always talking about. It talks about Christians 'being born again'; it talks about them 'putting on Christ'; about Christ 'being formed in us'; about our coming to 'have the mind of Christ'.

Put right out of your head the idea that these are only fancy ways of saying that Christians are to read what Christ said and try to carry it out – as a man may read what Plato or Marx said and try to carry it out. They mean something much more than that. They mean that a real Person, Christ, here and now, in that very room where you are saying your prayers, is doing things to you. It is not a question of a good man who died two thousand years ago. It is a living Man, still as much a man as you, and still as much God as He was when He created the world, really coming and interfering with your very self; killing the old natural self in you and replacing it with the kind of self He has. At first, only for moments. Then for longer periods. Finally, if all goes well, turning you permanently into a different sort of thing; into a new little Christ, a being which, in its own small way, has the same kind of life as God; which shares in His power, joy, knowledge and eternity. . . .

– C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, pp. 190-192

Breakout time (divide into small groups)

As Christians, do we show Christ to one another? How can we do a better job of this?

How can we keep from being discouraged by missteps?

How can you be conscious of shifting those you bring to Christ to focus on *Him* rather than you? How can you be honest with them that you will disappoint as a human, and their eyes must be on Christ?

In what ways have you experienced Christ's "interfering"? Discuss your reactions, both good and bad, and the results.

Consider

Map your spiritual journey, noting times of growth and corresponding life events.

True and False Christians

Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him and remarked, "Here is a true Israelite who is sincere." – John 1:47

"The Lord Christ does not want us to brag about being a Christian or, as in the case of Nathanael, being an Israelite. It's not enough to say, "I am baptized" or even to say, "I am a bishop," "I am a cardinal," or "I am a preacher." You must believe in Christ and live like a Christian. You must be righteous both on the inside and on the outside. You must not be embarrassed of the Lord Christ and the Christian faith. If you are, then you are a false Christian. If you don't believe in your heart, your entire life is a lie and you remain in darkness. You aren't righteous, and you only appear to be Christian. Your actions don't reflect your Christian faith..." – Martin Luther, *By Faith Alone*, May 17

Notes

Religious Identity

SERVICE

Quotable Quotes

“The difficulty is not to understand what Christianity is but to become and to be a Christian.”

– Søren Kierkegaard, *Provocations*, p. 267

“The greatest religious problem today is how to be both a mystic and a militant; in other words how to combine the search for an expansion of inner awareness with effective social action, and how to feel one’s true identity in both.”

– Ursula K. LeGuin

SERVICE PROJECT IDEAS

Hold a celebration to honor unsung community leaders.

Conduct a voter registration drive.

Write letters to elected officials and newspaper editors about social problems and possible solutions.

Knowing and Being Known

LEADERSHIP

Essence

It has been said by someone that “the proper study of mankind is man.” I will not oppose the idea, but I believe it is equally true that the proper study of God’s elect is God: the proper study of a Christian is the Godhead. The highest science, the loftiest speculation, the mightiest philosophy, which can ever engage the attention of a child of God, is the name, the nature, the person, the work, the doings, and the existence of the great God whom he calls his Father.

There is something exceedingly improving to the mind in a contemplation of the Divinity. It is a subject so vast, that all our thoughts are lost in its immensity; so deep, that our pride is drowned in its infinity. Other subjects we can compass and grapple with; in them we feel a kind of self-content, and go our way with the thought, “Behold I am wise.” But when we come to this master science, finding that our plumbline cannot sound its depth, and that our eagle eye cannot see its height, we turn away with the thought that vain man would be wise, but he is like a wild ass’s colt; and with solemn exclamation, “I am but of yesterday, and know nothing.” No subject of contemplation will tend more to humble the mind, than thoughts of God....

But while the subject *humbles* the mind, it also expands it. He who often thinks of God, will have a larger mind than the man who simply plods around the narrow globe.... The most excellent study for expanding the soul, is the science of Christ, and Him crucified, and the knowledge of the Godhead in the glorious Trinity. Nothing will so enlarge the intellect, nothing so magnify the whole soul of man, as a devout, earnest, continued investigation of the great subject of the Deity.

And, whilst humbling and expanding, this subject is eminently *consolatory*. Oh, there is, in contemplating Christ, a balm for every wound; in musing on the Father, there is a quietus for every grief; and in the influence of the Holy Ghost, there is a balsam for every sore. Would you lose your sorrow? Would you drown your cares? Then go, plunge yourself in the Godhead’s deepest sea; be lost in his immensity; and you shall come forth as from a couch of rest, refreshed and invigorated. I know nothing which can so comfort the soul; so calm the swelling billows of sorrow and grief; so speak peace to the winds of trial, as a devout musing upon the subject of the Godhead....

– Charles H. Spurgeon, January 7, 1855

Breakout time (divide into small groups)

Discuss: “There is something exceedingly improving to the mind in a contemplation of the Divinity.”

What is one to do once engaged in the study of the “great God whom he calls his Father”? In what ways must this “study” differ from that more traditionally undertaken by man?

Share examples of how you have found “this subject...eminently *consolatory*.”

What are the implications of this study of God for our own identity?

To whom do you belong? Whose opinion truly matters in your life – man or God? Your answer to these questions will determine where you stand on the question of identity.

Consider

Spend quiet time in God's Word contemplating Him. Identify areas in which you need to know more about your heavenly Father. What questions do you have about your own identity that might be resolved in better understanding your Father's?

Notes

[illegible]

Knowing and Being Known

DISCIPLESHIP

Essence

I walked in the sunshine with a scholar who had effectively forfeited his prospects of academic advancement by clashing with the church dignitaries over the gospel of grace. “But it doesn’t matter,” he said at length, “for I’ve known God and they haven’t.” The remark was a mere parenthesis, a passing comment on something I had said, but it has stuck with me and set me thinking.

Not many of us, I think, would ever naturally say that we have known God. The words imply a definiteness and matter-of-factness of experience to which most of us, if we are honest, have to admit that we are still strangers. We claim, perhaps, to have a testimony, and can rattle off our conversion story with the best of them; we say that we *know* God – this, after all, is what evangelicals are expected to say; but would it occur to us to say, without hesitation, and with reference to particular events in our personal history, that we *have known* God? I doubt it, for I suspect that [what] most of us experience of God has never become so vivid as that.

Nor, I think, would many of us ever naturally say that in the light of the knowledge of God which we have come to enjoy, past disappointments and present heartbreaks, as the world counts heartbreaks, *don’t matter*. For the plain fact is that to most of us they do matter. We live with them as our “crosses” (so we call them). Constantly we find ourselves slipping into bitterness and apathy and gloom as we reflect on them, which we frequently do. The attitude we show to the world is a sort of dried-up stoicism, miles removed from the “joy unspeakable and full of glory” which Peter took for granted that his readers were displaying (1 Pet 1:8 KJV). “Poor soul,” our friends say of us, “how they’ve *suffered*.” And that is just what we feel about ourselves!

But these private mock heroics have no place at all in the minds of those who really know God. They never brood on might-have-beens; they never think of the things they have missed, only of what they have gained.

“But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ,” wrote Paul. “What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him.... I want to know Christ” (Phil 3:7-10). When Paul says he counts the things he lost *rubbish*, or *dung* (KJV), he means not merely that he does not think of them as having any value, but also that he does not live with them constantly in his mind: what normal person spends his time nostalgically dreaming of manure? Yet this, in effect, is what many of us do. It shows how little we have in the way of true knowledge of God.

– J.I Packer, *Knowing God*, pp. 24-25

Breakout time (divide into small groups)

Discuss the effect that having a larger worldview has on one's perspective of life's challenges.

Is there any experience you can point to in your life where you can – or *would* have been able to – say you *have known* God? What might this mean?

What might it take in your life for “past disappointments and present heartbreaks” not to matter in light of your personal knowledge of God? What effect might this have on your life and witness? Explain.

Compare and contrast what people often refer to as their “crosses” with what Christ had to say about picking up one’s cross? In what ways are they the same/different? Why must we be careful about how we throw around biblical jargon?

Should people looking upon us as Christians have an idea of how we've *suffered*? Why/why not? Are there different answers for different circumstances? Explain. Use Scripture to support your answers.

Notes

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue or grey ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

Knowing and Being Known

EVANGELISM

Essence

How can we turn our knowledge *about* God into knowledge *of* God? The rule for doing this is simple but demanding. It is that we turn each truth that we learn *about* God into matter for meditation *before* God, leading to prayer and praise *to* God.

We have some idea, perhaps, what prayer is, but what is meditation? Well may we ask, for meditation is a lost art today, and Christian people suffer grievously from their ignorance of the practice.

Meditation is the activity of calling to mind, and thinking over, and dwelling on, and applying to oneself, the various things that one knows about the works and ways and purposes and promises of God. It is an activity of holy thought, consciously performed in the presence of God, under the eye of God, by the help of God, as a means of communion with God.

Its purpose is to clear one's mental and spiritual vision of God, and to let his truth make its full and proper impact on one's mind and heart. It is a matter of talking to oneself about God and oneself; it is, indeed, often a matter of arguing with oneself, reasoning oneself out of moods of doubt and unbelief into a clear apprehension of God's power and grace.

Its effect is ever to humble us, as we contemplate God's greatness and glory and our own littleness and sinfulness, and to encourage and reassure us – “comfort” us, in the old, strong, Bible sense of the word – as we contemplate the unsearchable riches of divine mercy displayed in the Lord Jesus Christ. ...God help us, then, to put our knowledge about God to this use, that we all may in truth “know the Lord.”

– J.I Packer, *Knowing God*, pp. 23

Breakout time (divide into small groups)

Discuss: “The rule for [turning knowledge *about* God into knowledge *of* God] is simple but demanding. It is that we turn each truth that we learn *about* God into matter for meditation *before* God, leading to prayer and praise *to* God.”

What false impressions of God have you overcome through the years? Why is it important to “clear one's mental and spiritual vision of God”? Discuss examples in the Bible of wrong notions of God. In what ways is this idolatry, or worship of a false God? Why, then, is it so important “to let his truth make its full and proper impact on one's mind and heart”?

What is one to do with this contemplation? What are the implications for evangelism? Note that Jesus regularly took time alone with God, but this time was always followed by action. Is that which we learn of God in meditation to be kept to ourselves?

Consider

Write down the “various things that [you know] about the works and ways and purposes and promises of God” and spend time in meditating on these, thinking them over, dwelling on them, and applying them to yourself.

Notes

[illegible]

Knowing and Being Known

SERVICE

Quotable Quotes

“The ancient human question ‘Who am I?’ leads inevitably to the equally important question ‘Whose am I?’ — for there is no self outside of relationship.”

—Parker Palmer

“There is another interesting paradox here: by immersing ourselves in what we love, we find ourselves. We do not lose ourselves. One does not lose one’s identity by falling in love.”

—Lukas Foss

“Know thyself” — a maxim as pernicious as it is odious. A person observing himself would arrest his own development. Any caterpillar who tried to “know himself” would never become a butterfly.”

—André Gide, *Nouvelles Nourritures*

SERVICE PROJECT IDEAS

Hold a blood drive and/or a community health education fair.

Christ-like Identity

LEADERSHIP

Essence

According to the New Testament, the religious experience of the earliest Christians was derived from and dependent upon Christ. Christian experience is more than an imitation of the life and teaching of Jesus. It is the present experience of the risen Christ indwelling the believer's heart by the Spirit. Both Johannine and Pauline literature refer to this reality by emphasizing the inclusive and corporate personality of Christ. ... Paul expresses the personal appropriation of the work of Christ by the term "IN CHRIST." It appears to be the Apostle's favorite term to describe the personal and dynamic relation of the believer to Christ, and it appears in a variety of contexts. This particular phrase "In Christ" is found 8 times in Galatians, 34 times in Ephesians, and 18 times in Colossians.

This is what theologians call "Identification with Christ." It means God has acted in such a way that we have become identified with Christ. Therefore, as far as God is concerned, what is true of Christ's standing has become true of us. ...Of course we have not become the creators of the world, nor have we become deity, but the areas where we are identified with Christ go much further than many of us would challenge ourselves to think.

Union with Christ is the result of an act of divine grace, the Baptism of the Holy Spirit. Baptized into Christ, the Believer is incorporated into the body of Christ. This new position In Christ is the fulfillment of Jesus' promise to his disciples in John 14:20. Therefore this phrase has a corporate meaning as well – we belong to the Community of Christ. This community is defined by its relation to its representation of Christ. So when we are In Christ, not only are we related to Christ, but we also Look Like Christ. I have to pause at this point and tell you that this is the missing ingredient in the local church today:

- Identify with everybody but Christ
- Church no longer wants to look like a Church
- Used to be a time when people could look at us and tell we were different
- We want to look like the Rappers
- We want to look like the Gangsters
- Too much of the world in us and not enough Jesus in us

...The Bible says God's plan for us is that we be "TRANSFORMED INTO HIS LIKENESS WITH EVER-INCREASING GLORY, WHICH COMES FROM THE LORD, WHO IS THE SPIRIT" – II CORINTHIANS 3:18. There is no end to the power He wants to exhibit in our lives. ...

We were created as incredible models of our Father. We bear such a striking resemblance to our Father that His enemies hate us just because of who we are!!

- We were created in His image and likeness
- Of all the creatures of the earth, we are unique
- Of all the creatures of the earth, we are the only ones that live with the knowledge that we will one day die
- Of all the creatures of the earth, we are unique in our capacity for rational thought
- We have an Abundant Life with Christ, that was established long ago

– Wayne A. Lawson , *Identity Theft*, www.sermoncentral.com

Identified or Simply Interested?

“I have been crucified with Christ...” (Galatians 2:20).

The inescapable spiritual need each of us has is the need to sign the death certificate of our sin nature. I must take my emotional opinions and intellectual beliefs and be willing to turn them into a moral verdict against the nature of sin; that is, against any claim I have to my right to myself. Paul said, “I have been crucified with Christ...” He did not say, “I have made a determination to imitate Jesus Christ,” or, “I will really make an effort to follow Him” – but – “I have been *identified* with Him in His death.” Once I reach this moral decision and act on it, all that Christ accomplished *for* me on the Cross is accomplished *in* me. My unrestrained commitment of myself to God gives the Holy Spirit the opportunity to grant to me the holiness of Jesus Christ.

“...it is no longer I who live...” My individuality remains, but my primary motivation for living and the nature that rules me are radically changed. I have the same human body, but the old satanic right to myself has been destroyed.

“...and the life which I now live in the flesh,” not the life which I long to live or even pray that I live, but the life I now live in my mortal flesh – the life which others can see, “I live by faith in the Son of God...” This faith was not Paul’s own faith in Jesus Christ, but the faith the Son of God had given to him (see Ephesians 2:9). It is no longer a faith in faith, but a faith that transcends all imaginable limits – a faith that comes only from the Son of God.

–Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost for His Highest*, March 21

Breakout time (divide into small groups)

Discuss what it means to be “In Christ,” both individually and corporately.

List ways in which the Christian is to be identified with Christ, citing Scripture for back-up.

What would we look like – both as an individual and a community – if there were more Jesus in us? If we were truly transformed into His likeness?

Discuss: “Christian experience is more than an imitation of the life and teaching of Jesus. It is the present experience of the risen Christ indwelling the believer’s heart by the Spirit.”

Discuss: “What understanding do you have of the salvation of your soul? The work of salvation means that in your real life things are dramatically changed. You no longer look at things in the same way. Your desires are new and the old things have lost their power to attract you. One of the tests for determining if the work of salvation in your life is genuine is – has God changed the things that really matter to you? If you still yearn for the old things, it is absurd to talk about being born from above – you are deceiving yourself.” –Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost for His Highest*, November 12

Scripture

Further exploring my biblical identity:

John 15:16 _____

Ephesians 4:24 _____

Colossians 3:3 _____

Colossians 3:4 _____

Hebrews 3:14 _____

1 Cor 2:12 _____

1 Cor 1:30 _____

1 Cor 2:16 _____

2 Cor 5:14-15 _____

2 Cor 5:21 _____

Galatians 2:20 _____

Ephesians 2:4-5 _____

Colossians 1:27 _____

Colossians 2:7 _____

Colossians 2:10 _____

Colossians 2:12, 13 _____

Colossians 3:14 _____

2 Timothy 1:7 _____

2 Peter 1:4 _____

Philippians 1:6 _____

Christ-like Identity

DISCIPLESHIP

Essence

Followers not Admirers

It is well known that Christ consistently used the expression “follower.” He never asks for admirers, worshippers, or adherents. No, he calls disciples. It is not adherents of a teaching but followers of a life Christ is looking for.

Christ understood that being a disciple was in innermost and deepest harmony with what he said about himself. Christ claimed to be the way and the truth and the life (Jn. 14:6). For this reason, he could never be satisfied with adherents who accepted his teaching – especially with those who in their lives ignored it or let things take their usual course. His whole life on earth, from beginning to end, was destined solely to have followers and to make admirers impossible.

Christ came into the world with the purpose of saving, not instructing it. At the same time – as is implied in his saving work – he came to be *the pattern*, to leave footprints for the person who would join him, who would become a follower. This is why Christ was born and lived and died in lowliness. It is absolutely impossible for anyone to sneak away from the Pattern with excuse and evasion on the basis that It, after all, possessed earthly and worldly advantages that he did not have. In that sense, to admire Christ is the false invention of a later age, aided by the presumption of “loftiness.” No, there is absolutely nothing to admire in Jesus, unless you want to admire poverty, misery, and contempt.

What, then, is the difference between an admirer and a follower? A follower *is* or strives *to be* what he admires. An admirer, however, keeps himself personally detached. He fails to see that what is admired involves a claim upon him, and thus he fails to be or strive to be what he admires.

To want to admire instead of to follow Christ is not necessarily an invention by bad people. No, it is more an invention by those who spinelessly keep themselves detached, who keep themselves at a safe distance. Admirers are related to the admired only through the excitement of the imagination. To them he is like an actor on the stage except that, this being real life, the effect he produces is somewhat stronger. But for their part, admirers make the same demands that are made in the theater: to sit safe and calm. Admirers are only all too willing to serve Christ as long as proper caution is exercised, lest one personally come in contact with danger. As such, they refuse to accept that Christ's life is a demand. In actual fact, they are offended at him. His radical, bizarre character so offends them that when they honestly see Christ for who he is, they are no longer able to experience the tranquility they so much seek after. They know full well that to associate with him too closely amounts to being up for examination. Even though he “says nothing” against them personally, they know that his life tacitly judges theirs.

And Christ's life indeed makes it manifest, terrifyingly manifest, what dreadful untruth it is to admire the truth instead of following it. When there is no danger, when there is a dead calm, when everything is favorable to our Christianity, it is all too easy to confuse an admirer with a follower. And this can happen very quietly. The admirer can be in the delusion that the position he takes is the true one, when all he is doing is playing it safe. Give heed, therefore, to the call of discipleship!

– Søren Kierkegaard, *Provocations*, pp. 85-86

Breakout time (divide into small groups)

Discuss the distinction made between followers and admirers.

Discuss: “Christ came into the world with the purpose of saving, not instructing, it.” Do we as *followers* present His salvific work, or are we more inclined as *admirers* to instruct? If our inclinations are not in line with His example, what adjustment do we need to make?

Discuss: For Christians, the question of truth is not a “what,” but a “who.” Why is this significant, and how does it differ from other world religions? Is it accurate, then, when people say “We have the truth”? Why/why not?

Discuss: “There is absolutely nothing to admire in Jesus, unless you want to admire poverty, misery, and contempt.” Discuss the response of the rich young ruler in this light.

Discuss: “What dreadful untruth it is to admire the truth instead of following it.”

In light of the above reading, discuss why Jesus seemed most at odds with the “religious” of His day. What are the implications for us today?

Is there a particular danger in so-called “Christian” countries for those who call themselves Christians to admire Christ more than follow Him? Explain your answer.

Notes

Christ-like Identity

EVANGELISM

Essence

Already the new men are dotted here and there all over the earth....Every now and then one meets them. Their very voices and faces are different from ours: stronger, quieter, happier, more radiant. They begin where most of us leave off. They are, I say, recognisable; but you must know what to look for. They will not be very like the idea of 'religious people' which you have formed from your general reading. They do not draw attention to themselves. You tend to think that you are being kind to them when they are really being kind to you. They love you more than other men do, but they need you less. (We must get over wanting to be needed....) They will usually seem to have a lot of time: you will wonder where it comes from. When you have recognised one of them, you will recognise the next one much more easily....

But you must not imagine that the new men are, in the ordinary sense, all alike. A good deal of what I have been saying...might make you suppose that that was bound to be so. To become new men means losing what we now call 'ourselves'. Out of our selves, into Christ, we must go. His will is to become ours and we are to think His thoughts, to 'have the mind of Christ' as the Bible says. And if Christ is one, and if He is thus to be 'in' us all, shall we not be exactly the same? It certainly sounds like it; but in fact it is not so.

It is difficult here to get a good illustration; because, of course, no other two things are related to each other just as the Creator is related to one of His creatures. But I will try two very imperfect illustrations which may give a hint of the truth. Imagine a lot of people who have always lived in the dark. You come and try to describe to them what light is like. You might tell them that if they come into the light that same light would fall on them all and they would all reflect it and thus become what we call visible. Is it not quite possible that they would imagine that, since they were all receiving the same light, and all reacting to it in the same way (i.e. all reflecting it), they would all look alike? Whereas you and I know that the light will in fact bring out, or show up, how different they are. ...

The more we get what we now call 'ourselves' out of the way and let Him take us over, the more truly ourselves we become. There is so much of Him that millions and millions of 'little Christs', all different, will still be too few to express Him fully....In that sense our real selves are all waiting for us in Him. It is no good trying to 'be myself' without Him. The more I resist him and try to live on my own, the more I become dominated by my own heredity and upbringing and surroundings and natural desires. ...I am not, in my natural state, nearly so much of a person as I like to believe: most of what I call 'me' can be very easily explained. It is when I turn to Christ, when I give myself up to His Personality, that I first begin to have a real personality of my own.

At the beginning I said there were Personalities in God. I will go further now. There are no real personalities anywhere else. Until you have given up your self to Him you will not have a real self. Sameness is to be found most among the most 'natural' men, not among those who surrender to Christ. How monotonously alike all the great tyrants and conquerors have been: how gloriously different are the saints.

But there must be a real giving up of the self. You must throw it away 'blindly' so to speak. Christ will indeed give you a real personality: but you must not go to Him for the sake of that. As long as your

own personality is what you are bothering about you are not going to Him at all. The very first step is to try to forget about the self altogether. Your real, new self (which is Christ's and also yours, and yours just because it is His) will not come as long as you are looking for it. It will come when you are looking for Him. Does that sound strange? The same principle holds, you know, for more everyday matters. Even in social life you will never make a good impression on other people until you stop thinking about what sort of impression you are making. Even in literature and art, no man who bothers about originality will ever be original: whereas if you simply try to tell the truth (without caring twopence how often it has been told before) you will, nine times out of ten, become original without ever having noticed it. The principle runs through all life from top to bottom. Give up yourself and you will find your real self. Lose your life and you will save it. Submit to death, death of your ambitions and favorite wishes every day and death of your whole body in the end: submit with every fibre of your being, and you will find eternal life. Keep back nothing. Nothing that you have not given away will be really yours. Nothing in you that has not died will ever be raised from the dead. Look for yourself, and you will find in the long run only hatred, loneliness, despair, rage, ruin, and decay. But look for Christ and you will find Him, and with Him everything else thrown in.

— C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, pp. 223-227

Breakout time (divide into small groups)

Have you encountered such “new men”? What identifying characteristics would you add to those given by Lewis above?

Discuss: “We must get over wanting to be needed.”

Discuss:

“The more we get what we now call ‘ourselves’ out of the way and let Him take us over, the more truly ourselves we become.”

“It is no good trying to ‘be myself’ without Him.”

“Until you have given up your self to Him you will not have a real self.”

Do you agree/disagree with Lewis’ statement regarding the likeness of tyrants and the diversity of saints? Explain.

As we continue to explore identity throughout this year, how can we keep looking for Christ, that we might find our true selves, rather than looking for ourselves and finding “only hatred, loneliness, despair, rage, ruin, and decay”?

Christ-like Identity

SERVICE

Quotable Quotes

“Faith means receiving the gospel message as *dynamis*, reshaping us in the image and likeness of God. The gospel reshapes the hearer through the power of Jesus’ victory over death. The gospel proclaims a hidden power in the world – the living presence of the risen Christ. It liberates men and women from the slavery that obscures in them the image and likeness of God.”

– Brennan Manning, *Abba’s Child*

“Christ’s entire life must supply the norm for the Christian and for the life of the whole Church. One has to take every particular aspect of Christ’s life straight from his baptism to his resurrection and show correspondence. What else does it mean to be a Christian?”

– Søren Kierkegaard, *Provocations*, p. 277

“It does not say that you should try to resemble Christ. No, you are to put on Christ, put him on yourself – as when someone goes around in borrowed clothing – put him on, as when someone who looks strikingly like another not only tries to resemble him but represents him. Christ gives you his clothing (the satisfaction of atonement) so that you might represent him.”

– Søren Kierkegaard, *Provocations*, p. 277

“Christ comes to the world as the example, constantly enjoining: Imitate me. We humans prefer to adore him instead.”

– Søren Kierkegaard, *Provocations*, p. 279

“Never mind searching for who you are. Search for the person you aspire to be.”

– Robert Brault

SERVICE PROJECT IDEAS

Plan and implement your own community service project.

Visit an area prison or write letters to inmates.

Plan and start a Christmas service project (i.e. gifts for children of inmates; nursing home residents; etc.).

Heavenly Identity

LEADERSHIP

Essence

The most hopeful words of [Revelation 21:1-5] are those of God's resolve: "I am making everything new."

It's hard to see things grow old. The town in which I grew up is growing old. I was there recently. Some of the buildings are boarded up. Some of the houses are torn down. Some of my teachers are retired; some are buried. The old movie house where I took my dates has "For Sale" on the marquee, long since outdated by the newer theaters that give you eight choices. The only visitors to the drive-in theater are tumbleweeds and rodents. Memories of first dates and senior proms are weather-worn by the endless rain of years. High school sweethearts are divorced. A cheerleader died of an aneurysm. Our fastest halfback is buried only a few plots from my own father.

I wish I could make it all new again. I wish I could blow the dust off the streets. I wish I could walk through the familiar neighborhood, and wave at the familiar faces, and pet the familiar dogs, and hit one more home run in the Little League park. I wish I could walk down Main Street and call out the merchants that have retired and open the doors that have been boarded up. I wish I could make everything new...but I can't.

My mother still lives in the same house. You couldn't pay her to move. The house that seemed so big when I was a boy now feels tiny. On the wall are pictures of Mom in her youth – her hair autumn-brown, her face irresistibly beautiful. I see her now – still healthy, still vivacious, but with wrinkles, graying hair, slower step. Would that I could wave the wand and make everything new again. Would that I could put her once again in the strong embrace of the high-plains cowboy she loved and buried. Would that I could stretch out the wrinkles and take off the bifocals and restore the spring to her step. Would that I could make everything new...but I can't.

I can't. But God can. "He restores my soul," wrote the shepherd. He doesn't reform he restores. He doesn't camouflage the old; he restores the new. The Master Builder will pull out the original plan and restore it. He will restore the vigor. He will restore the energy. He will restore the hope. He will restore the soul.

When you see how this world grows stooped and weary and then read of a home where everything is made new, tell me, doesn't that make you want to go home?

What would you give in exchange for a home like that? Would you really rather have a few passions on earth than eternal possessions in heaven? Would you really choose a life of slavery to passion over a life of freedom? Would you honestly give up all of your heavenly mansions for a second-rate sleazy motel on earth?

"Great," Jesus said, "is your reward in heaven." He must have smiled when he said that line. His eyes must have danced, and his hand must have pointed skyward.

For he should know. It was his idea. It was his home.

– Max Lucado, *The Applause of Heaven*, pp. 191-193

Breakout time (divide into small groups)

If you were able, what would you make new?

What are you looking forward to in heaven?

How can you realize the present reality of your heavenly identity? That He *has* restored your soul? That eternal life has already begun?

Scripture

Further exploring my biblical identity:

Ephesians 2:6 _____

Philippians 3:20 _____

Colossians 1:13 _____

Notes

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue or grey ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are approximately 20 lines visible. The paper has a slight shadow on the right side, suggesting it's resting on a surface.

Heavenly Identity

DISCIPLESHIP

Essence

Let Your Kingdom Come

Let your kingdom come. Let your will be done on earth as it is done in heaven. (Matthew 6:10)

We shouldn't pray, "Dear Father, let us come into your kingdom," as though it's a place to which we travel. Instead we pray, "Let your kingdom come." For if we're to receive it at all, God's grace and kingdom with all its virtues must come to us. We will never be able to go to him. In the same way, Christ came to us – from heaven down to earth. We didn't go up to him from earth to heaven.

Another mistake of those who pray the Lord's Prayer is that they only think about their eternal happiness. They understand the kingdom of God to mean nothing but joy and pleasure in heaven. Thinking from an earthly, physical perspective and fearing hell, they only seek their own benefit and advantage in heaven. These people don't realize that God's kingdom is nothing but godliness, chastity, purity, gentleness, tenderness, and kindness. His kingdom is full of every virtue and grace. They don't know that God must have his way and that he alone lives and reigns in us. This should be our first and foremost desire. We are saved only when God reigns in us, and we become his kingdom.

We don't have to seek or ask for joy, happiness, or anything else that we may desire. Rather, all of this comes along with God's kingdom....

– Martin Luther, *By Faith Alone*, August 14

The Opposition of the Natural

Those who are Christ's have crucified the flesh, with its passions and desires" (Galatians 5:24).

The natural life itself is not sinful. But we must abandon sin, having nothing to do with it in any way whatsoever. Sin belongs to hell and to the devil. I, as a child of God, belong to heaven and to God. It is not a question of giving up sin, but of giving up my right to myself, my natural independence, and my self-will. This is where the battle has to be fought. The things that are right, noble, and good form the natural standpoint are the very things that keep us from being God's best. Once we come to understand that natural moral excellence opposes or counteracts surrender to God, we bring our soul into the center of its greatest battle. Very few of us would debate over what is filthy, evil, and wrong, but we do debate over what is good. It is the good that opposes the best. The higher up the scale of moral excellence a person goes, the more intense the opposition to Jesus Christ. "Those who are Christ's have crucified the flesh...." The cost to your natural life is not just one or two things, but everything. Jesus said, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself..." (Matthew 16:24). That is, he must deny his right to himself, and he must realize who Jesus Christ is before he will bring himself to do it. Beware of refusing to go to the funeral of your own independence.

The natural life is not spiritual, and it can only be made spiritual through sacrifice. If we do not

purposely sacrifice the natural, the supernatural can never become natural to us. There is no high or easy road. Each of us has the means to accomplish it entirely in his own hands. It is not a question of praying, but of sacrificing, and thereby performing His will.

– Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost for His Highest*, December 9

Breakout time (divide into small groups)

Discuss how all is God's initiative in our direction. What is the significance of understanding this?

Discuss: "God's kingdom is nothing but godliness, chastity, purity, gentleness, tenderness, and kindness."

How can our realization of God's present kingdom help us be better ambassadors of that kingdom in our present earthly reality, rather than being accused of "being so heavenly minded we're no earthly good"? How might this relate to Luther's assertion that we "become his kingdom"?

Discuss Luther's statement that we need not seek "joy, happiness, or anything else that we may desire" in light of Christ's statement in Matthew 6:33.

Discuss the idea that it is too often those things that are good in and of themselves rather than the "filthy, evil, and wrong" that "keep us from being God's best." What are the implications of this? How can we guard against anything standing in the way of the "best"?

Discuss: "The higher up the scale of moral excellence a person goes, the more intense the opposition to Jesus Christ."

Discuss: "There is no heaven that has a little corner of hell in it. God is determined to make you pure, holy, and right, and He will not allow you to escape from the scrutiny of the Holy Spirit for even one moment. [Matthew 5:26]... The moment you are willing for God to change your nature, His recreating forces will begin to work. And the moment you realize that God's purpose is to get you into the rights relationship with Himself and then with others, He will reach to the very limits of the universe to help you take the right road...." – Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost for His Highest*, July 1

Scripture

Consider what the following texts say regarding the importance of Christian growth:

Eph 4:15 _____

Heb 6:1 _____

1 Pet 2:2 _____

2 Peter 3:18 _____

Romans 12:12 _____
James 1:25 _____
1 Cor 16:2 _____
Heb 10:25 _____

I like the story of the little boy who fell out of bed. When his mom asked him what happened, he answered, “I don’t know. I guess I stayed too close to where I got in.”

Pick a time in the not-too-distant past. A year or two ago. Now ask yourself a few questions. How does your prayer life today compare with then? How about your giving? Have both the amount and the joy increased? What about your church loyalty? Can you tell you've grown? And Bible study? Are you learning to learn?

Notes

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Heavenly Identity

EVANGELISM

Essence

It is God who has called us by name. The God beside whose beauty the Grand Canyon is only a shadow has called us beloved. The God beside whose power the nuclear bomb is nothing has tender feelings for us....

The moment of truth has arrived. We are alone with the Alone. The revelation of God's tender feelings for us is not mere dry knowledge. For too long and too often along my journey, I have sought shelter in hand-clapping liturgies and cerebral Scripture studies. I have received knowledge without appreciation, facts without enthusiasm. Yet, when the scholarly investigations were over, I was struck by the insignificance of it all. It just didn't seem to matter.

But when the night is bad and my nerves are shattered and Infinity speaks, when God Almighty shares through His Son the depth of His feelings for me, when His love flashes into my soul and when I am overtaken by Mystery, it is *kairos* – the decisive inbreak of God in this saving moment of my personal history. No one can speak for me. Alone, I face a momentous decision. Shivering in the rages of my... years, either I escape into skepticism and intellectualism or with radical amazement I surrender in faith to the truth of my belovedness.

...Sadly, many of us continue to cultivate such an artificial identity that the liberating truth of our belovedness fails to break through. So we become grim, fearful, and legalistic. We hide our pettiness and wallow in guilt. We huff and puff to impress God, scramble for brownie points, thrash about trying to fix ourselves, and live the gospel in such a joyless fashion that it has little appeal to nominal Christians and unbelievers searching for truth.

– Brennan Manning, *Abba's Child*

Breakout time (divide into small groups)

How can we live in such a way that *is* appealing to “nominal Christians and unbelievers searching for truth”? Discuss this in light of John 10:10.

What have you found “doesn't matter”? How can you get things in heavenly perspective?

How can we live in such a way that the “liberating truth of our belovedness” can break through? Consider Isaiah 43:1,4; 54:10.

Consider

Repent and believe in the gospel. Jesus says. Turn around and believe that the good news that we are loved is better than we ever dared hope, and that to believe in that good news, to live out of it and toward it, to be in love with that good news, is of all glad things in this world the gladdest thing of all. Amen, and come, Lord Jesus.

– Frederick Buechner, as quoted in Brennan Manning, *Abba's Child*

If you are more inclined to “escape into skepticism and intellectualism,” how can you instead “with radical amazement...surrender in faith to the truth of [your] belovedness”?

Notes

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Heavenly Identity

SERVICE

Quotable Quotes

“The only correct and adequate answer to the question which was put on all sides in Jesus’ time and which in the New Testament the disciples had also put to Jesus, “Lord, when is the end coming, and what are the signs of it?”, is therefore: do not puzzle over such things, but live an ordinary life as Christians, in accordance with the practice of the kingdom of God; then no one and nothing can come upon you unexpectedly apart from the liberating rule of God himself....What matters is how your life looks when you hold it up to the light of the gospel of the God whose nature is to love all of humankind.”

– Edward Schillebeeckx, as quoted in Brennan Manning, *Abba’s Child*

“There is never a moment that does not carry eternal significance...”

– Brennan Manning, *Abba’s Child*

“Our achievements of today are but the sum total of our thoughts of yesterday. You are today where the thoughts of yesterday have brought you and you will be tomorrow where the thoughts of today take you.”

– Blaise Pascal

“We have to be braver than we think we can be, because God is constantly calling us to be more than we are.”

– Madeleine L’Engle

“It’s never too late to be who you might have been.”

– George Eliot

SERVICE PROJECT IDEAS

Host a New Years’ party for elderly at a nursing home; adopt a “grandfriend.”

The Name Only God Knows

Essence

Can't say I've given a lot of thought to my given name. Never figured it made much difference. ...

But there is one name that has caught my interest lately. A name only God knows. A name only God gives. A unique, one-of-a-kind, once-to-be-given name.

What am I talking about? Well, you may not have known it, but God has a new name for you. When you get home, he won't call you Alice or Bob or Juan or Geraldo. The name you've always heard won't be the one he uses. When God says he will make all things new, he means it. You will have a new home, a new body, a new life, and you guessed it, a new name. ...(Rev. 2:17)

Makes sense. Fathers are fond of giving their children special names. Princess. Tiger. Sweetheart. Bubba. Angel. I have a friend whose father calls her Willy. Her name is Priscilla. Growing up, he teased her by saying Priscilly. That became Silly-willy. Today he calls her Willy. No one else does. Even if they did, no one else could say it the way her dad does.

Now maybe you didn't get a special name. Or maybe you've devoted much of your life to making a name for yourself. ...Whatever, any earthly name will soon be forgotten. The only name that matters is the one God has reserved just for you.

Or maybe you have received special names....you never sought. Names of derision and hurt. Names like "loser" or "cheat," "cripple," "infected," or "divorced." If so, I'm sorry. You know how a name can hurt. But you can also imagine how a name can heal.

Especially when it comes from the lips of God.

Isn't it incredible to think that God has saved a name just for you? One you don't even know? We've always assumed that the name we got is the name we'll keep. Not so. Imagine what that implies. Apparently our future is so promising it warrants a new title. The road ahead is so bright a fresh name is needed. Your eternity is so special no common name will do.

So God has one reserved just for you. There is more to your life than you ever thought. There is more to your story than what you have read. There is more to your song than what you have sung. A good author saves the best for last. A great composer keeps his finest for the finish. And God, the author of life and composer of hope, has done the same for you.

The best is yet to be.

And so I urge you, don't give up.

And so I plead, finish the journey. And so I exhort, be there.

Be there when God whispers your name.

— Max Lucado, *When God Whispers Your Name*, pp. 190-192

Breakout time (divide into small groups)

Share special names you've had at different points in your life. Discuss the role of identity and relationship in these names and how they made you feel. Given this, what do you look forward to in receiving your new name from God?

Reflect back over the year's exploration of identity. How has your understanding of your identity changed over the year? Repeat the exercise from the first week, compiling a list of what the group knows the Bible has to say about our identity. How does this compare to your first week's list? Were there any misconceptions that were dispelled throughout the year? How will your greater understanding of your identity in Christ affect your daily life in the year ahead? In what ways are you safeguarding against the enemy's attempt at identity theft and ensuring a constant growth in your identity development?

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SMALL GROUP DISCUSSIONS ON discipleship



THE POWER OF ONE

- Honoring Jesus
- Revealing His Kingdom
- Transforming His World
- Equipping His People
- Fulfilling Destiny



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