

## **“Identity Theft”**

### ***Learning the Art of Contentment in a World of Consumption #3***

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**(Eph. 1:3-14)**

#### **Introduction.**



It's been great hearing comments from many of you this past week about how you and your family followed through on the homework assignment I gave last Sunday. Here's a picture Heather Egan sent to me showing the bowl they put out in their house. I love it!

Carrie Earhart also wrote me and said, "When we came home, I sat a large bowl out on the counter. As we talked about it over dinner, we decided to combine the two challenges, and daily write down at least 5 things we're thankful for (w/o repeats!) & toss them into the bowl.

Gracilyn suggested we read them all at Thanksgiving. We're calling it our Thanksgiving Bowl! Have a great week 'focusing on your bowl!'" That is so cool!

Today we continue in our series of sermons on Learning the Art of Contentment by looking at the idea of Identity Theft. Last spring I received a letter from the IRS. (That's never a good thing!) But this letter said that Lorie and I were getting a \$19,000 refund this year, and they would be sending it to us in the next few weeks. However, when I read through some of the details of the information about our earnings and deductions for the previous year, I could tell something was amiss.

So I called our accountant who does our taxes every year, and I asked her about the refund. That's when I learned that she hadn't even submitted our return for 2014 yet! Then she said the fateful words, "I think someone has stolen your identity, and they've filed a fake return hoping to cash in."

Sixteen million Americans are victims of identity theft every year, and the total cost of this kind of fraud comes to \$50 billion annually. Victims spend an average of \$1,500 and 175 hours to recover their identity, and that doesn't account for the emotional wear and tear and all the anxiety this kind of thing produces.

However, I would suggest to you today that there is a far more damaging and far more dangerous form of identity theft of which you need to be aware. It's Spiritual Identity Theft. This kind of Identity Theft occurs when you are robbed of who you are in Christ, and it happens when you think that your value is really measured by the things you own, the job you have, and the place you live rather than who you are in Christ. And this Identity Theft of the Spirit destroys contentment.

#### **I. Identity Crisis.**

Do you know who you are in Christ? Do you draw the strongest sense of your identity from your relationship with Jesus, or do you have a crisis in your spiritual identity today? Let me tell you a story and see if you can identify with it. In his book *Satisfied?*<sup>1</sup> Jeff Manion tells about how he ran into a guy named Tony at the fortieth birthday party of a mutual friend. They hadn't connected in years though they attended the same college and now lived in the same city.

The small talk quickly moved through the usual topics, and they shared about work, their kids, and what they'd been up to recently. But then the conversation took one of those rare and refreshing turns toward honest vulnerability. Tony confided that he and his wife, Karen, were suffocating beneath a weight of financial pressure. This wasn't a temporary setback; they faced the real possibility of financial ruin.

The party wasn't a very good setting for such an honest conversation, so Jeff and Tony set up a time to get together for coffee the next week and talk further. When they met the next Monday, Tony chronicled the financial drama they were facing, and it became clear that adequate income wasn't the problem. Both Tony and Karen were employed and earning good salaries. The issue was an inability to keep their spending under control.

Tony confessed that the problem was largely his fault. He felt an inner compulsion to keep up the appearance of someone who is successful and well-off, and this pressure drove not only his choice of a home but also what kind of cars they leased, their expensive tastes in restaurants, and the habit of taking costly vacations. The sum of these expenses was threatening their financial stability.

Tony had great clarity about what was driving his consumer lifestyle. He described a childhood of scarcity, shortage, and embarrassment. His father moved out when he was six, leaving his mother to raise three children on an income that fell below the poverty line. One of Tony's most painful memories was being teased by other kids in the seventh grade for wearing pants that were way too short. He got the nickname "Flood", and the moniker stuck throughout middle school even after better-fitting clothes could be afforded and were purchased.

As a seventh grader, Tony made a silent vow to himself that he would never look poor again. Now he was a successful 43-year-old man who was strained to the breaking point financially in an attempt to fulfill that vow. But it seemed that no matter how much money he earned, it wasn't enough to compensate for the humiliation that had been etched into his identity. Tony's money crisis was the result of an identity crisis. It was destroying his spirit, and it was robbing his contentment in life.

For Tony, and for many of us, changing the way we view our spending and even the way we live our lives will require a transformation in the way we look at our core identity. For the follower of Jesus Christ the issue of identity cannot be overestimated, because it's our new identity in Christ that propels us into a different way of looking at life and our possessions and a different way of living our lives. It invites us into a new narrative about who we are which is centered in our relationship with Jesus Christ.

## **II. Our Identity in Christ.**

The book of Ephesians is a remarkable book of the Bible in many ways, and one of the reasons is because of what the apostle Paul writes in this letter about our identity in Christ. In the opening verses of the first chapter, Paul mentions three things in particular which can help us reclaim our true identity which are all tied to Jesus. In these opening sentences, Paul uses three images to convey the reality of our true identity – *adoption, redemption, and sealing*.

**The first image is adoption**, and the apostle writes, "*In love [God] predestined us to be adopted as His children through Jesus Christ, in accordance with His pleasure and will – to the praise of His glorious grace, which He has freely given us in the One He loves*" (Eph. 1:4-6).

The image of adoption is one which every person in the Roman world in the first century would have understood because child abandonment was a common practice. In Roman culture, a newborn baby was placed at the father's feet. If the father wanted to keep the baby, he picked it

up and claimed it as a desired child. However, the father could also disown the baby for any reason at all, in which case he would simply turn his back and walk away. Maybe he wanted a boy, and it was a girl. Or he wanted a girl, and it was a boy. Or perhaps he saw some blemish that displeased him. All the father had to do to reject the child was walk away.

It was common in the first century for the rejected infant to then be placed outside and left there exposed to the elements so that the child would die of dehydration and hypothermia. In the city of Ephesus you could pass by the marketplace or the city garbage dump at night and hear the cries of infants who had been abandoned there. People passing by would sometimes rescue a baby, but the reason most of them did this was for the purpose of raising the child to be sold later as a slave or a prostitute. It was an early form of human trafficking.

To these Christians in Ephesus, many of whom were slaves themselves, and all of whom lived in a culture of abandonment, Paul writes about the wonder of adoption. Can you imagine what it was like for them to hear this for the first time and begin to grasp that their fundamental identity was no longer determined by the father who rejected them but by the God who took them in?! That kind of recognition has the power to transform your identity and change the way you think about yourself.

Jeff Manion says that your identity isn't defined by the fiancé who broke off the engagement, or the spouse who betrayed you. Your most defining moment isn't determined by who threw you out but by Who took you in. Our understanding of our spiritual adoption in Christ can change every aspect of our lives, and there is a strong connection between our identity and the way we view material possessions. I think many of us, like Tony, try to heal the wounds of our past or fill the emptiness of our souls with material things. But they never bring contentment, do they?

**The second image Paul uses is that of redemption.** After writing about the wonder of adoption, Paul continues to root his readers in their new identity in Christ by borrowing a term from the marketplace. He writes, *"In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that He lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding"* (Eph. 1:7-8).

To redeem something is to pay for it. It means to buy it. And when it's applied to people, it relates to a person being released or ransomed as a result of being purchased. This is what happened in the case of slavery.

In the city of Ephesus in the first century, there was a massive marketplace which sold everything under the sun. Remember, Ephesus was the fourth largest city in the Roman world, and it was an epicenter of commercial trading. And one of the things you could buy and sell in the marketplace in Ephesus was a slave. It was the world capital for the slave trade.

When Paul reminded these young Christians that they had redemption through the blood of Christ, he was expressing the amazing truth about God's mercy that Jesus gave Himself to pay for our souls. And when Jesus redeemed us to be released from the bondage of sin and death, He didn't give money. He paid for it with His own life.

Can you imagine what these words would have sounded like to a person who had spent their entire life as a slave? Can you imagine what it meant for them to learn that Jesus loved them so much that He gave His own life to set them free, and that they had been redeemed? Their identity wasn't as a slave. They were a redeemed child of God. It must have had a remarkable impact on their sense of who they were in Christ regardless of their outward circumstances.

The **final image** Paul uses in Ephesians 1 is that of **sealing**. The apostle writes, “*And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in Him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit*” (Eph. 1:13).

In the first century it was a common practice to put a tattoo on the hand of a slave. It was a seal of ownership. It was a visible sign that a person was a slave, and it marked them as belonging to a particular owner. But what if the most identifying marker wasn't the tattoo on your hand but the Holy Spirit in your heart?! What effect would that have on a person who has always been a slave? God has placed the seal of his ownership on each of us by sending His Holy Spirit to live inside our hearts. We belong to Him now, and the Holy Spirit proves that I am His and He is mine.

Your identity isn't tied to *what belongs to you*. Your identity is rooted in *Who you belong to*. It isn't what you own; it's Who owns you – the One who purchased and redeemed you with the precious blood of Jesus. As a result of being in Christ I don't *get* my identity from the house I own, the car I drive, the clothes I wear, or where I send my kids to school. I *bring* my identity in Christ to all these things. And my new identity should also impact all the decisions I make in these financial matters.

It's difficult for most people to get their heads around this profound truth, and many times we tend to go back to old ways of thinking and old ways of living even after we become Christians and have lived for Christ for many years. We have a hard time believing the Good News that we really are loved by God, and that we have a new identity which changes everything.

Jeff Manion points out<sup>2</sup> that in his book *The Blind Side*, Michael Lewis chronicles the difficult life professional football player Michael Oher had growing up. There was even a movie made by the same title, and maybe you've seen it. Oher was one of 13 children in Memphis, Tennessee, and he was in and out of the foster care system from the time he was seven. But Michael's life took a remarkable turn when he began attending Briarcrest Christian School and was taken in by Sean and Leigh Anne Tuohy. They were an affluent couple in Memphis whose children attended the same school, and, in time, the Tuohys actually adopted Michael.

Sean owned a chain of Taco Bell and KFC restaurants, and the family could go to any of them and order whatever they wanted free of charge. When Michael came to live with the Tuohys, he was able to take advantage of this privilege too. However, whenever Michael visited one of the family restaurants, he always ordered more food than he could eat, and he would bring home leftovers and stash them in the refrigerator.

The reason he did this was because of his former experience of hunger. The habit of hoarding revealed that he was still struggling with the concept that things had really changed, and there was always going to be enough to eat. Michael had a new home, a new security, a new family, and a new identity. But he still battled old habits from his former life of scarcity and shortage that were hard to shake.

In what ways are you like Michael? How have you tended to forget that you have been adopted into God's forever family? In what ways do you think and live like you used to before you came to Christ? You have a new home and a new heavenly Father who loves you and will provide everything you need. Forgetting who we are, we tend to lose sight of our identity and security in Christ. We begin to put too much stock in the things we own, the job we have, and the children we raise to give us our sense of worth and value.

**Conclusion.**

At the beginning of my sermon I shared with you the story of my identity theft with the IRS. After I learned about the fraud, the next few weeks were taken up with contacting the IRS and putting a hold on the fake return, and filing an identity theft report with the Federal Trade Commission and the local police department. In addition, I had to put a freeze on any credit report requested of the three companies that provide them. It was a nightmare, and some of my worst fears became a reality when someone stole my identity. At the end of it all, I didn't get a \$19,000 refund from the IRS. In fact, I owed them a little bit of money!

It was a lot of work, but it sure was a good feeling to have my identity restored. What will it take for you to restore your spiritual identity in Christ? What do you need to do to reclaim who you are in Jesus? And how does God want you to resist the temptation to allow the world to tell you that your value is measured by what you own, where you live, how you dress, and where you work?

I have another homework assignment for you. Later on today or perhaps later this week, make a list of the common sources of identity on which you tend to rely to give you cues about who you are and what makes you feel good about yourself. In addition, ask yourself, "Were there any early life experiences that caused me to base my identity on what I own or what I accomplish?" It might be important to name these influences and renounce their power over you.

And the second thing I want you to try to do is not to purchase anything this week other than what is necessary. Try to enjoy what you already own and be content. Fast from purchasing anything new this week that isn't necessary. Enjoy the clothes you already possess. Read books, listen to music, and watch movies you already own. Even eat food that's already in your refrigerator. Try not to purchase a single item unless it's a necessity. And at the end of the week, write down what you learn and share your thoughts with a family member or a friend.

The Heidelberg Catechism opens with this question and answer: *"What is your only comfort in life and death? My only comfort in life and death is that I am not my own, but belong—body and soul, in life and in death—to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ. He has fully paid for all my sins with His precious blood, and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil. He also watches over me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my Father in heaven; in fact, all things must work together for my salvation. Because I belong to Him, Christ, by His Holy Spirit, assures me of eternal life and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for Him."*

Adoption, redemption, and sealing. This is our comfort. This is the source of our identity. And this is where we belong. We are His, and He is ours! Don't let anyone steal your identity in Christ. It's one of the keys to learning the art of contentment in a world of consumption. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Jeff Manion, *Satisfied?* pp. 85-90. Many of the thoughts and points of this sermon are drawn from Jeff's excellent book.

<sup>2</sup> Jeff Manion, *Satisfied?* pp. 103-104.