

“WHO AM I?” – REDEEMED

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We've been walking through a brief series entitled “Who Am I?”, that looks at the way we shape our sense of self – our identity. This is the final talk in the series, so at the end of my time with you today you should be able to answer any question you've ever had about your identity. Ok, maybe not.

But this has been a good journey. Hopefully it's given you some food for thought – and if it's sparked conversation, those conversations don't need to end. Let's keep talking as a community.

When I introduced the series a few weeks ago I talked about how we shape our identities subconsciously. Tim Keller says we're no less aware of how we shape our sense of self than a fish is aware of the water they swim and breathe in. These past few weeks we've been doing our best to take a step back to look at the water we're swimming in.

Much of what we've talked about over these weeks are things we talk about all the time.

- Luke talked about how we were created by God – created with bodies that are an intrinsic part of who we are – created in the image and likeness of God.
- Dave talked about how our God is relational – and that we, made in God's image, are also fundamentally relational—made for an interdependent life with each other.

These are not new concepts – they're foundational biblical statements about what it means to be human. One of my favorite images from Luke's sermon two weeks ago is that we all have roots systems. We all came from somewhere. We came from our creator, who made and designed us in a particular way. We were designed for relationship, both with God and with one another. However, we seldom unpack the implications these realities have in how we frame our self-understanding. Hopefully these few weeks have helped you to begin to think about what those implications are.

Today I want to help us pull these implications together, and to explore what identity formation with Jesus at the centre looks like. I would call this a redeemed approach to identity formation – an approach that fits with the way we were designed, that takes into account our brokenness, and that is only truly possible because of Jesus' death and resurrection.

- The way we develop our sense of self is determined by our culture, and has changed over time.
- **Traditional Identity Formation**
 - Remember that in **traditional cultures**, people gained their sense of self through doing their duty --- not through exploring their personality, thoughts, and feelings. Identity had to do with how well a person fulfilled the role given to them by their family and culture. If they did what brought honour to their family and community, they were validated -- affirmed in who they were. Identity was about fitting in, not about uniqueness and standing out.
- **Post-Modern Identity Formation**
 - This is not so in our post-modern era. When we think about **identity formation**, our concern is to find an authentic identity that stems from the interior qualities of the person.
 - Our culture has become so concerned with finding an authentic sense of self that we've determined the best way to do it is for each person to look exclusively inward. We look towards our own thoughts, emotions, desires, and drives – and build an understanding of who we are through what we feel, think, and want. We then push for the world to accept who we are. This leads

to a sense of self as inconsistent as our emotions and as fragile as our egos. It overwhelms us with the need to demonstrate our value through standing out.

- And ultimately, this kind of identity formation becomes impossible – because none of us can create an entirely inward identity. We are constantly looking for a voice from the outside, and we are influenced by the voices around us, whether we are aware of it or not. We're not able to create a sense of self that is accurate and healthy on our own.
- **Neither traditional or post-modern identity are completely bad.**
 - Both of these approaches to self-understanding have good things in them, things that work with the way we were made.
 - In traditional identity formation you find a value of one's contribution to community, and an awareness of our need for an external moral voice to shape our beliefs and actions.
 - And the postmodern value of each person's individuality is actually a biblical concern – and is a healthy corrective to the traditional way that people have not been valued or seen. Jesus' ministry on earth is basically the story of God coming down to earth and seeing people – the young, the old, the broken, the sick and infectious. Jesus walks around noticing people who felt like they were no one and says "I see you. You matter.
 - It's Jesus' validation of the individual – and the biblical declaration that each person is made in the image of God –that is the foundation of our understanding of human rights.
- **Neither traditional or post-modern identity formation is what Jesus calls us into.**
 - And that's an important distinction to make. Tim Keller says that many people looking at Christianity from the outside assume that we are calling people back to a traditional form of identity formation.
 - I think that we end up thinking that way, actually, many times. How many times have you identified with the Pharisees when you've read about them in Jesus' biographies? We like to prove our worth by following the rules – because we often feel more comfortable feeling like somehow we've earned our way to Jesus through our good behaviour.
- **But Jesus calls us into something fundamentally different – something better.**
 - Jesus came to redeem our sense of self – to give us a new identity –a Christian identity.
 - None of us, of course, live completely out of a Christian sense of self. If we did we'd be perfect. But the process of growing in Christ is the process of growing into this new identity.
 - It's easy to think of maturity as a Christian to be getting behaviours right. But our behaviours stem from our self-understanding. And that's what Jesus is seeking to transform in us.
 - Ezekiel 11 - says that when Jesus comes – He will take out our hearts of stone and give us hearts of flesh. Jesus is not just changing our behaviours – He's changing our hearts.
 - But I'm not sure we always want the heart transformation He has for us – and the influence and priorities of culture don't always help. Our culture's understanding of identity formation seeps in, and we begin to look at the abundant life Jesus has for us with suspicious eyes – uncertain if what He has for us is really and truly good.
 - So, I want us to talk today about what a redeemed identity in Jesus looks like from the framework of the two big questions I find I've carried inside my heart at times -- the questions that can keep me from running forward into the goodness Jesus has for me.
 - If I follow Jesus, will I lose my uniqueness?
 - If I follow Jesus, will I lose my freedom?

Human Uniqueness

(If I follow Jesus, will I lose my uniqueness?)

- My family growing up loved to watch Star Trek: The Next Generation. In that show the most terrifying enemies by far were The Borg—a cyborg species that assimilated other species into their collective. As a kid I found them terrifying – it still makes me feel slightly ill, actually, to think about them. There are few things scarier to us as people than losing our uniqueness – than ceasing to be ourselves.
- We can easily think that Jesus is calling us to let go of our uniqueness when we hear Him call us to die to self and to lay down our lives.
- There is a central paradox to the Christian faith—a statement that looks like a contradiction but is actually, when you explore it at a deeper level, true. Jesus probably said it most succinctly when he

said *"For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it."* – Luke 9:24

- Sometimes people think that this paradox only has to do with giving things up now so that we can have eternal life with Jesus. But this paradox also speaks to the way we become more fully human in this life – more fully who we were meant to be.
- Here's the thing -- what is Jesus talking about when He calls us to lose our life?
- This is where all the things we've been talking about come into play. We all have an understanding of who we are – of our identity:
- If we have framed our life more out of a traditional understanding of identity formation, we might have a sense of validation out of how we've done our duty, how we have fulfilled our role in society. How we've done the right thing.
- If we have formed our sense of self more out of a post-modern understanding of identity, we might have shaped a sense of self understanding out of the people we've loved – the things that have made us feel valuable.
- Regardless of whether it's a traditional or post-modern identity, we cling to things that feel like life and feel like US--things we feel our central self. Maybe it's our job, maybe it's a relationship, maybe it's things that comfort us. It could be habits – it could be emotions – anger or bitterness, self-sufficiency, pride, fear . . . so many different things.
- We hold onto these things with a tight grip – because this is who we feel like we are.
- Oftentimes, as we walk in relationship with Jesus, He begins to poke his head into those areas of our lives – He begins to speak to us about these identity defining parts of ourselves, perhaps calling us to let go of some of them. And at this point we often become quite touchy and defensive (I know I do). And we become fearful that He is calling us to let go of who we are.
- But lets think this through: if we, as Christians, believe that we are created by someone – if we believe that we have a creator who made us, who knows us, who made us like Him. Then there actually is someone who knows us better than we know ourselves.
- It would be true that He knows us better than we know ourselves even if we weren't broken – but how much more true this is when we take into account our fallenness. We see through a glass darkly – but He sees us fully – He knows us fully. Psalm 139 is a hymn that declares this – the full depth of our Creator's knowledge of us.
- And if we believe, as the Bible tells us, that this Creator who made us, is good and loves us – loved us so much, in fact, that He came to be with us, and died to restore relationship with Him – than this Creator, who knows us better than we do – uses His understanding of who we are to BLESS us, not to harm us. He uses His knowledge for our benefit.
- When Jesus tells us to lose our life – He is not trying to destroy our uniqueness. He's not making us to be carbon copies of Him. He could have made carbon copies of Himself – lacking the will to rebel – the world would have been safer, more orderly. But it also would have been empty – devoid of life – and of real love. One of the deepest ways that we reflect the image of God is in our will – God didn't want blind conformists. He made us to be lovers.
- Jesus cares more about your uniqueness than you do. He made you, uniquely, lovingly. There is no one like you in the world.
- Paul, in the book of Colossians tells us that *"You died, and your life is now hidden in Christ."* (Colossians 3:3). It tells us that we are being renewed in the image of the creator. Paul tells us in Galatians that *"I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."* (Galatians 2:20) When Paul became a Christian what did he lose? He lost his pride over his pharisaical righteousness. He lost his identity as a pharisee. He probably lost relationships, he lost his obsession over persecuting Christians. But he didn't lose who he was. When you read about Paul in the New Testament you see his incredible mind and passion at work – you see his personality come out in his letters. You see a full and vibrant human being – loving Jesus with every part of himself – not like a robot – but as a human being – fully alive.
- The stuff we leave behind when we follow Jesus is not the stuff that makes us fully human. It's the stuff that is getting in the way of who we were meant to be.

Here's the thing:

- Jesus says to each and every person "follow me." He invites each and every one of us to become like Him. He invites each of us to be filled with the same Spirit – the Holy Spirit. He gives us each the same free gift of a new identity as His children – not something we have to earn, but a free gift. Each of us members of the same family. You, me, anyone who would receive what He offers with an open hand.
- And what happens when we each seek to become like the same Jesus through the power of the same Spirit – when we each seek to live out of the same free gift of identity in Jesus – what happens is an explosion of diversity. And It's one of the most gorgeous things I've ever seen.
- Every saint – Dallas Willard says, "Is utterly unique."
- How can people all trying to be like the same person become so incredibly different?
- When we follow Jesus, when we live in relationship with him, we find our true home – the life we were created for. Jesus says in John 15 that he is the vine and we are the branches. The implications of this image is that we were created to be in dependent relationship with Him – and if we are not connected to the vine – we're dead. ***"If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit, apart from me you can do nothing."* – Jn 15:5.**
- Have you ever noticed how incredibly similar sin is? Start listening to stories – stories of addiction, of codependent relationships, stories of misuse of power, of workplaces with dehumanizing work conditions. Do you ever listen to peoples' stories and think "I feel like I've heard this story before?" It's because you have.
- W.H. Auden says that ***"the course of History is predictable in the degree to which all men love themselves, and spontaneous in the degree to which man loves God and through Him his neighbour."* – WH Auden**
- The surprises in this life come from the saints, not the sinners -- because it's the saints, the people connected to the vine, who are freed up to grow into their true humanity.

And here we arrive at our second question:

If I follow Jesus, will I lose my freedom?

- The paradox of finding our life through losing it has to do with our freedom as well.
- When we follow Jesus we're called to lay down our lives – and that does indeed mean the laying down our freedom as our world often understands freedom. It means the death of our autonomy – our constant compulsion to be free from any constraint.
- But I'm not sure how free any of us actually feel when we persist in a life free from constraint. You know, David and I try to be good parents, but sometimes we let the kids watch TV and we forget to tell them to stop. If we accidentally let them get away with a good 3 hours of screen time I can tell that they don't feel good – our middle kid in particular is quite verbal about how awful he feels. And I think we're all a bit like that. Freedom from constraint is not really an experience of freedom – it's more like an experience of allowing ourselves to be controlled by our compulsions.
- Following Jesus is really about recognizing that we were designed for dependence, made for worship, made to make someone or something our Lord. That's not the most popular idea in our hyper-independent culture – but it's the way we were designed. And if we actually serve, worship, and are dependent on the Creator we were designed to be dependent on – our dependence paradoxically becomes our road to freedom.
- Following Jesus means that I let go of the lie that I am completely independent – that I am self sufficient – that I am free to do whatever I want.
- But following Jesus means that I gain the freedom and capacity to be my true self. The more I lean in to my identity in Christ, the more The Holy Spirit enables me to be fully Kirsten.
- I listened to a great talk by Dallas Willard where he talked about our picture of holiness. He talked about how we often see holiness as something very like the traditional identity we talked about earlier. We see holiness as something that we do for God – following the rules –performing for God – doing the right thing. This kind of holiness does not bring freedom.
- The true kind of holiness, though, is when we are transformed in our interior person, by the direction of hearts toward Jesus. As we love Jesus, draw close to Him, and seek to follow Him, we begin to be more like Him. We begin to stop doing things not because we're following rules, but because it just isn't like us anymore. As our identity changes, so do our behaviours – and that is freedom. Through the Spirit's work in us we become freed up to be who we want to be.

I think the main thing that I've been trying to say is that we can trust Jesus with our identities. He helps us to figure out what **is** us and **what is getting** in way of being truly us, and his ultimate goal is that we would be more uniquely ourselves, and more free – that we would be dependent in a way that makes us stronger.

Trust Jesus with the vulnerable places of your heart – let Him speak into your life about who are. And be prepared for Him to speak through other people sometimes – because the Holy Spirit works through people.

But I also want to say this. When a person gives their life to Jesus they are given a new identity. They are a child of God, a new creation, a friend of God, redeemed, adopted, freed, loved. This identity is different from either a traditional or a post-modern identity. Ultimately, any other identity we get from the world has to be earned. Maybe we earn through doing our duty, or maybe we earn by gaining a certain number of followers on our Instagram, every other identity can be lost because it has to do with our performance.

Jesus has given us what we all desperately need – an identity grounded in grace. And because it's an identity that we didn't earn – it's an identity that can't be lost. Nothing can touch this new identity that we're growing into. It's the solid rock we've been looking for, after years of building on unstable sand. And the more we allow Jesus to speak into our lives about who and whose we are, the more we are able to feel the solidity under our feet.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- When did you become a Christian, and how did that change your self understanding? If you grew up in the faith, how do you think that impacted your identity formation?
- When you think of your story, can you see the paradox of losing your life to find it? If so, how? If not, what do you think about this paradox?
- Do you agree that follow Jesus makes you more fully yourself? Why or why not? How has following Jesus made you more fully yourself?
- Why is an identity in Christ more stable than an identity built on performance?
- As we reflect on this series as a whole, what are you learning about a Christian identity, and how it's different from other identities? How do you think Jesus is calling you to lean in to your Christian identity?