

“Identity Theft—Pick-pocketed by the Past”

I've got a question for you today. Did you have a nickname when you were growing up? Did you have a nickname that people called you? It might have been something good that you liked, it might have been something bad that you hated. But did you have a nick name? In fact, let's turn the lights up for a minute and let me hear a few of your nicknames...[Aaron with people]

I did not have a nickname growing up. I could be wrong, but I think part of the reason that I didn't have a nickname was because for most of my early years I was this hyper, wild, unpredictable kid (with a hint of psycho), and I have a hunch that the other kids were scared to give me a nickname for fear that I'd go crazy on them. Like that one time somebody called me scrawny Aarony. I was on him like a spider monkey, I scissor-kicked the back of his head! Not really!

I did kind of have a nickname in college. My roommate my freshman year and a couple of his friends found out that I was going into ministry and whenever they'd start drinking they felt the need to confess to me and call me Father Brown. It was kind of creepy. I can't say I really appreciated that.

Were you given any nicknames that just stuck in you? You got any of that stuff that you still kind of hang onto it? It still affects the way you see yourself? Still affects the way you live? You still hear those voices?

Well, I hope that you've been hearing very clearly the last few weeks, the voice of God. And if not, then I hope you hear him today say, "You are not defined by what they used to call you. You are not defined by the nicknames they shouted at you at recess, or the hurtful things your parents used to say about you, or the harmful thing that someone did to you. You don't have to be paralyzed by the past. They were wrong." And you can and you should move on to a new life and a new day and a new identity.

Or maybe it's not so much what was done to you. But maybe, maybe it's some things that you did. I don't know. Maybe for some of you it was a DUI. Or maybe it was an affair. Or a failed marriage, or maybe financial collapse, or maybe you cheated and you got caught. Or maybe you flunked out of school, or maybe you got kicked out of the house. Maybe you got fired from your job. Maybe it's the abortion that still haunts you. Or all kinds of different sexual experiences.

Or maybe, you were not only the victim of abuse but it turns out you grew up to be an abuser. Or maybe your identity for a while was inmate number 37842. Or perhaps you've introduced yourself for a number of years as, "Hi, my name is so and so and I am an alcoholic." Or maybe it was gambling for you, maybe it's drugs, maybe it's pornography. And what you did or what happened back then still defines you today. In fact, it's become who you are.

Listen, just like the things we've been talking about in the last three weeks, imperfect relationships, the distorted image in the mirror, the distorted image of success in our culture. Just like those things, the past can hack into your soul and steal your identity. But today, we can change all that.

Let's start by understanding guilt. You know guilt is a really a strange emotion to deal with. A bunch of little kids were asked to explain what a guilty conscience was like. One little six-year-old girl said, "A guilty conscience is a pot inside of you that burns if you're not good." A seven year-old boy said, "A guilty conscience is feeling bad when you kick girls or little dogs."

What is guilt? Guilt is that thing inside of us that says, "I think I crossed the line there." It's that thing that says, "That wasn't right. That didn't even feel right." And, you know what? Guilt is a good thing. Because, if you get to the point where you don't feel that little twinge of "that was wrong" in your heart, then your heart is heading to a cold, callous and very dangerous condition.

Feelings of guilt can actually lead us to honesty. Guilt can lead us to confession. Guilt can lead us to forgiveness. Guilt can lead us to a better decision the next time around. But, unresolved guilt—guilt that gets suppressed, guilt that gets stuffed down, guilt that gets hidden—is a really destructive thing.

Have you learned, like I have, that secret sin cannot coexist with inner peace? Secret sin cannot coexist with inner peace. Look what the Bible says about it, Proverbs 28:13, **"People who cover over their**

sins will not prosper. But if they confess and forsake them, they will receive mercy" (Proverbs 28:13, NLT). Listen, that's a message that's repeated over and over and over in the Bible. It's a message that God clearly wants us to get.

So let me say it again. Guilt is a good thing. It's a good thing. And from God's perspective, it's a really good thing. It's like a warning light on the dashboard of our car. It lets us know that something is not quite right in the engine and we need to deal with it.

But watch this: Guilt that is left unconfessed, guilt that is left unforgiven, it begins to morph and it morphs into a sinister, ugly beast named "shame." And shame takes guilt to a whole new level. Shame is more than capable of stealing your identity and keeping you paralyzed in the past.

I don't talk a whole lot about satan, I don't want to give him any limelight. But the Bible calls satan, who is the enemy of our soul, who is the thief, who is the father of lies, the Bible also calls satan the accuser. He loves to make the accusations. Have you heard his subtle whisper? Those little whispers that say, "You know what? You are such a loser. You're drunk, you're an addict, you're a junkie, you're a pervert, you're stupid, you're so ugly, you're unloved, you're so alone. You always have been and you always will be. Come on, just face it – that's who you are." That's the voice of the accuser. He uses shame to steal your identity.

No doubt about it, shame is a dangerous, dangerous enemy. But you need to know that shame has got a dangerous, dangerous enemy of its own called grace. If shame tells me I'm defective, grace tells me that I'm valuable. Shame's greatest weapon is the fear of judgment. Grace's even greater weapon is the relief of unfailing love. Shame says that because I'm flawed, I'm unacceptable. Grace says that even though I'm flawed, I am priceless. Shame believes the opinion of other people is what matters. Grace believes that the opinion of God is the only thing that matters. Shame claims that I must become perfect to earn the approval of others. Grace claims that I am accepted regardless of my imperfections. Shame makes us hide. Grace sets us free. Shame is the language of the thief. Grace is the language of Jesus Christ.

So you take your guilt, you take your sin, you take your past, and like I've done, and like countless other people, and you just get honest with God. You come clean with him no matter what you've done, how far you've strayed, how dark your life has become, and let his grace restore your soul and restore your identity.

Look what it says in 1 John 1:9, look what it says. **"But if we confess our sins to Him, He is faithful and just to forgive us and cleanse us from every wrong" (1 John 1:9, NLT).** I love that verse of Scripture, don't you, because it tells me that when I become a Christ follower and when I accept the forgiveness and the grace of God, that, I'm not going to be perfect, I'm still going to kind of screw up along the way. There are going to be times I make mistakes and when I make mistakes, when I sin, when I fall, I confess my sins to God and when I confess my sins to God he is faithful and just to forgive me of my sin and cleanse me from all unrighteousness in my life.

Oh, and the Bible also tells us we ought to come clean, not only with God, but with a trusted friend. There's real power, there's real healing, when you get into an honest community. You know that? Because you discover that most of us are like the rest of us. You're always afraid that somebody else is going to know your stuff and you get in a group and you go, "Wow, you too!" That's one reason we're always telling you to get connected into a small group. It's a great place to deal with the guilt. A great place to claim your real identity.

Look what the God of unfailing love says about your past. Isaiah 44:22, **"I have swept away your sins like the morning mists. I have scattered your offenses like the clouds. Oh, return to me, for I have paid the price to set you free" (Isaiah 44:22, NLT).** Hebrews 10:17, **"I'll forever wipe the slate clean of their sins" (Hebrews 10:17, NLT).** And Romans 8:1, **"So now there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus" (Hebrews 10:17, NLT).** That's what God says about your past. Know that truth. Grasp that truth.

You've seen this classic toy before, right? This right here, the Etch-a-Sketch. As a kid this thing was kind of fun, but also kind of frustrating. I never was able to do anything on this except like make stairs going

up. I couldn't do anything else on it. You try to draw a picture, just little squiggly lines. It's a really hard deal to do. But the good thing about this, you know what it is, you mess up and you go (shake it) and you start all over again.

And watch this, the God of unfailing love says, "I know what a mess you've made. Just come humbly to me. Confess your sins to me. Let me know what's going on in your heart. Don't stuff that guilt down. Don't let it turn into shame. Come to me. I'm your loving father." And you say, "God, listen, here's what I did. This is how I did it and this is how it made me feel. And, God, I don't want to live like this anymore. And I just need to give this to you." And you release it to the God of grace and the God of grace goes.... New day. New mercies. New creation.

The God of unfailing love does not want you to be defined by who you used to be. He wants to give you a fresh start. One young man wrote this about his experience, "...it's been nearly two years since I first walked into [church] and gave my life to God. And these two years have been amazing. Trusting God to guide me in the right direction and leading me to people and situations that keep me from giving in to temptation that come every day. It's been awesome.

"When I first started my new life in God, I was so fearful that someone would come along who knew me only as the old, drinking, gambling, porn-addicted guy I was, and try to either pull me back into that lifestyle or mock me for my new ways. In fact, for a long time, I tried to either avoid conversation with those people. Or if I had to talk to them, I would keep my spiritual life a secret. I quickly realized that that wasn't going to work.

"I can vividly remember one night begging God to provide me the strength to stand up for my new-found passion for Him. And asking Him to take me out of my comfort zone, to acknowledge my past indiscretions to others and the new life that He gave me. Before I knew it, He was using me to talk to and help people who were just like I used to be. I really felt like God allowed me to throw away the key to my past and not be fearful of my new life with Him.

"I, obviously, will never forget the struggles that I went through and put my family and friends through in the past. But, I'm no longer ashamed or embarrassed by those incidents because I know that God has been shaping my life for a really long time now and He wants me to be excited about my new life."

Second Corinthians 5:17 says, **"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come. The old is gone, the new is here" (2 Corinthians 5:17, NLT)**. That's the truth, Ruth. You choose Christ and you are brand new. Your old identity is gone. You are a new creation. But here's the snag, old patterns are easy to return to. You know what I'm talking about?

My Father-in-Law is a Farmer in central Missouri. And he's been working the farm that his dad worked for years. When we go there love to take a drive around the farm and when we do we always see the paths that have been traveled by the tractors and trucks over the years. Some of the ruts are so defined that he could probably put his tractor on that path, close his eyes, take his hand off the wheel and that tractor would go all the way down that path all the way to that field. It would just follow those deep, deep, deep ruts in that path. Those tractor tires have just dug those ruts in that path because he goes down that path every single day.

The Bible says, "As a person thinks, so he or she is." If you're tired of fighting battles with yourself, if you want to be somebody else, then change your mind. Get some new ruts to drive in, ruts that take you in the right direction. It's so important to renew your mind daily to a new way of living. Being saved and being set free is a gift from God. Walking free, that's a choice you make. That's a choice you have to make every single day.

That's why the apostle Paul wrote in Romans 12:2, once again, **"Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world. But be transformed by the renewing of your mind" (Romans 12:2, NIV)**.

Intentionally put yourself on a new path, new patterns of thinking. Those old ruts from the world that defined who you are by some relationship, or how you looked in the mirror, or some success scorecard, or your past have to be replaced with brand new ways of thinking.

Instead of looking for relationships to complete you, you now know that Jesus Christ is the only one that is going to complete you. As you grow closer to him, your relationships get better because you're growing closer to him. You start to do new things and instead of screaming and yelling at each other you say, "I'm going to see if I can serve you. I want to be quick to listen and slow to speak here."

New ways, new ruts. Instead of letting some cover model become your role model, you look in the mirror every day and you say, "Wow, whew, I am fearfully and wonderfully made! Look at that!" And you say, "God, you have made me this way. My new way of thinking is that I am a temple that you live in. So, God, I'm going to take care of this body. I'm going to work on my beauty; I'm going to work on my handsomeness from the inside out every single day." It's a new way of thinking.

Instead of chasing the American dream and running so fast to prove to everybody that you're somebody, you relax in the fact that because you've changed your thinking that you already know you are somebody in God's eyes. You don't need the applause of other people because you've already got the applause of the one who matters most. It's a whole new way of thinking, that starts happening when you start renewing your mind every single day to the truth of God. But that's your responsibility.

The Bible says in the book of James 1:22, it says, "**Don't merely listen to the word and so deceive yourself. Do what it says**" **James 1:22, NLT**). That's the transformation of our minds. And we can do it. But it takes effort, energy, intentionality. You're not going to just drift into a transformed mind.

I want to encourage you. Use these study guides, download the messages from the website, write those Scriptures down. Get a Bible to read, reread it, meditate on it, memorize those things, make some flash cards, write them out and keep them in your car if you spend a lot of time there, keep them in your desk at work and take them out on breaks, keep them in the places you are and use a few minutes here and there to re-wallpaper your mind. Jesus was right, the truth, when you know it, will set you free. It will.

You know, we started this series with this little toy here, and we talked about all the square pegs we try to fit in the round hole, the God shaped hole in our heart, and we said that deep within our heart is a God-like shape, a perfect fit for Jesus in every way. No heart is too big, no heart is too small. And Jesus is the answer; He fits them all.

Well, how do you get Jesus into your heart? Well, we used the Scripture the first week, John 1:12. "**But to all who believed Him and accepted Him, He gave the right to become the children of God**" **(John 1:12, NLT)**. The equation is this: **Believe + Accept = Become**. Today's a good day to become a child of God.

Some of you have been sitting here for the past four weeks and you know things aren't right between you and God. But God's been stirring in your heart and you're feeling some hope and you're feeling some grace and you're feeling like, "Maybe I could start to really live. Maybe I could live forgiven and free. Maybe this could be a new start for me." Well, it could. If you simply believe in Jesus Christ, the only son of God who came to this earth and died on a cross to cover all your sins. Who was buried and rose from the grave to give you eternal life in heaven. If you accept his grace that he's given you, he's given you, you can become a child of God. Your true identity.

Here's how I want to end this series. I printed up a whole bunch of little cards and put them up here. They're I.D. cards. Identity Cards. They simply say, In Christ I am completely accepted; I am totally secure; I am deeply significant. And I've loaded it as full as I could with what God says, references from scripture that back those up. Today, I want us to claim our identities. Here in just a minute Janet's going to sing the song, "All I Want to Do." And while she does come up, grab a card, take it back to your seat, sign it, claim, and keep it. And when the thief tries to steal your identity, go back and remember just who you are. I thought about handing these out at the door, but you've got to come pick one up. Just like you've got to claim for yourself God's view of you. Whenever you want, come get it.

Prayer...

And for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

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