

**“Identity Theft—Robbed by Relationships.”
Easter Sunday!**

A few years ago I got a call from a U.S. Postal Inspector saying that a Nigerian gang in Chicago had been using my name and social security number and acquired credit cards. The U.S. Postal Inspector had intercepted these cards and was looking for more. Talk about scary! Talk about time consuming. All the calls to the Postal Inspectors, Credit Bureaus, and Banks to get this **straightened out so that a SWAT team didn't raid the church** thinking I was secretly involved in a Nigerian Credit Card fraud!

Identity theft is a huge concern these days. We worry about it, we hear about it, and anything that causes us fear and concern has the making of an industry. Yes, a whole new industry has popped up to protect your identity and mine. Lifelock.com wants us to pay \$10 a month to protect our identity. I've been on their website and they even want to sell you protection for your kids' identity. I'm not saying it's a bad thing. It's just sad.

What's almost even more tragic is that I recently heard of parents stealing their own children's identities. It's true! When parents wreck their own credit, they start using their kids' names and Social Security #'s to take out loans, credit cards, get cable TV, cell phones. Those kids are going to grow up into identities that have already been stolen and trashed.

It's Easter Sunday, and we're starting this new series of messages called “Identity Theft”. We tend to think that identity theft is a new phenomenon tied into the high-tech age. But listen, identity theft is nothing new. We've already heard the Easter story. We've heard how Jesus was crucified, dead and buried, and then came back alive. We've also heard how there was a plot to steal his identity. People were paid to say that Jesus' body was stolen by his disciples. The religious authorities at that time were trying to steal Jesus' identity as the one who overcame death, once and for all. There was a concerted effort to steal his identity as the one who was and is, God in the flesh. There was a cover-up plan to steal Jesus' identity as the one who died and rose again in order to take away the sins of the world.

Identity theft is nothing new. And it seems like the world has just kept trying to steal the true identities of men and women. And that's what this series is about. Not what some Nigerian gang might do with your information, not what some computer hacker might get posing as you. No, we're going to an even deeper level of identity theft. Because we're being infiltrated all the time. There is a concerted effort from a whole bunch of directions to take our true identities and leave us standing there not knowing who we really are! Or leave us standing there with somebody else's idea of who we should be.

Our culture tries to convince us that if we find the right relationship, keep up our appearance, and strive for success, we'll live happy, fulfilled lives. But the truth is, chasing after these kinds of things will only lead to despair and emptiness in our souls. So, who are you? Who were you made to be? Are you being that person? Or has your identity, the real you, the true you, been stolen?

Through the next few weeks we're going to turn the spotlight on some nasty identity thieves. We're going to learn how to spot them, how to protect against them, and how to get our identities back.

Today we're going to identify a real culprit in the identity theft trade. And we're going to get some power over this one. One way we have our true identities stolen is that we're robbed by relationships.

This is my daughter's little toy. You've probably seen something like this. It's a learning toy. You've got the shaped blocks and a little piece of wood with corresponding holes with the same shape. My daughters have both had toys like this. And they've both learned to put the blocks in the right spots. I had a hard time with this growing up. I'd get impatient. And the little wooden hammer wouldn't cut it. So I'd be heading to the work bench for my daddy's 20oz framing hammer! Yeah baby! Bam, bam, bam! It was so frustrating to me!

I see toys like this and they remind me why I do what I do. Because there are so many people trying to cram square pegs into a round hole. There was a guy named Solomon, the richest guy who ever lived. He made Bill Gates look like I mean he just had every resource available to him and it says in his journal, the Book of Ecclesiastes, in the Old Testament in the Bible, he says, “I said to myself, I said to my heart, ‘Come now. Let's just see what might fill up that hole in my heart.’”

He tried as he puts it, “Everything under the sun” to see if it would fill up that hole. I mean he had the resources to pull it off too. He had real estate, mansions, palaces, gardens, parks, reservoirs. He tried music. He tried sexual encounters. He had the best food, the best wine, the best parties available to anybody and at the end of all that he said, “You know what I discovered? It's all meaningless. It's just like chasing after the wind.” It's like trying to cram a square peg into a round hole. You know what he discovered? Deep within our hearts is a God-like shape.

Look what Solomon wrote a little bit later in the Book of Proverbs. He said, **“What a man desires is unfailing love...”** (Proverbs 19:22, NIV). In other words, **“Here’s my conclusion, what a man desires, what a woman desires, what they’re really after is an unfailing love,”** and don’t you sense that that is true? I mean I think there is a sense in each one of us that we think, **“Maybe if I could just fill up this hole in my heart with somebody, a person, who loves me, that’s it right?”** But be careful when you think that, because you’re about to have your identity stolen.

How many love songs have been written through the years? You know love songs that pledge their devotion like **“ain’t no mountain high enough, ain’t no valley low enough, ain’t no river wide enough to keep me away from you.”** I hear songs like that and I think...it’s time to get a restraining order!

There’s Trisha Yearwood’s song, **“If you ever leave, baby you would take away everything good in my life.”** I’m thinking, maybe it’s time to get a life. If he is everything in your life, maybe the more appropriate, the more accurate song is **“Looking for love in all the wrong places.”** Maybe that’s the one you know.

Remember the movie Jerry Maguire? Tom Cruise and Renee Zellweger; it plays over and over on TNT. There are three famous lines from that movie. Do you remember what they were? **The most famous line is probably, “Show me the money.”** Yeah, **“Show me the money,”** and then the second line was, **“You had me at hello.”** Then the one that just really stuck in me was when he looks at his wife and he says, **“You complete me.”** Dr. Evil quotes that to Mini-me in Austin Powers.

I’ve got to tell you something. Janet and I have been married for 14 years now. We dated for 2 years before that. I can honestly tell you that our love for each other has continually grown. It grows every day for me and she is my soul mate. **She’s my best friend.** I would rather hang out with her than anybody else on the planet. I look forward to going home every day just to see her, but listen, she does not complete me. **She’d tell you the same thing: that I don’t complete her either.**

It’s like the woman who said, “I thought I married Mr. Right. I just didn’t know his first name was Always.” Here’s what I’m getting at, watch this: To expect another person to complete you, to expect a relationship to fill up that hole in your heart, is setting that relationship up to fail and to frustrate you and that expectation is both unfair and unrealistic. You remember what Solomon said, **“What a man, what a woman desires, is an unfailing love,”** to hope for, to expect, imperfect people to complete you, is setting yourself up for huge disappointment and setting the relationship up for a long uphill struggle. You look to another human being to complete you, to fill that God-shaped place, and you will get your identity stolen.

One article I read on identity theft said this, **“It was a big, nasty surprise. When Chevonne King-Lewis, a 23-year-old single mother from Atlanta, checked her credit report three years ago, she found that someone had opened more than 25 credit-card accounts, taken out loans and filed for a marriage license in her name. King-Lewis says she tracked down the culprit ...[a] former Taco Bell co-worker who used to stay at her house...Her ex-colleague allegedly had run up \$37,000 in charges, including a car and a plush \$1,200 mattress.”** King-Lewis said, **“It’s really scary knowing that someone else has been living my life...”**

That’s scary isn’t it—to think that somebody else is living your life. But, you know what? I see it all the time. I see people all the time allow other people to live their lives. I watch high school students who will do just about anything, and turn into anybody, in order to be accepted by a certain group or a certain guy or a certain girl. Why do you think people so readily give up their body sexually speaking? Why do we care so much about what other people think or say about us? Why do we end up in co-dependent patterns and relationships where we just need to be needed? **It’s because there’s this need to be accepted.** We try to fill this God-shaped place with someone besides God and it just doesn’t work! Our identity gets stolen and we end up letting other people live our lives.

Now, don’t get me wrong here. We need each other and we are called to be family, to belong, to connect to other people, to love people deeply and be deeply loved by them. But, even as healthy and as good as relationships can be, they don’t possess an unfailing love. And if I, or you, put that kind of pressure on a human relationship it’s going to crack! **That person you put that pressure on to fill that God-shaped place is going to disappoint you. And when you get stung by somebody, when you get hurt by somebody that you were expecting to complete you, all that acceptance, all that security, all that significance that you’ve been craving is gone, and your identity gets stolen with it.**

Do you remember what Solomon said? He said, **“What a man desires, what a woman, desires is an unfailing love.”** If you looked through Scriptures you would find that little phrase **“unfailing love”** over 40 times in the Bible. Every time it’s used as a little phrase like that, it’s used in connection with the only one who can actually give it.

Look at some of these Scriptures. Psalm 32, **“Unfailing love surrounds those who trust the Lord.”** (Psalm 32:10, NLT). Psalm 36, **“How priceless is your unfailing love oh, God. People find refuge in the shadow of your wing.”**

(Psalm 36:7, TNIV). Psalm 130, "Hope in the Lord for with the Lord there is unfailing love and an overflowing supply of salvation." (Psalm 130:7, NLT).

Listen real close to what this one says. "Show me your unfailing love in wonderful ways...Guard me as the apple of your eye." (Psalm 17:7-8, NLT). Do you know that? Did you know that you are the apple of God's eye? Hide me in the shadow of your wings. In other words, wrap your strong loving arms around me. We all long to be loved with a love like that. We all long to be the apple of somebody's eye. We all long for an unfailing love, one that is constant, one that will not disappoint, one that is compassionate, one that is dependable, one that is unconditional, one that is perfect.

You see deep within our hearts is a God-like shape. A perfect fit for Jesus in every way. No heart is too big, no heart is too small. Jesus is the answer. He fits them all. He fits them all. And some of you are saying, "Yeah, yeah, I hear you about this Jesus thing and all that but I need somebody. I need somebody in my life. You don't know how lonely I am." Listen to what God says to you that are lonely and feeling like something has been ripped from your life. You know what he says. This is God speaking to you. From Isaiah 54, "Don't be afraid, you'll not suffer shame. Don't fear disgrace, you will not be humiliated for your maker is your husband. The Lord Almighty is his name" (Isaiah 54:4-5, NIV). God desires to be your companion.

Some of you are saying, "Yeah but you're not in a family like I am. My parents don't give a rip about me. In fact they have even said before they wished they never had me." Or maybe things just blew up at home and you don't see eye to eye anymore. Maybe you feel very, very lonely because you don't have anybody—maybe you've been separated from your father, from your mother for a long, long time. Well look what the Bible says to you Psalms 68, Verse 5 and 6, "A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows is God in his holy dwelling. God sets the lonely in families" (Psalm 68:5-6, NIV).

I really love it when you tell me your stories. When you send me letters and emails about what God is doing in your life. One woman going through some difficult times in her marriage and family sent me this: "I'm thankful, thankful, thankful! I just have to say that I'm infinitely grateful for Saint Paul's...It became my home, and the people here my family, when home didn't feel so much like home. And it continues to be that, even though our family is healing. This church has directly and drastically influenced my life and by extension the lives of my kids, my husband, and many others...I honestly can't imagine our lives now had I not given in to the nudge to come (alone...) to a Sunday service at Saint Paul's...Thanks!"

One man wrote this: "I believe that God brought me to St. Paul's at the right time in my life. The questions that I had been asking myself and God over the prior six months were just that: What am I here for? I had messed up my life so many times and every time I thought I had gotten right with God and was living and trying to serve Him, I would encounter the temptations that I could not resist...I had lost my family...my marriage...everything...Then I came to Joplin and was led to St. Paul's. I knew immediately when I stepped through the front door that I was in the right place. It just felt right, that's all I know to say...I thank you and the church..."

You see the Lord sets the lonely in families. That is what an unfailing love does. I want, so much, for us to imprint this on the circuit boards of our minds. I want so much for this to get into our souls, into our bones. We can go to church for years and years and keep this at arm's length, but don't do it! Take it in. Please, don't go through life looking for acceptance and security and significance in all the wrong places.

You can be robbed by relationships, or you can know the truth about your identity. When God fills that God-shaped space in your life, you walk with power, confidence, joy, purpose. So no matter who you think you are, here's what God says you are, what I am. Wallpaper your mind with this..

Look what it says first of all In Christ I am completely accepted. Here is what God says about you and me, "I am God's child—John 1:12. I am Christ's friend—John 15:15. I've been justified—Romans 5:1. I am united with the Lord and I am one in spirit with him—1 Corinthians 6:17. I've been bought with a price; I belong to God—1 Corinthians 6:19-20. I'm a member of Christ's body, the church—1 Corinthians 12:27. I've been adopted as God's child—Ephesians 1:5. I have direct access to God through the Holy Spirit—Ephesians 2:18. I have been redeemed and forgiven of all my sin—Colossians 1:4. I am complete in Christ—Colossians 2:10."

In Christ I am not only completely accepted, in Christ I am totally secure, totally secure. Look what God says about that. "I am free forever from condemnation—Romans 8:1-2. I am assured that God works all things together for

good—Romans 8:28. I cannot be separated from the love of God—Romans 8:35-39. I am confident that God will finish the good work he started in me—Philippians 1:4. I am a citizen of heaven—Philippians 3:20. I have not been given a spirit of fear but of power, love, and self-discipline—2 Timothy 1:7. I can find mercy and grace to help in time of need—Hebrews 4:16. I am born of God and the evil one cannot touch me—John 5:18.”

In Christ I am not only accepted, I am not only secure, but in Christ I am deeply significant. God says this, “I am the salt of the earth and the light of the world—Matthew 5:13-14. I am a branch of the true vine, Jesus, a channel of His life—John 15:15. I’ve been chosen in this life to bear fruit—John 15:16. I’m a personal Spirit-empowered witness of Christ—Acts 1:8. I am temple of God—2 Corinthians 3:16. I am God’s coworker—2 Corinthians 6:1. I am God’s workmanship created for good works—Ephesians 2:10. I may approach God with freedom and confidence—Ephesians 3:12. I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength—Philippians 4:13.”

Listen, Jesus Christ completes me. He completes me and he will complete you too. He wants to do that. You see, the Bible just doesn't say that God has an unfailing love. Jesus proved it on a cross. He said, “Father forgive them, they don't know what they are doing. I have come to take away the sins of the world,” and today you can believe that and you can accept that and you can become the person that God's always wanted you to be. His most loved child. That's the relationship that complete us, and that's your true identity. And for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Father I want to thank you so much for the way you love us and the way you speak into us and to the way you fill up that hole in our heart. Thank you for Easter and the power and meaning of this day. Help us to grasp how high, and wide, and deep is your love for us.

I thank Mike Breaux, teaching pastor of Willow Creek Community Church for his resources in this message.