

“Identity Theft—Stolen by Success”

I brought some stuff over from my office. If you’ve been in my you know it’s kind of eclectic. I believe that a person’s office or study is a reflection of the inside of their brain. Mine is a strange assortment of the scholarly and, well, junk, toys, debris. I keep little things. Like this Alaskan Moose Nugget. My mom got this for me in Alaska. It’s made from Moose Manure. You’re supposed to put in on your lips. It says on the side, “It won’t heal your lips, but it sure keeps you from lickin’ em.” I’ve got these pictures of my childhood dog, Sweetie Pie and her only litter of puppies. I’ve got this paper chain that I brought back from Nicaragua on my first trip to our village there. The children in one of the schools made it to celebrate our visit and they gave it to me. It reminds me of them.

I’ve got pictures of my wife and daughters. I’ve got this sand painting from Russia to remind me of my visit there.

I’ve also got some award kind of stuff like this old gumball machine my parents gave me when I was in grade school. It was a reward for going several weeks without a visit to the principal’s office—I’m not kidding. This was a big deal!

On the walls of my office I’ve got some stuff that will really impress you, like this diploma from my college, Hendrix College, and my diploma for my Masters Degree from Duke University. I’ve got this plaque for winning the Denman Evangelism Award a few years back.

An office can be a place where we try to convey a certain image. Some of us are kind of into image management. Displaying things, doing things, arranging things to help people know just how successful we are.

If you want to see image management at its most glaring, best or worst, go to a ten-year reunion, go to a twenty-year reunion, and just watch everybody there. I mean, it’s all about impressing the other person. Someone shows up, remembering he was voted least likely to succeed and he thinks, “I’ll show you.” So they rent a car, a really nice car, and act like it’s theirs. They rent a really nice suit and act like it’s theirs. Rent a really nice date, act like it’s theirs.

It’s like the doctor who saw his 92-year-old patient out one day with a very, very attractive, very much younger woman on his arm. And the old man said to his doctor, “Hey, doc, thanks for the great advice.” And the doctor said, “What advice was that?” And the old man said, “You told me to get a hot mama and be cheerful.” The Doctor said, “No, I said you have a heart murmur; be careful.”

We want to be seen as successful. And you know how early in life that definition of success thing starts? Ever been to a playground and just sat around with a bunch of parents who have toddlers playing all over the place and listened to the conversation. It’s unbelievable. You’ll hear things like, “So when did she learn to walk?” “When did she learn to talk?” “Can he say his A-B-C’s?” “Well if he’s gonna get a scholarship, then ...” Unbelievable. Three year olds, ya know.

Ever go to a ballgame and watch parents whose kids are playing in some kind of sporting competition. They’re just going crazy, trying to live their lives through their kids. Listen to the things they say.

There have been several big blowups in the world of little league baseball right here in our neck of the woods. Parents trying to get their kids on the right team, with the right coach, moving them up or down a grade in order for them to be more successful, to stand out. To get an early taste of success.

There’s pressure in school to perform and get good grades. Now, it’s important to do well in school, because it honors God when you do your best. And I really do like the bumper stickers that say, “I’m the proud parent of an honor student.” But I would love to see one that said, “My kid got a C and I’m just as proud.” Or, “My kid got a D-, but he’s really kind.”

But a message is sent early on to our kids. When the bell goes off, when the starter pistol is fired, at all costs, do whatever it takes—whatever it takes to blow past your co-workers, to blow past your classmates, your teammates, your family, your neighbors. Be bigger, be smarter, be stronger, be faster, be richer, be higher, be better than the other guy. Do whatever it takes to be successful.

Remember that guy we talked about in week #1 named Solomon? He was the guy who tried to fill the God-shaped place in his heart with everything else but God. He's the guy who said what a man or a woman really desires is unfailing love. Look what Solomon wrote in Ecclesiastes 4:4, "**Then I observed that most people are motivated to success by their envy of their neighbors. But this, too, is meaningless, like chasing the wind.**" (Ecclesiastes 4:4, NLT).

I've got ask, what makes us run so fast? What makes us work so hard and compete so intensely? I mean, part of it is that there are God-given drives within us. Channeled in a healthy way, they can help us really get the most out of life. Those drives can help us to live with purpose and direction and joy. But as I look around, I see way too many people with those drives out of balance and out of control. And I think it's due to something else. You know what I think it is? I think it's a hunger for acceptance. I think it's a hunger for the elusive "Atta boy!" or "That's my girl!" I think people are starving for an unfailing love.

From my experience, I've found that most workaholics grew up in homes that were pretty much performance-driven; and they were taught that love and acceptance are earned. So if you fly a little higher, if you run a little faster, if you do a little better, then maybe you will get some love and acceptance showered on you—until the next time you fail.

And so you fast-forward that a few years and you see that man, you see that woman, still running fast and working hard and doing long hours because they're searching for that acceptance they never got. They're starved for that unconditional love and they're saying, "I feel like a nobody, and I hate that feeling. I'm going to be somebody; and I'm going to prove to everybody that I'm somebody. If it takes long hours, if it takes seven days a week, if it costs me my health, if it costs me my marriage, if it costs me my kids, if it costs me my soul—I will pay that price because I can't stand feeling like an unloved nobody. So I will perform and I will produce and earn and accumulate—strive, drive, and win until I am appreciated, until I am accepted, until I am admired, until I am successful."

But you know what? Success is not going to fill that hole in my heart. I have to remind myself all the time that the unfailing love of Jesus Christ has filled up that God-shaped place in my heart and I'm already accepted. I don't have to prove anything, I don't have to perform, I don't have to be *the* best. I just want to be *my* best.

When all is said and done, what's your legacy going to be? I mean, if in your lifetime your legacy's just kind of a nice portfolio and a few plaques and awards and a thousand lost golf balls, you might have worked the image and you might have looked successful, but you never really loved and you never really lived.

I think that's why when God compiled the Ten Commandments list, he put these two at the top: "**Do not worship any other gods besides me. Do not make idols of any kind, whether in the shape of birds or animals or fish. You must never worship or bow down to them, for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God who will not share your affection with any other god!**" (Exodus 20:3-5, NLT)

Now here's how I think this whole deal works. We look at Exodus 20 where God says to not make any images and bow down to them. So what do we do in our culture? We set this *image* of what success is. We've got an image of the right body, the right clothes, the right car, the right house, the right family, the right job, the right office—and we go after this image. We bow down to this image. And this image gets to be so important that all of our energy and all of our time and all of our devotion and all of our affection and all of our resources go into the pursuit of this image. And you know what the Bible calls that? The Bible calls that worship, when you pour your energy and affection and devotion into something.

The Bible also teaches us that when we worship anything other than God that's called *idolatry*. It means bowing down to the altar of that image. And you know what I think is really sad as I look around our culture? I see people worshipping this image, trying to attain this image, bowing before this image, giving this image everything they've got—and that becomes their *identity*. It's a vicious cycle.

There's a story in the Book of Luke about a young man caught in that cycle. He's commonly called the rich young ruler and he came to see Jesus. This guy is just lost in the cycle of identity-theft. He was committed to keeping up his image, and he looked like he was together. This was a guy that was working the image. I mean, he's got his Abercrombie toga on, got the K-Swiss on his feet. He's young, he's handsome,

he's got abs of steel complete with calf implants. He's power-lunching at the Jerusalem Club and driving a chariot with all the options, including moon roof.

By all appearances this guy's got life figured out. But in reality he's feeling empty. Success has left him empty. So he comes to Jesus and in Luke 18:18 he asks, **"Good teacher, what should I do to get eternal life?" (Luke 18:18, NIV)**. Did you catch the question: what must I **do**? He's always had to do something, so he asks, "What must I do to get that?"

I think a lot of us, like this guy, feel like our eternal destiny is in some way linked to our performance on this earth. But listen, you need to know that our eternal destiny is linked only to a blood-stained cross of Jesus Christ. Eternal life is a gift from God.

But this rich young ruler asked, "What must I do?" This guy is successful; in the Jewish culture in Jesus' day, he's considered wealthy. This culture viewed people who are rich as people that God accepted, as people that God had blessed. So this guy is working the success image. In fact, he thinks he's even worked his way into good standing with God.

In a way, Jesus kind of played along. He asked, "OK, you been keeping the rules? How about that Ten Commandments list? Let me just click off a few for you. Don't commit adultery; how about that one? Don't murder, don't steal, don't give false testimony, honor your father and mother?"

Now when Jesus clicks off this list of the Ten Commandments, notice he leaves out the first two, the most important ones, the ones about having no other gods before me and don't bow down and worship any kind of image—all the things about a personal relationship with God. He just lists the outward commands, the ones that are seen by other people, the ones that kind of keep up your good image. And the guy says to Jesus, "Yeah, I got an A. I'm an honor student. I've kept these since I was a boy. I'm looking good."

You know what? When we live with a compulsive desire to project the perfect image to everybody so that everybody will admire us, the result is that nobody ever really knows us. It's just a front. But God knows our true self. Look what it says in Mark 10:21-22; I love Mark's account of this: **"Jesus looked at him and loved him" (Mark 10:21-22, NIV)**.

Isn't that cool? Jesus could see through the façade this guy's putting up, but Jesus looked at him and loved him. Like, "Yeah, you're really good. You're a good guy. You've never broken any of the commandments. You're trying to do the right thing. You've got the image thing working." The passage goes on, **"'One thing you lack,' he said. 'Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.'** At this the man's face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth."

Jesus said, "You look like you've got it all; but you lack one thing: surrender. Surrender to the love of God." He said, "Listen, you're bowing down before the wrong image. The one thing you lack is complete surrender to the true and living God. Put him first in your life. That's what will make all of life come together for you."

The truth that Jesus says to this guy: "Listen, God really doesn't have your heart, does he? He doesn't have your affections. Until you have that one thing right in your life, you will never really know God. And because of that, you'll never really know yourself. And as a result, it's keeping you from living a real life on this side and on the other side of eternity."

And listen, the issue here is not this guy's money. You can be poor and be just as empty and lost. Jesus is saying here, the issue is your heart. Who or what has it? This guy's image—his possessions—had stolen his affection, had stolen his worship, and had stolen his identity.

I think God takes a different approach to this whole success deal. I think in God's economy, this is the way it works. He says, "First of all, you've got to get this one. Put *identity* at the top." That's where you start. Get this one nailed down. So you know who God is and what he's like. You know who he is and who you are in God's eyes.

Once that happens, it leads to *intimacy*—intimacy with God and intimacy with other people because now you know who you are. You're secure and accepted in who you are. And now real intimacy can flow between you and your spouse, can flow between you and your kids, can flow between you and your friends

and co-workers. And then that intimacy leads to a *right image*. You start to live created in the image of God again.

That's a great cycle to get into: when you know who God is, and when you know who you are because you know who God is. And I cannot overemphasize how important it is to get this identity thing nailed down is your life. To really know who God is and what he says about you will set up your life for success or failure.

You've got to drill this one down. Grasp it, know it, be captured by it. Really know God's identity, who he is and what he says about you. This God that we're talking about is a God that has a consuming love; so much so, that he sent the only Son he ever had wrapped in our skin. And he learned how to walk, and he stumbled and he fell, and he cried out for milk, and he cried out for his mom and dad. And he sweated blood in the night, was lashed with a whip and showered with spit, was nailed to a cross—and he died whispering forgiveness on us all. Grasp that. Know that. Be captured by the love of God, the consuming love of God for you.

When you know and trust in the God who loves us consistently and freely, it changes you. When you embrace your identity as a true child of God, you decrease your hunger for power, you decrease your hunger for the applause of other people. You're grateful for your life; you deeply appreciate love; you even like yourself. And you stop running so fast and trying so hard to be somebody—because you already are somebody!

Lots of people in the corporate world really get caught up in titles. People on church staffs and volunteers can get caught up in titles too. I used to be called the Senior Pastor, but that just sounded so old. Then my title changed to Lead Pastor, and that's OK except that you can also pronounce that lead pastor—the heavy stuff that used to weigh things down, make bullets, etc. The bottom line is I don't really care. I used to care. But I don't any more. I've discovered that if somebody loves me because of my title, because of my position, they don't really love me, they love what they think my title might get for them. Titles don't really mean anything.

But check out this obscure Scripture from the Gospel of John. It's just kind of in the middle of a story. Look what it says: **“Peter turned and saw that the disciple whom Jesus loved was following them.” (John 21:20, NIV).**

Now check that out real quick. Does anybody know who was called the disciple whom Jesus loved? John. And who wrote that verse? John. Isn't that cool? John could have said, “John, the Great Apostle,” “John, the Senior Disciple,” “John, Associate Disciple,” but he said, “Hey, I'm just the one Jesus loves.” That was his only title.

And you know what, that's the only title I need, the only one you need. You are deeply loved by God. Define yourself as someone who's just radically loved by God. That's your true identity. Every other identity is just an illusion.

My worth is not found in my possessions. My worth is not found in my reputation. My worth is not found in my title. My worth is not found in “Atta boy's” or applause or everybody telling me how important I am to the company. I stand anchored in the love of God—the deep, wide, high, long love of God, the one who tells me, “Hey, you're my kid and I love you with a radical love.” And that's all I need to be. That's my identity, and for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

I thank Rev. Mike Breaux, Teaching Pastor at Willow Creek Community Church, for his resources in this message.