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Title: *Identity Theft - "I Am What I Have"*

Scripture: Matthew 4:1-11

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So, Jack started his day just like any other day. He got up. He poured himself some coffee. He began his commute to his office and realized his car was running a little low on gas. So, he stopped to buy some gas. And when he went to swipe his credit card, it was declined. And he thought that's odd. No big deal. I'll use the second credit card that I have in my wallet. And he pulled it out, swiped it, and it went through. And so, he thought I'll have to check on my credit card when I get to work. He got to work, got consumed in his day, and forgot to check his credit card.

But as the day went on, he realized that something more was amiss. He started to get some notifications from his credit card company, then his bank, and then some other places asking questions about whether or not he had made purchases. He realized that his identity had been compromised. And what began as a simple attempt to get a store credit card where he had given his Social Security number just to extend his credit, somebody had taken that and sold it, and it became a multiple-month nightmare of trying to unravel all the damage that it did.

You see, identity theft in our financial environment is something that threatens to make our credit disappear, to create a headache, to create something that's unpleasant and difficult to unravel. But what we've been talking about over these last several weeks is that there's a kind of identity theft that's even more insidious than this. And it's what I've called spiritual identity theft, where we've talked about this idea of when we want our identity to be found in what we do or in what people think about us. Today we'll talk about what we have and how we surrender a little bit of our possible identity in Jesus Christ to really this other way of thinking.

And we've used Matthew four as our place to camp out and look at this, and today we're looking at the third of Jesus' temptation. So, the first temptation was Jesus' temptation just to simply make bread, to do something useful. And we said, that in a way, is defining himself by what he did. And then we talked about going up to the Temple and how Satan had said to him just throw yourself down, and the angels will catch you. And that was, in a sense, to say what people will think or see.

And today we're going to look at the last couple of verses, verses eight through ten. And it says this, "Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain." Here's a picture of the high mountain right here. This is Mount Hermon in Israel, which you don't think of Israel having snow, but other than in your nativity scenes. But they actually have a snow-covered mountain. So, this is probably where it happened. It doesn't tell us. But this is the highest mountain. You could see everything. So, it says, verse eight, "Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor." Now, by all the kingdoms, he means you can see several areas around this, and he said look at all this. "'All this I will give you,' he said, 'if you bow down and worship me.' Jesus said to him, 'Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'"

Now, the big point in the sense of this text is that Jesus never sinned. Jesus was tempted, and Jesus was sinless. And the reason this matters is that Jesus was sinless so that those of us who are sinful can go to him, and his sacrifice on our behalf becomes effective when we believe in him. Meaning that our need isn't to try to live sinless, perfect lives ourselves so that we can commend ourselves to God, but to simply go to the one who already was and is sinless.

And certainly, you could look at this text and you could talk about the insidiousness of temptation. Three times Jesus is tempted, and three times he says it is written, and he replaces the idea of temptation with something better. I think it was Thomas Chalmers, who is a Puritan writer who wrote about what he called *The Expulsive Power of a New Affection*. But his point was this, and that is that we don't actually walk away from temptation unless we have something better that we're looking to. And here the temptation that Satan gives is he says look at everything you could have. Look at what you could do. Look at how your world could be. If you stepped into this.

I was driving down the road the other day and I saw one of these signs, it said Mega Million lottery, number winner. Did any of you see this number? It was like \$980 million. Now, I'm not tempted to buy a lottery ticket. I've done the math on one in 300 million odds. And so, I'm not usually tempted by this, but I had that moment where I thought if I bought a lottery ticket and won, what would I do with \$900 million? And all of a sudden, I started to have this moment of thinking about what would I do if I had that kind of money to use at my disposal. And in a sense, it maybe wasn't a high mountain, it was on 79, but I was on a hill. I had that moment of what could my life look like if I had endless resources. Maybe not endless but had plenty of money.

And you see, the temptation is to say if I had a little more, maybe my life would be better. Now, you may say rightly, I'm not really tempted by money, especially if you've made a little bit of money in your life. You may feel like you aren't defined by it, but there's a piece of me that says even sometimes our attempts to not appear like we have a lot can be an attempt to mask how much our identity can be tied to money.

When you're younger, what happens is you try to show people that you've made it and you have enough. And then when you get a little bit, what you do is you actually try to distance yourself from some of the accouterments of it so that people don't think that you're trying to somehow show what you have. But a lot of times the houses that we live in define where we fit in the socioeconomic strata of our community. Sometimes the cars that we drive define those things. And although we may not say well, I am this because I drive this or I live here or I dress this way, there's a sense in which there are some things that come from money.

Jesus in talking about this in Matthew six, verse 25 says, "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes?" Verse 26, "Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?" Verse 28, "And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin." And then if you read on, he says but yet I clothe them and you're more valuable than the flowers of the field.

And you see, here's what you have in Matthew six. We use wealth in a sense to bring security into our lives. This is what the birds represent. And so, what a lot of us will do is we won't use it as something to show, oh, I have worth because I have this, but we use wealth as a way to say I feel secure. Especially if you grew up without having a lot. Having a little more makes you feel like, you know what, I'm going to be okay. And then the flowers of the field represent that we can use wealth for status or significance, and clothes as a way of saying look at how nicely I'm dressed. Can you believe that there was ever a culture so shallow that they thought that the way they dressed somehow made them more appealing?

But here's what's true, and I'm just going to take you around a few scriptures, around the Bible to show you what's true about wealth. And by the way, wealth is one of the things that's addressed pervasively in the Bible. It's one of the most talked about subjects. In fact, in Jesus' parables, the majority of them have a reference to wealth. In other words, this is a big deal in the Bible. Sometimes people get apologetic to talk about money and faith and how these things intersect. But the bottom line is, all of us need money to live. All of us care about our resources, and the Bible has a lot to say about it.

And here's just a couple of things, and that is wealth, first, we learn this is temporary. Proverbs chapter 27, verse 24 says, "...for riches do not endure forever, and a crown is not secure for all generations." So, the stuff that we accumulate is not something that is necessarily lasting. It is something that is more temporary than not. In Revelation chapter 18, there's an account of Babylon and how the money is all lost in an hour. And some people see Revelation as being future and some people see it as having already taken place. There are different interpretations but what's clear is that in the way that the Bible talks about wealth is that it can be taken from you in a heartbeat. And even as we're here today, there's a movement among some other nations to try to establish a currency that will rival the dollar, that could cause the dollar to lose value, and that could change the whole economic system of our world. It's hard to even fathom how that would work. But the point is, our resources are temporary.

It's a little bit like having camp money. If you ever went to camp as a kid and you got camp dollars that you could spend at the camp store. Do you know what was true about your camp dollars at the camp store? As soon as you went home, your camp dollars were worthless. Even if you can keep all of your money to the end of your life, there's coming a day when your money will be temporary. It won't do anything for you in the future. So, money and wealth are temporary. It's uncertain. First Timothy, chapter six, verse 17 says, "Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment."

And so, the idea here is this, and that your wealth is uncertain. It's not just temporary, but it's not a guarantee. And I realize that some of us will do a great job managing our wealth, and it will endure till the end of our lives. But what I think this text means is that what you count on for wealth, to give you security and status is uncertain.

I don't know if you saw this story last week, but Bronny James, who's the son of LeBron James, who's an aspiring basketball player like his dad, was working out at USC, and he collapsed of cardiac arrest. And it's uncertain right now exactly the long-term implications of

his collapse. But here's what struck me about that. LeBron James, one of the best-known athletes in the world, and one of the richest people in the world has done an incredible job managing his money, leveraging his money to make more money. And his son collapses, and all of his money doesn't buy anything. There's a sense in which all of the money that you and I have doesn't give us what we hope that money will necessarily give us.

It's also said to be unsatisfying. Ecclesiastes chapter four, verse eight, says this, "There was a man all alone; he had neither son nor brother. There was no end to his toil, yet his eyes were not content with his wealth. 'For whom am I toiling,' he asked, 'and why am I depriving myself of enjoyment? This too is meaningless-a miserable business!'" And then chapter five, verse eight. "If you see the poor oppressed in a district, and justice and rights denied, do not be surprised at such things; for one official is eyed by a higher one, and over them both are others higher still." Verse ten. "Whoever loves money never has enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with their income. This too is meaningless."

Now, this is written by a guy named Solomon who we're told had incredible wealth. And what he's basically doing is he's saying, I've had a lot of wealth and I'm telling you, it's meaningless now. And that day you hear that from Solomon but in our day, there was an actor who said something similar. He said this. "I hope everyone gets rich and famous and can do everything that they ever dreamed of so that they can see that it's not the answer." That wisdom was dropped on us by Jim Carrey. But what he was saying was, I've had a lot and it hasn't brought me the satisfaction that I hoped it would bring. And people who get money will tell you this all the time, that it doesn't bring all of the satisfaction. Now, obviously, it does bring some security. It does bring some status. It does help. But if you're counting on it, you're counting on it in the wrong way.

And then I would also say that wealth is deceitful. Mark chapter ten, verse 23 says this. "Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, 'How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!'" Do you see that sometimes our very wealth will cause us to say we don't need God at all? And then in Deuteronomy, chapter eight, verse 13, I won't read it, but it says that having wealth can cause us to forget God. And in First Timothy, chapter six, verses 17-19, which I read part of that, what we see is that our wealth can cause us to be prideful and to put our hope in ourselves. Now, why do I take the time to just read through these verses and talk about them? Because when our identity can be shaped by what we think we have, then what happens is we start to live in a way that we try to accumulate more and more, and we miss where the reality of our real security is.

Now, if you've been here, what we've said is that in Matthew three, the section we've been looking at Matthew four, Jesus is affirmed as God's beloved son at the very end of Matthew three. You are my beloved son is basically what it says. And then Satan comes, and he tempts him with each of these different temptations. And our temptation can be to say it is resources that give us security and status therefore, that's what I need most. Rather than saying these are good things but my best things come from God himself. And that God, who in Matthew six says that you're more valuable than the birds, that you have more splendor than the flowers of the field because you are loved is where our real security can come from. And what some of us will do instead is we'll let our identity be wrapped up in saying just a little more, what I buy, what I have, how I'm portrayed, the security that wealth gives me, rather than saying my real security, my real status is in God.

And notice how Jesus addresses this verse ten. "Jesus said to him, 'Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'" There's a sense in which what really matters here is worship. See if what I want, notice the temptation up on the high mountain, look at everything you could have, no, worship the Lord your God. And when we want to be made much of, what happens is we're drawn into maybe a different kind of identity. Second Corinthians, chapter eight, verse nine says this says, "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich."

And here's what that means. Jesus became poor, who had everything, so that you and I, if we believe in Jesus, could have ultimate wealth, we could have ultimate status, and we could have ultimate security. Meaning that what we would be able to do is say it's God whom I worship, and because I worship God, he's the one who secures my future. And that doesn't mean that you are irresponsible with how you choose to live your life. But what it means is that you and I would say this is where my ultimate hope is. This is why I worship God, not what resources can bring.

And here's why identity theft is insidious. Because when we start to believe that we're defined by what we have, we're always in the quest to have more because more is always better. And we don't get satisfied with what we have. But if we can see that Jesus has already said you will have ultimate security, ultimate status, ultimate wealth, because I became poor on your behalf, that is a God who's worthy of worship. Then the way that this can live itself out in your life and in my life is to decide that we will limit our consumption just to say I'm not going to be on a constant train of always getting more and more stuff.

So, one of my weaknesses in my consumption life is books. I like books. I have an extensive library, and a few years back I decided that I had more books than any person should have. And so, I decided this isn't really that big of a deal. But I decided that every time I got a new book, I'd get rid of a book so that I would stop just adding books to my collection. And then not long after that, I went into my closet, and I realized that I had more clothes than any middle-aged man should have. And I did the same thing with my closet. I said I'm done. No more items in my closet. If I get something, I have to get rid of something. That's not that freeing in all reality. It's just saying another shirt, another pair of shoes, another book isn't going to make my life better. And what some of us do instead is we keep assuming that if we just accumulate a little more of something, it'll somehow give us either that security or that status or that experience, and that will give us what we need.

So secondly, I think it's important that we put our hope, as First Timothy chapter six says, in God, that we worship God, that we say my identity is in being a beloved child of God. Because he, through Jesus Christ, has allowed me to be identified as one who is seen as being sinless rather than one who needs something from what I have.

And then I would just say that generosity is something that is always an antidote to wanting more. Because when we choose generosity, generous spirit, and generosity in the way that we use our resources, what happens is we take this desire to say I'm defined by this and I'm just giving away some of what I could otherwise have. And that strikes a blow at this kind of identity theft.

Now, I realize that you may say, well, this kind of identity theft, I mean, what's the big deal? So, you know, I have a few extra shirts, a few extra pairs of shoes. I want a nicer house. I spend way too much time perusing Zillow looking at the next thing that's out there. You know, I do those things. What's the big deal? Well, the deal is that if you're not careful, your security and your status will be sourced in those things rather than in God himself. You see, having more stuff isn't bad in and of itself. Wanting more stuff isn't bad in and of itself. It's when it replaces the rightful place of God in our lives that it becomes detrimental to our own souls.

And so, my question today is just this, and that is, are you defined by what you do? Are you defined by what people think? Are you defined by what you have? Or are you defined by God's definition? And in a way, this is an ongoing thing. It's not like you just one time say, oh, I decided that I'm defined by God. It creeps up over and over again when you think you have it under control.

We have this big old lab rescue dog, and she tore her ACL a while back, according to the vet. And so, she runs around on three legs. And then when we keep her from running, she starts to heal. And as soon as we let her run at all, she can't help herself. And she runs so hard that she goes back to running around on three legs. And you would think that she would be smart enough at some point to say, I can't keep running because every time I do, I end up on three legs. But she isn't that smart. I would like to think that I'm shrewd enough to be able to say I can handle stuff, but I don't think I'm that smart without continuing to come back and say I want and need to get my sense of who I am from what Jesus says, not from stuff. And that's where we find real freedom.

God, I pray today that you would help each of us to be defined not by what we do, what people think, or what we have, but by your definition of a beloved son, beloved daughter. And if we've trusted Jesus as our Savior, let that become a truer sense of identity and a truer sense of our future. Because you became poor so we could become rich. And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.