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**Title:** *Identity Theft - "I Am What Others Think"*

**Scripture:** Matthew 4:1-11

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I saw a story a while back about a man who took some of his money and put it into cryptocurrency. And he did this and evidently, he put millions of dollars into this. And in order to authenticate it, he had to give a code word that went in, and it was supposed to never be able to be replicated or something. And he figured because he put so much money in, it was a risk if he wrote it down that somebody else would find it. So, he thought, I'll remember this clearly because there's so much at stake. And so, then he did that. And then when he went to redeem it, he typed in his code, and he had the wrong code. He couldn't remember exactly what he had put in.

And what happened was evidently the number of times that he could put in a wrong code started to add up, and he started to get the message, you have five more tries, four more tries, three more tries, and all of a sudden, he's down to one try left. And this is when I saw this story. It basically said he wasn't going to try because he couldn't remember and then he would lose all this money in perpetuity if he put it in the wrong code.

And I don't know how you have dealt with preserving your identity or keeping your stuff safe. You probably have passwords and passwords upon passwords. And if you're normal, at least as I understand it, what you do is you try to use one password for a lot of things and then you have a few variations of it that you use for other things that are a little more needed to be cryptic. And then you hit that point where you're like, I have no stinking idea what password is supposed to go for this thing.

And what happens for some of us is we spend more time and put more effort into trying to preserve our financial identity than we do our spiritual identity. And the reason that's a challenge is because we don't tend to think about our spiritual identity as being that significant.

And what we're doing over these weeks is we're looking at Matthew four versus 1 through 11, where Jesus was taken into the wilderness, led into the wilderness to be tempted. But what we've said is that because Matthew four follows Matthew three, Matthew three ends with the declaration of Jesus' identity. Jesus is said to be the beloved Son of God and then Satan comes and tempts Him in the wilderness.

And each of these temptations, if you will, is a temptation for Jesus to put his identity into something other than his true identity as a love son of God. Now, some of us may hear that and say, well, Jesus has an identity. He obviously is God's son, but that doesn't mean that I have that kind of identity. But John chapter one says this, verse 12, "Yet to all who did receive

him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become the children of God." And what that means very simply is if you believe in Jesus Christ, if you've acknowledged Jesus as your savior said, I'm sinful, I need a savior, then according to John one, you become a child of God. And that means that you can say, I am a loved, beloved son, a beloved daughter of the God of the universe. That is my true identity. And yet what we tend to do is be led away to something simpler.

Now, we talked last week a little bit about this idea of Satan tempting. And there are three titles used in this passage for Satan, Satan, the devil, and tempter. And we talked some about that last week, so I'm not going to repeat it. But here's what C.S. Lewis said about Satan, because sometimes we think that the satanic or demonic things are always these huge spiritual warfare issues, and there is that category. But often the way that Satan tries to disrupt us is with things that seem fairly mundane.

Here's how C.S. Lewis put it in his book, *The Screwtape Letters*, which he writes from kind of a demon perspective. But he says this, "Indeed, the safest road to Hell is the gradual one - the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts." And what he's doing basically here is he's just saying that a lot of times the way that Satan tries to undo our lives is not with the dramatic, not with the horribly wrong things, but with the subtle things that seem like they're pretty good. And identity is probably one of those things that happens to us in our lives very easily.

Now, I know that just when I say today, we're going to talk about I am what people think of me or I am what people think about me. You see, the first temptation is I am what I do, where Jesus was tempted with this simple phrase, why don't you make bread? And He says, man doesn't live by bread alone, but by every word that comes out of the mouth of God. Then Satan takes him, we're told, to this high mountain and or to the top of the temple. And he says, basically, jump down, prove yourself to be the son of God. But when I say that some of us might be tempted by what others think, here's what I guess would happen for many of us. And that is you'd say, well, that used to be true when I was like in middle school or high school, but I'm an adult now. I don't really give in to that so much.

So let me just tell you a couple of quick stories about how I've seen this, even in me, in my life. So, some of you may know a year or so ago I had a mishap, and I wasn't supposed to put any weight on my left leg for about two months. And so, I didn't walk for an extended period of time. And then I was cleared to walk, and I finally went out to walk. And where I live, I often will run or walk in that area. And if you run or walk in the same place all the time, you see the same people, the people who walk their dogs, the people who run, the people who walk, they're all out in the same area. And so over time, you know who's who of these people.

And there's this one woman who walks where I live, and I will just for the sake of fact, say she's considerably older than me. And she does the speed walk thing when she goes, and

she wears this bright yellow security vest to make sure that nobody misses her. You can't miss her. She has a bright yellow security vest on. And so, when I run and she's out, I'll just zip right by her. And it's kind of like, yeah, I'm still fast. But when I went out to walk after I had not walked, I'm walking, and I turn and look, and there's the security vest women.

She's gaining on me. And I'm having one of these moments where I'm saying, oh no you don't. Now, what's going on inside of me that I care a lick about what she thinks, about whether or not she's gaining on me? She didn't know I had been injured. Yeah, she's seen me run many times, and all of a sudden, I'm standing here saying I am not letting her gain on me because I care what she thinks evidently.

Now that is a goofy example, but I could tell you things that are maybe closer to heart. Here's one. My kids were a little younger. I remember taking my kids to the park. And if you've ever taken a group of kids, we had a group of kids to the park, sometimes they get into it with each other. My boys would sometimes get into it with each other. And I remember sitting sometimes in the park when my kids would have embarrassing interactions with one another and thinking, I'm not going to tell anyone they're my kids. Because I don't want to admit that I'm the kind of parent who has kids who sometimes get into knockdown, drag-out, yell at each other, name-calling fights.

Now, here's my point. You may think, oh, this is a middle school issue, a high school issue, a young person issue. But what happens as we age is we just change a little bit the people that we care about. Sometimes it's people that are somewhat imaginary to us. It's just people, and sometimes it's real people in our lives that we say, I care what they think about me.

And what happens here is that Jesus is taken to this high peak where he's told to jump down and show that the angels of God will rescue him, that He is the son of God. Here's a modern picture of the temple, and this is probably similar to where Jesus would have been taken by Satan and told, if you're really the Son of God, jump down. And then he quotes Psalm 91. So, he uses Scripture to say he's commanded his angels to have charge over you, jump down, and show everyone that you're the Son of God. And the temple would have been crowded all the time.

So, this in our day and age would be a little bit like going to PNC Park, standing on top of a grandstand during a pirate game, and saying, I'm going to jump, and the angels are going to catch me. Actually, it's not exactly like that. There aren't that many people at PNC Park. So, you're going to your stadium, but not during a football game. Oh, come on. And so, you jump off during a Steelers game or a Taylor Swift concert, whatever it is, and say the angels will catch me.

And this is a moment when it's important to understand something about how God works. God never does miracles just as a naked display of his power. If you read through the Bible,

what you'll see is that miracles are not just God saying, let me show you this cool trick that I can do. They are always reversals of the brokenness of our world. They're always the restoration of something of the created intended order.

And why that's important is because when Jesus says, don't put the Lord your God to the test, verse seven, what he's doing is he's saying, you can take me up here and tell me to do a trick, but what you're really doing is you're saying, I want to test what God is doing. and our temptation and part of the temptation here is to say not just I'm spiritual so God will catch me, but there's also a temptation at least in part, to say I care what other people think.

Now, I know some of us may say, well, I don't care what anybody thinks, but if that's you, you're probably a psychopath. And that's not just a joke because it's natural to care what people think. And certainly, if we can be inflated by praise, we can be deflated by criticism. And I'm not advocating here that you say I don't care what anybody thinks, but I'm wanting us to see that there's an unhealth to being driven by what people think in our lives rather than being able to say I receive.

And when I say it's somewhat natural, think about a kid. When a kid starts to grow, what happens? At first, they say, no, Mom, and Dad. But what's one of their favorite phrases when they're just you know, kind of in this little zone right here? Look at me. And why do they say, look at me all the time? The reason they say look at me is because they want you to affirm them and celebrate them. It's not good enough that they learn how to dance to the song. They want you to look at them while they dance to the song. It's not enough that they jump off a rock. They want you to see them jump off a rock. So, you'll say, good job. Way to go. You're amazing. Look at what you did. And what happens as we age is we just change the desire to say, look at me. And again, some of that is okay and natural. But there's a place where it flips into something else.

It was Lewis Smedes who once put it like this. He said our temptation to look good, make good, and be good forms a holy trinity in our lives, basically. And he said they make good goods but terrible gods. The temptation to look good, to make good, and to be good. And that's what a lot of us do in our lives as we orient our lives around those things.

Now, why do I say that Jesus was tempted by what people think? Here's what we read. Verse six, "If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down. For it is written: 'He will command his angels concerning you,'" This is the part where he quotes Psalm 91. "And they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone." And so, what he does very simply here is he takes them to this high point, and he says throw yourself down surrounded by people so everyone will know that you are indeed spectacular. You are the son of God.

Here's how Henri Nouwen writes about this. He says, "Jesus was exposed precisely the temptation to do something spectacular, something that could win him great applause. 'Throw yourself from the parapet of the temple and let the angels catch you and carry you in their arms.' But Jesus refused to be a stuntman. He did not come to prove himself. He did not come to walk on hot coals, swallow fire, or put his hand in the lion's mouth to demonstrate that he had something worthwhile to say. 'Don't put the Lord your God to the test.' he said."

See, Henri Nouwen says that Jesus' temptation here was to be spectacular, to be made much. And our temptation can be to say, I want people to affirm me, to make much of me. I want to avoid criticism because I want to be well thought of. And when the tempter says throw yourself down, there's a little sense of saying, I want to know that I'm special, that I can do things that nobody else does, that I have skills or abilities, or I'm special in some way. And again, this is a temptation to say, I want to know that there's something about my life that's unique.

I saw that Kim Kardashian recently said something. We're going all over the place. C.S. Lewis. You know, Lewis meets Kim Kardashian. Here's what she said. She said, If I thought that eating poop would make me younger, I might eat it. I just might. Now, I don't know how that strikes you. I realize her financial empire is tied to her appearance. I realize there are a few different things going on here, but there's probably something in most of us that would say I would do something that is objectionable in order to be in a place where I could be well thought of by people. And that is the essence in some ways of what we're talking about here. It's that need to say, I want to be affirmed, I want to be special, I want to be celebrated.

But there's one other aspect of this, and this is Jesus I think, wanting to be spiritual or the temptation to be spiritual. And here's why I say this. Again, Satan quotes Psalm 91 and he says there won't be anything that'll strike your foot. And if you go back and look at Psalm 91, where this is quoted from, he quotes verses 11 and 12, but the verses around it talk about how no pestilence will harm you if you trust God. There will be no danger or nothing will harm you. Verse 11, "For He will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways; for they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone."

So, does this mean that if you follow God, you'll never stub your toe? That's kind of how Satan wants Jesus to take this. And he says just prove yourself. Prove that you are indeed the Son of God. That you are so spiritual that you can throw yourself off this high point and nothing will happen to you. This would be a little bit like saying I'm going to go out and walk and stand in the middle of 79 and say, the angels have it. We don't recommend that, by the way.

You see, the problem is Satan's misusing Scripture. And one of the reasons we get in trouble in life is because we misuse or misunderstand what the Bible actually says. And what Satan is doing is he's taking this promise from Psalm 91 and he's making it absolute so that people

will hear this and say, well, if I trust God, then nothing bad will happen to me. Therefore, if anything bad happens to me, either the Psalter or the Psalmist was wrong, God is wrong, or the people didn't really trust God.

And you've heard this kind of thinking at different times in your life. And the way it ties into wanting people to think well of us is we want people to think we're spiritual. And so, sometimes what people will do is try to hide the hardships of their lives or the difficulties because they think if I'm really spiritual, I won't actually have this problem. And when that happens, we're actually not understanding how Jesus countered this. He says, don't put the Lord your God to the test.

Derek Kidner, who wrote a great commentary on the Psalms, put it this way about what God was actually saying in Psalm 91, and what it means. He says, "It will not approach you," meaning this hardship, "without my permission and design. And my design is always good, even if I permit an arrow to take their life. This is a statement of exact and sweeping providence, not a charm against adversity." See, sometimes what we want is we want God to be a charm against adversity. But this is an understanding of saying, don't test God. God's ways are good, even if you don't understand them.

And notice at the end of the passage, verse 11, the angels actually did come and minister to Jesus. The promise came true right in the passage, just not the way Satan said that it would. So, you may say, okay, so if he misquoted Jesus or misused the Psalms, he didn't misquote Jesus, misused the Psalm, Satan did, and Jesus corrected that. What does that have to do with you and me and the tendency to base our identity on what people think of us? Glad you asked.

So, in First Corinthians four, Paul addresses this issue. And here's what Paul says. First Corinthians chapter four, verse six says, "Now, brothers and sisters, I have applied these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, so that you may learn from us the meaning of the saying, 'Do not go beyond what is written.' Then you will not be puffed up in being a follower of one of us over against the other."

What was happening in First Corinthians four was that the people in the church at Corinth were lining up behind different leaders and trying to say because I follow Apollos, because I follow Paul, because I follow these different people, I have value. And he says don't be puffed up. But the word in the original language for puffed up is a word that can mean puffed up to the point of something being painful, to be vulnerable. And so, he's talking here about how we let our opinions, the opinions of people, and our opinions of the opinions of people actually cause us to be puffed up.

And so, I have this balloon, and here's what this looks like. Maybe just start with an example of somebody. A young kid goes to school, middle school, high school, or college, and the

teacher or the professor pulls them aside after class and says, you have a real gift in writing. And they say I do. And then they go to their sports practice after school and the coach says, you know, I love the way that you make the corner kick. And so, you really are a phenomenal person at this particular thing. And they say oh, I'm really doing well right now.

Then they go home, and they decide that they're going to post something on Insta or TikTok. And so, they post something, they get all kinds of likes, and then they post something else, and it doesn't go very well. And then their mom says, what did you do with your hair today? And they're like ugh. And one of their siblings tells them that they're dumb, and now they're back to having to start all over the next day. But maybe the next day the teacher or the professor doesn't say, you're a great writer. And so now they're starting in this deficit.

And we tend to think, well, that's a middle school problem again. But as adults, I think it can still happen where you say, oh, if somebody tells me something good about me, then I get some puffing up. Somebody tells me I'm a good parent. Somebody tells me I'm spiritual or a good friend. They like the way I look. But here's the problem. As many times as you get those things, the balloon never tires, and it just keeps emptying out and you keep needing more and more affirmation. And so, you get puffed up. And here's the problem, even if you're really good at everything and you do everything super well and you get almost all affirmation and you shut out almost all criticism, what happens is because of the nature of being puffed up, you're still vulnerable because when something's puffed up, it's more likely to pop. You're driven to try to keep it puffed up all the time.

And sometimes it can even be painful when something is pushed to its limit. And so, it's a little bit like this. You get words of affirmation and more of them, and you just keep adding. You get to a point, you say, but I need more. And all of a sudden, it pops, and it's gone. Now, what a lot of us do is we say, well, what I can do is I can just simply say, it doesn't matter what anybody says about me.

And here's in First Corinthians where we see how Paul is handling this idea of being puffed up in verse three. He says, "I care very little if I'm judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I don't even judge myself." And a lot of us, what we do is we stop at the beginning of verse three and we say, I don't care what anybody says. But the problem with that is what's true for most of us is we have this ingrained need to be affirmed, to be celebrated. And if you simply go and sit in front of a mirror and you say I'm good enough, I'm smart enough, and doggone it, people like me, you're not going to fill your own heart with enough affirmation.

And if you got that reference, you are old. And the reference works whether you got it or not because self-affirmation doesn't fill the void. And so, what he says is, I don't even judge myself. Notice that phrase in First Corinthians four. He says it isn't that I've made my own standard, made my own way. In verse four, he says, "My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me."

Now, notice what he says. He says, my conscience is clear, but it's not because I'm innocent. It's because the Lord judges me. Go back to Jesus. Go back to John chapter one, verse 12. Why are you a child of God? Because you believe in Jesus. It's God's judgment that actually frees you. And so, the way that you and I can get free from living for the approval and the applause of people is by having a greater applause and approval that we know we have from God based on what Jesus Christ has given us. And you see, without that, what will happen is you will be a balloon that is vulnerable, painful, and driven always trying to keep everybody happy with you.

Now, again, I'm not suggesting that there is nothing in your world that matters in terms of affirmation. I said this earlier, but if you don't care about what anybody says, then there's a chance again that you are somebody who has so deadened yourself to what people think that you're not caring for what anybody says. But the point isn't so much that. It's saying don't make it your God, don't make looking good, being good, making good into more than it is, but instead make it a good, good thing in your life.

But instead, say but my heart is warmed by the fact that God loves me based on what Jesus Christ has done. I'm not innocent. God has seen me at my worst and has chosen to love me as a child. You see, what that does with criticism is it allows you to say you can criticize me because if you criticize me, the truth is you might be right. And the stuff that you don't know, frankly, is a whole lot worse than the stuff you do know. But God has seen it all and chosen to call me his beloved son. Anyway, that's what Jesus Christ does.

You see, sometimes we talk about salvation in churches, like it's this future thing, and what we need to do is believe in Jesus so that one day we can go to this perfect eternity. And there's truth to that. But salvation has immediate implications or ramifications. And one of them is that you can say I know that God has loved me because of Jesus Christ. I am a beloved son, a beloved daughter. So therefore, I don't have to go up and down based on the criticism or affirmation of even those people that are closest to me. But I can live in the glow of the fire of God's love, and that'll free me from an identity that's just whipsawed all over by what other people think.

Let's pray together. God, I ask today that you would help each of us to understand that if we come to acknowledge Jesus as our Savior, we have the power to become your children, your beloved sons and daughters. So free us from the temptation to be spectacular and special, to look good, make good, and be good. But instead, let us live from a true sense of who you've called us and made us to be. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.