



I-DENTITY

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What is your identity? From where do you derive your identity?

Identity is a big issue all around the world today. How should we determine our identity? From our parents? From our educators? From social media? Should we choose for ourselves?

At a breakfast for pastors last week, prayer was offered for the meal and then the host invited us to serve ourselves, saying, “Ladies first!” A brother turned to me with his plate in hand and said, “This morning I believe I identify as a lady.”

We may laugh at the joke, but we should also recognize that for some it’s a genuine, tormenting struggle.

If we look to the Bible to determine our true identity, what will we find?

- Sinner.
- Sinner loved by God.
- Sinner redeemed by Jesus Christ.

And if we accept that, and ask Jesus to redeem us, He will give us a new identity.

- Saved.
- Set free.
- Eternally alive.
- Child of God.

*Ephesians 3:14 This is the reason I kneel in the presence of the Father ¹⁵ from whom all the family in heaven and on earth receives its **name**. (GWT)*

*“...receives its **character**.” (CJB)*

What is the character of the name God gives us?

Apostle Peter expressed it this way:

1 Peter 2:9 But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; ¹⁰ for you once were not a people, but now you are the people of God; you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

I am not who others think I am. (Sometimes they think too highly of me, sometimes too poorly.)

I am not even who I think I am. (Sometimes I think too highly of myself, sometimes too poorly.)

I am who God says I am.

And if I am in Christ, then I am not only who I am, but also who I am becoming. Ours is a dynamic relationship. He is changing me. He is taking me somewhere. We are making progress.

In the beginning, we were made in the image of God. Then that image was distorted by sin in our lives.

But after we have been born again by the Spirit of Jesus, we are being formed into His likeness. Every day! On the good days, and on the bad days. When we do right, and even when we do wrong. That's the power of God's amazing grace!

When you look in the mirror, what do you see? Well, it depends on the quality of the mirror, doesn't it?

Your mirror might be really old or dirty... masking your image, OR, your mirror might be distorted... twisting your image into something less than human.

I recently re-read Peter Scazzero's landmark book, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*. In it, he reminded me of a book my father had read with interest when I was just a boy.

One hundred years ago, Martin Buber, a Jewish theologian, wrote a stunning book, *I and Thou*. Buber asserted that the most mature, healthy relationship possible for two human beings is one that he dubbed "I-Thou."

In such a relationship I recognize that I have been made in the image of God and so have you. This makes you a "Thou" to me, having a unique and separate existence apart from me, fashioned in love by God. You are different from me—I am I, and you are Thou. And I affirm you as an individual with my respect and love. I will not dehumanize or objectify you. As "Thou," every bit as much as "I," you deserve respect. You have intrinsic value and deserve to be treated with dignity, and encouraged with hope.

Recognizing this uniqueness and separateness of every other person on earth is essential to emotional and spiritual maturity—both mine and theirs.

I-It Relationships

Buber argued that in most of our human relationships, even if we have loved them, we lose sight of others as persons who are distinct from us and valued. We tend to treat people as objects, as an “It” (to use Buber’s word).

In an I-It relationship, I will treat you as a means to an end—as an object or a task or a burden. What might that look like?

- I walk into my office and drop an armload of files on my secretary’s desk without even saying hello.
- I move people around on an organizational chart during a staff meeting as if they were pieces on a chessboard.
- I treat my spouse or our children as if they are not in charge of their own freedom, dreams, and autonomy; I expect them to be the picture I have of them in my head.
- I talk about people in authority as if they were subhuman.
- I am threatened when someone disagrees with my political or theological views.
- I listen to my neighbors’ problems and help them with chores around their house, hoping they will attend the Easter service at our church. If they don’t, I’ll move on to someone else.

I-It relationships produce a lot of frustration when people don’t fit into my plans, and don’t follow along obediently. My way of seeing things is “right.” And if you don’t see it as I do, you are wrong. You are not seeing things the “right” way. You just don’t get it.

Augustine defined sin as the state of being “caved in on oneself.” Instead of using our God-given power to orient ourselves to God and other human beings, we focus inward on ourselves. We demand that people view the world the way we do. We believe our way is the right way. When we do that, relationships become sterile, isolated, and cold. They resemble hell more than heaven.

When Dante, in his famous religious fantasy, *Inferno*, arrived at the very pit of hell, it was not fire, but ice that prevailed. The coldness of sin and death, the inwardness and chilling aloneness filled the space. Satan was frozen in ice, unable to move, and weeping from all six of his eyes.

In *The Great Divorce*, C.S. Lewis described hell as a place where each person lives in isolation, millions of miles apart from one another, because they can’t get along.

I-Thou Relationships

Real relationships, said Buber, can only exist between two people willing to connect *across their differences*. Far from eliminating the differences, or as we've been taught to think of them—incompatibilities—God can be glimpsed in the genuine dialogue about our distinctiveness, filling the in-between space of an I-Thou relationship.

Buber's central tenet was that an I-Thou relationship between persons intimately reflects the I-Thou relationship humans have with God. A genuine relationship with any person as "Thou" reveals traces of the "eternal Thou."

For this reason, when we love someone well, as emotionally mature persons, regarding and treating them as "Thou," not "It," it is a most powerful experience. When genuine godly love is expressed in a relationship, God's presence becomes manifest. The separate space between two people becomes sacred space. *"Where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst"* (Matthew 18:20).

Does anyone NOT want this kind of relationship with God and other people? Of course not, or you wouldn't be in church this morning. But it does require prayer and good works.

So many words and images have been put on us over the years; we bring a lot of baggage with us into Christ's Kingdom. Even after being born again and receiving the baptism with the Holy Spirit, we're still flesh and blood, subject to temptation, and susceptible to sin. None of the Spirit's gifts are badges of merit; they are gifts (not earned).

When the Spirit operates in our lives, it is HE who is operating, and we are His vessels. And if the Spirit is operating in you, or someone else, it is no guarantee that the vessel is holy (morally pure). In fact, while reading Scripture recently, I came across a passage in Exodus (28:36-38), describing some of Israel's high priest's garments:

"You shall also make a plate of pure gold and shall engrave on it, like the engravings of a seal, 'Holy to the Lord.' You shall fasten it on a blue cord, and it shall be on the turban; it shall be at the front of the turban. It shall be on Aaron's forehead, and Aaron shall take away the iniquity of the holy things which the sons of Israel consecrate, with regard to all their holy gifts; and it shall always be on his forehead, that they may be accepted before the Lord."

Wait! What? *"The iniquity of the holy things"*? How do "holy things" have iniquity that needs to be removed?

Then, the Spirit of God gave me understanding: The “things” were “holy” because they had been offered (dedicated) to the Lord, not because they were intrinsically pure. So they needed to be ceremonially cleansed, in order to become fit for the Master’s use. Isn’t that just like us?

1 Corinthians 1:26 For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; ²⁷ but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, ²⁸ and the base things of the world and the despised God has chosen, the things that are not(thing), so that He may nullify the things that are (something), ²⁹ so that no man may boast before God. ³⁰ But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption, ³¹ so that, just as it is written, “Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord.”

God doesn’t call the qualified; He qualifies those He calls. He doesn’t choose the holy; He makes holy those who come to Him.

An “I-Thou” relationship does not come naturally; it is a supernatural gift. But when I say “gift,” I am not suggesting that there’s nothing you can do but wait and hope it will happen to you. Rather, I mean that when you seek it—for you must be willing to see others in this way (as people made in God’s image, no matter how distorted that image may seem) and treat them with such loving respect—when you think of others in this way and seek to display it, God will give you grace and help you. It will not be you alone, but Christ in you, reaching out in love.

If you hope ever to live like this, you must begin by thinking about it deeply and prayerfully. You must bring straying thoughts into captivity to obey Christ. It’s natural to experience an aversion to bad behavior, and disappointment when people let you down. But that’s no excuse to entertain evil thoughts about those who have displeased or hurt you.

Take Charge of Your Thinking

If you run people down in your thoughts, you may get away with playing the hypocrite for a while, but your love won’t be genuine until you take charge of your thinking. And if you think of them as an “It” in your mind, and you’re trying to tell them about Jesus, your words won’t ring true, and the Spirit cannot use your words to bring them to faith.

When we’re fishing for people, the only bait worth using is Jesus’ love. If we can’t show the love of Jesus with humility, the fish will turn up their noses and swim away.

Words of truth may catch their attention, but love is what they’re looking for. Bait your hook with gobs of Christ’s love. And don’t handle it too much or put too much of yourself into it—it

will begin to smell like you and not Jesus. People may not know His name or what He has done for them, but intuitively they know what they're looking for; they'll know Him when they find Him. You can show them if you represent Him faithfully.

Take Paul's advice:

Philippians 2:3 Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; ⁴ do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others. ⁵ Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. ⁸ Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. ⁹ For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, ¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹ and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Ephesians 4:24 Put on the new self, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and true holiness.

When you receive Jesus as Lord of your life, you also receive a new identity; the identity that your Father in Heaven has given you.

He has wonderful things to say about your past, however unpleasant it was: "It's past; it's behind you. It has shaped you in part, but it shall not rule over you anymore. You are forgiven. I will never recall your sins against you anymore."

He has wonderful things also to say about your present, however difficult it may be: "You are My child now, an heir to My riches and glory. I am with you always, even to the end of the age. Nothing and no one can separate you from My love. My mercies are new every morning."

He even has wonderful things to say about your future, however uncertain it may seem: "I will never leave you or abandon you. I will come again and gather you to Myself. Look! I am making all things new. I will complete everything concerning you; you will be whole."

I urge you, take your identity from Him. From Him who gave Himself for you. From Him who made you, and redeemed you, and is forming you, and renewing you. From Him who loves you with an everlasting love.

Let Jesus make you new. Let Jesus give you a new name, a new heart, a new character, and a new destiny.