

Date: July 15-16, 2023

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

Scripture: Matthew 4:1-11

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A while back, I noticed that I received a few emails in the same week that just caught my attention. And the first email was one that said, we're trying to deliver a package to your home, but your Amazon account is not working entirely right. Click here and follow the links to resolve this issue. And I quickly thought this was phishing, so I just deleted the email.

And then just a little while later I got another one. Except this time, it was a text message and it said, your Netflix account is frozen. You must respond now, or you'll be locked out of your Netflix account. And I started to have that moment, I thought, how could I live without Amazon and Netflix? But again, I realized that it was a little fishing expedition.

And then I got another email and this one said that I had a relative that I didn't know about that lived in another country who was worth millions of dollars, who had no other relatives. And if I would send my social security number, they could deposit money into my account. Now, you have probably heard about these kinds of phishing schemes where people try to tease out your identity.

I had some other people ask me if I had requested that they get me gift cards. And I just want you to know I'm never going to ask you for gift cards, especially through mail or anything else, email that you don't know about. And what you know is that when somebody is phishing, they're trying to take your identity so they can steal from you.

And what I'd like to say today and over the next several weeks is that there's a kind of identity theft that is way more insidious than somebody stealing your financial information. And what I'm talking about is the identity theft, where your identity, your true sense of identity, is misdirected or stolen, and you live from a false sense of identity.

And this is an old game. If you go back to the beginning of the Bible, Satan, the serpent, came to Adam and Eve, who were created in the image of God, and said, you can be even more than God made you to be. And today we're going to start a series. We're going to look at how Jesus was tempted in the wilderness, the stories told in Matthew four.

You heard it read where Jesus was led into the wilderness. And there's a time when Jesus goes, He spends 40 days there led by the Spirit, and he's tempted in every way during this time. But what we often don't think about is what comes before Matthew four. I'm full of deep insights today. Do you know what comes before Matthew four? Matthew three. And in the last couple of verses of Matthew three, here's what we read. Verses 16 and 17 say, "As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he

saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."

And so, Jesus, before He's tempted, is affirmed as the Son of God, the love Son of God, who is well pleased. And then He's led into the wilderness. And we're told that he's tempted or tested. And in Matthew chapter four verses one through four, we see the first of these temptations.

And what we're going to do over these weeks is we're going to talk about the temptations that Jesus faced. I am what I do. I am what other people think, and I am what I have. And today we're going to look at this. I am what I do. And the word for tested or tempted is a word that can be translated either way because usually our tests are our trials or our temptations, and our temptations are our tests that can be translated both ways.

And then he says, verse one, the devil, and the tempter, verse three, and Satan, verse ten. So, we have all of these different phrases for this enemy. Enemy and devil is a word that means the accuser. One of the ways that our adversary wants to attack us is to accuse us, to say we're not worth much, or how dare you think that you could come to Jesus. The tempter means exactly what it sounds like. One who tempts. And Satan means one who is our adversary, our opponent.

And sometimes in our day and age, people, maybe they are uncomfortable with this kind of spiritual language. But spiritual warfare is a real thing. Spiritual warfare is where there is an adversary, a tempter, and an accuser who wants to destroy you. And sometimes what we tend to do is we tend to think of spiritual warfare on a grand scale and that kind of thing exists. But what you'll notice here is Satan's temptation of Jesus was much more mundane than dramatic. And sometimes just because something's mundane doesn't mean that it's not as destructive.

I heard about a man who set out to walk across the country, and as he began walking, he ended up quitting. But he said that what did him in wasn't the mountains, it wasn't the heat, it wasn't the storms. It was sand in his shoes. It was something very mundane. And what you have here is you have Satan showing that his hand is often for the more mundane ways to steal our identity than something grand. And you may think again, I'm making too much of this, but again, notice the devil, tempter, Satan, used all three titles right here.

There's an old song that a Christian writer wrote years ago from Satan's perspective, talking about how he used to be shunned in a sense or shut out. But now people just open their door and let them in because no one believes in him anymore. Andrew Delbanco writes about this in his book *The Death of Satan*. Here's what he says. "We live in the most brutal century in human history. But instead of stepping forward to take the credit, the devil has rendered himself invisible. The very notion of evil seems incompatible with modern life, from

which the ideas of transgression and the accountable self are fast receding. Yet despite this loss of old words and moral concepts like Satan and sin and evil, we cannot do without some conceptual means of thinking about the universal human experience of cruelty and pain. My driving motive in writing this book has been the conviction that if evil, with all of its insidious complexity, escapes the reach of our imagination, it will have established dominion over us all."

And what he's saying is this, and that is when you and I don't conceptualize that there's a real adversary that is attempting to wreak havoc in our world, we won't have categories or words or vocabulary for things like evil or sin or destruction. And when we come across things that are actually destructive, we'll instead of responding to them, try to explain them away. And as he says, they'll have dominion over us. So today we're going to just talk about, I am what I do, and the way that this temptation comes about.

If it's the first of these three temptations, Satan comes. And when Jesus had been fasting for 40 days and 40 nights, he says this, verse three. "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread." So, you can basically say what he's doing is he's saying, really, if you're God, if you're the Son of God, if you're this beloved son, do something relevant, something productive, something that has meaning. Do something that matters. Don't just tell us you're the Son of God. Make bread. Notice how Jesus responds. Verse four He says, "'It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" And He quotes Deuteronomy eight here.

And each time that Jesus is tempted, he responds with the phrase it is written and Scripture. And what this means, at least in part, is that knowing Scripture and understanding Scripture and applying it to our lives, and being able to even recall it is one of the best defenses against the schemes of the adversary. And here Jesus says that we don't live by bread alone, but by the words of God. And I believe that what we can see in this is that he was pushing back on the idea that he had to produce in order to have a significant identity.

Now, some of us understand this intuitively. We're driven, we have jobs, we have careers, and we've allowed our careers to define us. Some of us will say, well, I've never let my career define me. I've always been about something else. But sometimes our productive addictions can show up in places that aren't our careers. We can do it in our homes. We can do it by being a parent and being a good parent or being a husband or a wife or a productive member of society.

And we can say, this is where I gain my sense of value, my sense of worth, because I produce. And certainly, there's a calling in scripture to value work and to see being productive as being a good steward of our gifts and our talents. But what can happen is when we take a good thing and we make it an ultimate thing and we let it define us as it becomes an idol, it

becomes a god for us, in a sense, where we start to say, my sense of well-being, my sense of definition is because I'm productive.

And what I'd like to do is just point out three characters in the Old Testament who at different points of their lives allowed their definition to come from what they did. And in doing that, I think what we can see is that an identity based on what we do can lead to three problematic tendencies in our lives. It can lead to a compulsive tendency, a narcissistic tendency, and a paranoid tendency.

So first, this idea of a compulsive tendency. In Exodus, we learn about Moses. Moses led the people of Egypt out of Egypt, and there were probably about two million Egyptians wandering through the wilderness. And we're told that Moses was trying to adjudicate all of their differences or act as a judge. In other words, there were almost two million people trying to get on his docket, and his father-in-law comes to him, Jethro. This is Exodus 18:17-18. And Jethro says, "What you are doing is not good. You and these people who come to you will only wear yourselves out. The work is too heavy for you; you cannot handle it alone." Verse 22, "Have them serve as judges for the people at all times, but have them bring every difficult case to you; the simple cases they can decide themselves." And so, Jethro comes to Moses and he says basically, you're trying to do too much.

Now, we don't know what was going on in the psychology of Moses, but what it tends to be if he was compulsive in the sense that he said I have to keep performing. I'm the one who got these people out of Israel, came out here, and now I need to take care of it all. And if you ever find yourself in a place where you're trying to take care of everything and it becomes too heavy, chances are that you have taken on more responsibility than perhaps God intended you to have. And this manifests itself with the simple phrase we're working too much. We simply just find ourselves working too much.

There's a pastor who's well known, whose dad was also a pastor who's well known, and he has famously said that he watched his dad work at the things of the church way too much in his childhood. And he said as I decided to enter into pastoral work as well, I decided to cap my work at 45 hours because I figured God could build a church on my 45 hours just as well as he could on my 60 hours.

Now, I'm not suggesting that everyone cap their work at 45 hours, but the mindset says I'm not going to be defined by everything that I do. I'm defined by something else. Therefore, if it doesn't happen, it's okay. But what happens when we become compulsive is we say, I have to have certain things be true, and if they're not true, then my life doesn't have a lot of relevance. And so, we start to define ourselves and we start to work all the time in order to say, this is how I have value.

We've just had this week of KidsFest and sometimes we do this with our kids, we project onto our kids this need to achieve. And we say, unless you get into the travel lacrosse team at age three, you're never going to be a killer lacrosse player. You know, unless you get into grade school, your life is doomed. And that's their preschool that we're targeting. And so, what we'll sometimes do as well is we'll create the sense of I must, and you must do whatever it takes instead of saying I'm defined by something more. So that's one, the compulsion and the compulsive tendency.

Here's the second. And I'm just going to say this is a narcissistic tendency. And I think we see this in the Old Testament character of Solomon. Solomon was the King of Israel, and he built a lot of stuff, he became wealthy, and he didn't deny himself any pleasure. Ecclesiastes chapter two, verses nine and following says this, "I became greater by far than anyone in Jerusalem before me. In all this my wisdom stayed with me." So, he says, compared to everybody before me, I'm the best and I still have all my wisdom. And then he says this, "I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure. My heart took delight in all my labor, and this was the reward for all my toil."

So, here's what he's saying. In essence, he's saying, I have all this stuff. I'm greater than anyone before me, and I do whatever I want. Now, sometimes we tend to define narcissism as somebody who's overly self-focused. And that's true. And there's a clinical kind of narcissism that can be very destructive in homes and in communities. What I'm talking about here is not clinical narcissism. I'm talking about somebody who projects too much. And when I say projects too much, what I mean is that we project our image and our sense of significance into the things that we do.

For Solomon, it was, I've built everything. I'm greater than anybody else. I have more wealth than anybody. I have more pleasure than anybody. And Solomon was actually not just amassing stuff. In Deuteronomy 17, there's some instructions for the King of Israel. Here's what we read. This is Deuteronomy 17, verse 16, "The king, moreover, must not acquire great numbers of horses for himself or make the people return to Egypt to get more of them, for the LORD has told you, 'You are not to go back that way again.'" Verse 17. "He must not take many wives, or his heart will be led astray. He must not accumulate large amounts of silver and gold." And what Solomon did is, he said, acquiring helps me feel good, at least in part about me. I'm greater than everybody else. And if we're defined by what we do, it's hard not to compare, and it's hard not to say I have value because of this.

C.S. Lewis wrote about this one time, and here's what he said. He said, "Now, what I want you to get clear is that pride is essentially competitive. It's competitive by its very nature. Pride gets no pleasure out of having something, only out of having more of it than the next man. We say we're proud of being rich or clever or good-looking, but we are not. We are proud of being richer or cleverer or better looking than others."

You see, a narcissistic tendency will cause you to look sideways in every instance and say, I have value because of how I compare. And people do this in all kinds of arenas, not just in their careers, but in terms of saying, well, you know, compared to other people my age, I produce more. I'm more fit, or I have gotten farther, or my kids are, and then we fill in our blanks with whatever it is as if to say somehow this gives me value. But what we need to see is that if we're defined by what we do, we will have some of these narcissistic tendencies.

So, there's compulsive tendencies. There's narcissistic tendencies. And then I'm going to say there's paranoid tendencies. And I see this in King Saul again in the Old Testament. Saul was the king before Solomon, and he had a son, David, who had a son Solomon. And that was the succession of kings. Saul had David coming to be king because he was anointed. And here's what he says at one point, verse seven of first Samuel, 18, "'Saul has slain his thousands, and David his tens of thousands.' Saul was very angry; this refrain displeased him greatly. 'They have credited David with tens of thousands,' he thought, 'but me with only thousands. What more can he get but the kingdom?'"

And what he was revealing here was his paranoia and the tendency when we're paranoid because we're defining our success or ourselves on what we do is to worry too much. Because we start to say, well, if this doesn't work out or if this doesn't happen, if this doesn't come true, then I'm not. Fill in your blank again. I'm not valuable. I'm not significant.

There's a scene in the old movie, *Chariots of Fire*, where the story's told about the two Olympic runners. And Eric Liddell is usually the one that we think about if you've seen the movie, who chose not to run on Sundays because he wanted to honor the idea of the Sabbath. But the other runner in the account, at one point says to Eric Liddell about his running, he says, when I run, I have ten seconds to justify my existence.

In a sense, if you're an Olympic athlete, that's kind of true. Because you've spent four years working for this moment, this race, and you're saying everything I've spent four years or longer, and people have poured into me, has to be justified by my performance in this moment. But think about how often we project that in other areas of our lives. I have to justify my existence with my production, with my achievement, with what it is that I do, or with how I live my life. And so, the paranoid tendency tends to worry about what happens if we don't perform, if we can't continue, or if we don't do enough.

Now, as I said, Jesus was defined not by what He did, but by this phrase in verse 17 of Matthew three. "'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.'" In the Bible, Jesus is presented not just as a Savior, but also as an older brother. In Hebrews chapter two, verse eleven, we get this idea. It says this, "Both the one who makes people holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters." And then in Romans chapter eight, we also have this idea. This is in verse 29. It says this, "For

those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.”

So why does the Bible call Jesus an older brother? Because in a sense, some of us have had older siblings who weren't very helpful in our lives. But I think the idea is that as an older brother, he went before us, and by going before us we get the same privileges that he gets. So, when he's called the beloved Son of God in whom God is well pleased, by relationship to him we are also those children of God. Meaning, if you've come to a point where you've said, I trust Jesus Christ as my Savior, I acknowledge my sin, my need for Jesus to be my Savior, then you have also come to a point where you can say, I am loved by God, and I am God's beloved son.

Now what's true about a child? And I'm not thinking like an adult child, even a teenage child, I'm thinking of a little child. If you have a little child, a baby in your house, what you don't do is you don't say, oh, you know, I've been taking care of you, getting up at night, feeding you, providing for you. I've been doing all this stuff. When are you going to pull your own weight? I mean, you just don't do that with a little child. Now, you might with a teenager at some point or an adult child, but with a little child, you don't do that. You take delight in the child. You love the child. You're enamored with the child being in your house.

And yet what we often tend to want to do is say, but I have to earn, I have to perform. And what we even do spiritually sometimes is say maybe the world's definition of my performance doesn't matter, but I still need to perform for God rather than living from this identity as a loved child with whom God is well pleased. How do you think it would change how you lived if you knew that you were seen by the God of the universe as his beloved son or his beloved daughter, and he was well pleased with you?

Brennan Manning writes about this, and here's what he says. He says, “God loves you unconditionally as you are, not as you should be because none of us are as we should be.” Brennan Manning says in another place, he says, “Define yourself radically as one beloved by God, this is the true self. Every other identity is an illusion. God's love for you and His choice of you constitutes your worth.” And what that means is that if you and I understand that our true sense of self comes from how God sees us, then when we perform, we don't perform with the compulsive, narcissistic, and paranoid tendencies that can be destructive.

You see, defining ourselves by what we do is like sand in the shoes. It may not seem like that big of a deal, but at some point, it will become destructive to our very being because we won't be able to continue to perform all the days of our lives. You may think, well, that's somebody else's issue. I can. But the truth is, all of us age, and all of us hit a point where we can't perform anymore. And we may be able to say, well, I looked back, and I didn't, but that is still an insecure identity compared to saying I'm loved by God.

You know, I mentioned earlier the movie *Chariots of Fire* and the concept of Sabbath. Sometimes what people in the church have done with Sabbath is they've turned it into this idea that says, you take one hour and go to church on Sunday, and that's the idea of Sabbath. And then you use Sunday to do what you do the rest of the week. But what if the idea of Sabbath, it's one of the Ten Commandments by the way, was a gift from God to say, I want you to stop working for a day, a week, so that you don't use that day to accomplish what you use all the other days, to remind yourself that you are more than what you produce.

And again, remember, it isn't just your job. You may take off your work, but then still use a day to say I'm producing everything I couldn't do during the week because I had too much to do. But what if you just said this is a gift from God to say I'm stopping the idea of production for a day? What if you lived with a daily end-line, with a weekly finish line, where you could say, at the end of a day, at the end of a week, here's where I stop because I want to remind myself that it isn't about what I produce. What if you had an annual finish line where you said, at this point of the year, I know I've done enough. But when we live with the compulsive narcissist mistake and paranoid tendencies of an identity that's formed by what we do, we don't feel like it's ever enough, like we can ever stop. And it's almost like Jesus is saying, here's an invitation.

Now, I wish I could tell you today that I had three simple steps to live as a love child because my guess is there's many of us who say, I kind of know this, but I can't help myself. Okay? I like to produce. I like to produce in whatever area of my life. And so, I wish I could just say, here are the simple three steps to do this.

But I think if you come back to the text, we see the real answer. Jesus said it is written and then he quotes Deuteronomy eight. And what does he say? Man shall not live by bread alone, but by what? Every word that precedes from the mouth of God. Where do I get my identity? Where can you get your identity? Only by letting the Scripture so permeate our psyche that we say my truest sense of self is as a love child of God, not with what I do. And without that, what will happen without that reminder, without that sense of letting God's word work in you or me, we will find ourselves being compulsive, narcissistic, and paranoid all the time.

But the invitation of God is to say, you can live as a love child. Which way would you rather live? Now, I don't know how big of a temptation this is for you, but I would guess just from conversations I have with people all the time and living in the society in which we live, that it's really hard not to want to be defined by what we produce, by what we achieve, and by what we accomplish.

But there's a better way. That's the way of Jesus. If you're here today, and you've always thought that Christianity was about performing for God, that the story of Christianity, the message of Christianity is really that Jesus has performed for you, and that He invites you to

be a loved child. And you can enter that by simply acknowledging your sin before God and your need for a Savior.

If today you're here and you're saying, well, I believe that, but I still find myself being drawn to define myself by what I do. Maybe today is just your day to say, God, I'm going to sit in your word enough to be defined by what you say about me. I'm going to have an end-line, a finish line, and intentionally be nonproductive for a while each week so that I can remind myself that it isn't about what I do, but about how you love me.

God, I pray that we wouldn't be drawn into our adversaries and phishing schemes and find ourselves wanting to define who we are by what we do. But we would be able to define ourselves by what you've said about who we are and what our real worth and value are. And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.