

LIVE|14 – Mistaken Identity

“I Am What I Do” (Part 1 of 4)

Colossians 3:1-17

Mark Vroegop

On May 17th of this year, Admiral William McRaven, Commander of US Special Operations Command, gave a commencement address at the University of Texas. Admiral McRaven has been a Navy SEAL for 38 years, and he used his training as a Navy SEAL to encourage and motivate 8,000 graduates. He lists ten life lessons. They are all insightful, but let me read two of them to you:

Lesson #1: Every morning in basic SEAL training, my instructors, who at the time were all Vietnam veterans, would show up in my barracks room and the first thing they would inspect was your bed. If you did it right, the corners would be square, the covers pulled tight, the pillow centered just under the headboard and the extra blanket folded neatly at the foot of the rack—that's Navy talk for bed. It was a simple task, mundane at best. But every morning we were required to make our bed to perfection. It seemed a little ridiculous at the time, particularly in light of the fact that we were aspiring to be real warriors, tough battle-hardened SEALs, but the wisdom of this simple act has been proven to me many times over.

If you make your bed every morning you will have accomplished the first task of the day. It will give you a small sense of pride, and it will encourage you to do another task and another and another. By the end of the day, that one task completed will have turned into many tasks completed. Making your bed will also reinforce the fact that little things in life matter. If you can't do the little things right, you will never do the big things right . . . If you want to change the world, start off by making your bed.

Lesson #4: Several times a week, the instructors would line up the class and do a uniform inspection. It was exceptionally thorough. Your hat had to be perfectly starched, your uniform immaculately pressed, and your belt buckle shiny and void of any smudges. But it seemed that no matter how much effort you put into starching your hat, or pressing your uniform, or polishing your belt buckle, it just wasn't good enough. The instructors would find "something" wrong.

For failing the uniform inspection, the student had to run, fully clothed, into the surf-zone and then, wet from head to toe, roll around on the beach until every part of your body was covered with sand. The effect was known as a "sugar cookie." You stayed in that uniform the rest of the day—cold, wet and sandy. There were many students who just couldn't accept the fact that all their effort was in vain. That no matter how hard they tried to get the uniform right, it was unappreciated. Those students didn't make it through training. Those students didn't understand the purpose of the drill. You were never going to succeed. You were never going to have a perfect uniform.

Sometimes, no matter how well you prepare or how well you perform, you still end up as a sugar cookie. It's just the way life is sometimes. If you want to change the world, get over being a sugar cookie and keep moving forward.¹

¹ <http://online.wsj.com/articles/william-h-mcraven-life-lessons-from-navy-seal-training-1400884791>

Why did this address catch my attention? Because when someone is introduced as a Navy SEAL, there is immediately an “identity” that comes with that title. But that “identity” does not just happen; it is built as the SEAL-identity eclipses the other, competing identities. One might even argue that the SEALs are elite and highly effective fighting force, not just because of their training, but because there is a powerful new identity that is central to who they are, not just what they do. In other words, the SEALs do not just train soldiers. They give them a compelling new identity.

Mistaken Identity

Today we are starting a four-week series on the issue of identity. It is one of our annual spotlight events (like THINK, SERVE and REACH), and our goal is to see what the Bible says about something very relevant and applicable to our lives. We take a topic – such as identity – and examine it through multiple passages of Scriptures, and our theme for this year is “mistaken identity.” Over the next four weeks we are going to examine four critical areas:

- Week 1: “I Am What I Do”
- Week 2: “I Am What I Look Like”
- Week 3: “I Am What I Have”
- Week 4: “I Am What I’ve Been Through”

Through the series we are going to use these common areas of mistaken identity in order to help us understand and embrace a biblical identity – one that is rooted in the gospel through a personal relationship with Jesus.

We also have produced a great small group series to maximize your learning and experience. However, in order to benefit from this video, you have to be in a Small Group. So our goal is not just to give you content but to encourage you to consider joining a Small Group. Additionally, since this is a shorter series, this is also a great time to extend an invitation to someone who you have been meaning to ask to church. Finally, I hope that this series will whet your appetite for additional learning, reading, and training. We are not going to solve all of our identity challenges in four weeks, but my prayer is that God will help us to take some significant steps in conforming our understanding of identity in light of what He says about us.

Our Identity Problem: Reading the Wrong Script

Our text today is Colossians 3, and it serves as the solution to the issue of a mistaken identity. Before we jump into that text and see the connection to work, we need to start by looking at the issue of identity. I do not want to assume that we are all on the same page when I talk about this.

When I use the word “identity,” I mean to ask ourselves some important and deeply personal questions: “Who I am?” “Where do I belong?” “What do I believe to be true about the world?” “Why am I here?” These are huge questions. They relate to what we value about ourselves and others, how we think about ourselves, and what makes us who we are. Identity is the essence of who we really are, and there is something powerful about it.

Think of the times in life that you thought about your identity. Think of the times that you have asked yourself “Who am I?” or “Where do I belong?” For most of us those questions surfaced because of something traumatic or painful: a relationship conflict, a job loss, an expected illness or death, a difficult break-up, a failure of some kind in ourself or someone else, or a time when something we thought was going to fulfill us

turned out to be less than what we had hoped. These questions can also surface in the midst of good things: a new job or career, getting married, the addition of children into our home, having grandchildren, a spiritual awakening, or a moment of conviction.

We often think of “identity issues” as something of a struggle within the teenage years. But the truth is simply that teenagers are less skilled at hiding their identity issues. Adults have identity issues, but we are better at masking them. Traumatic moments only uncover what is already lurking under the surface of every human being – regardless of age. Identity is fundamental to who we are as humans.

The other significant challenge with identity is the fact that we do not live in an identity-safe world. Our world is broken, and there are many competing ways to think about who you are, why you are here, what is really valuable, and what will really satisfy. Tim Keller uses the term “narrative” to describe this reality. He says we cannot function in the world without working answers to the big questions like “what should human life look like,” “what is wrong with the world,” and “what can be done to make it right.” This world-story or worldview is how we explain and define the world around us.²

Our world is filled with competing ways of thinking as scripts – a narrative or message that moves us to action. Mark Yarhouse wrote a book with a burden to highlight “God’s script” or the “gospel Script” against the scripts offered to us in the world, especially in regards to the script of “homosexuality.” Yarhouse defines “scripts” this way:

When I use the term ‘script,’ I’m referring to a way in which we come to understand ourselves and our lives. Scripts reflect the expectations of our culture in terms of how we are supposed to live and how we should relate and behave. . . . It is important to understand how scripts function in the lives of actors. Actors read from scripts all the time. They use scripts to determine how their character thinks and feels and relates to others. [We] similarly look for scripts to read from to make sense of who we are.³

The noteworthy point is simply that there are “scripts” behind our understanding of who we are and the good and bad things that we do. Our world is not mono-scripted, nor is it script-safe. In fact, a contrary script is the essence of temptation. The very first temptation in the Garden of Eden involved a script, and it sounded like this:

“⁴ But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not surely die. ⁵ For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” Genesis 3:4–5 (ESV)

At the tower of Babel, it sounded like this:

“⁴ Then they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth.” Genesis 11:4 (ESV)

With the worship of the Golden Calf, it sounded like:

“These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!” Exodus 32:4 (ESV)

And when Jesus was tempted by the Devil himself, there was also a “script:”

² Tim Keller, *Every Good Endeavor* (New York: Dutton, 2012), 157.

³ Mark A. Yarhouse, *Homosexuality and the Christian* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 2010), 48.

⁸ Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. ⁹ And he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." Matthew 4:8–9 (ESV)

So the very first thing that I want you to wrestle with and be aware of today is this idea of "identity-script." Over the next four weeks, I want you to listen for the cultural scripts that are all around you. Part of the problem is that we do not realize the "scripts" that we are reading. I have said it this way before: "the problem with our thinking is that we don't think about our thinking." And when it comes to scripts, the problem is that we have identity myopia – we are not looking beyond what is right in front of us. My challenge is for you to be "script-aware."

Let me give you a few examples. Teenagers, what is the "script" in your school or with your friends regarding who is cool, what is popular, and what is important? Adults, what is the "script" in your workplace regarding who is recognized, who is rewarded, or who is successful? Parents, what is the "script" behind what your children want to do, want you to buy, and what to wear? Has anyone else heard this statement: "Dad, all my friends have _____." Singles, what is the "script" of the conversations that you have when you are hanging out with your friends regarding achievement, success, and relationships? Women, when you stand in front of your wardrobe, what is the script that runs through your head? Men, when you "hit the gym," what is the script that is all around you? Finally, let me speak to those of you who would not describe yourself as a Christian. What has been the "script" of your life? What is really valuable to you? Maybe part of the reason you are here today is because you are going through "script" crisis.

I hope that this series will help all of us to listen more carefully to the scripts around us. And I hope that you will see that "mistaken identity" – living in a way that God never intended – is due to listening and reading the wrong script. Or to put it positively: The key to becoming "who you truly are" and "finding yourself" is not following your heart but following the right script – God's script.⁴

God's Solution: "Who?" before "How?"

So how does the gospel, the Bible, and a relationship with Jesus relate to this issue of mistaken identity? We are going to unpack this over the next four weeks, but let me introduce here with this summary: "who?" before "how?" In other words, the Bible invites us to understand who we are before we think about how we live. One very prominent cultural "script" is believing that who I am is what I do. But the Bible inverts that.

In the Bible, actions follow identity. How you live comes from who you are. And throughout the Scriptures, especially in Colossians 3, indicatives precede imperatives. Now, some of you may need a grammar review so let me remind you that an indicative is an expression of fact. But an imperative is a command or something we are to do. To say that indicatives precede imperative is to say that believers in Jesus are called to "be who they really are." The "who?" question must be answered before the "how?" question.

Let me show you this in Colossians 3.

If you read verse 1, you can see it very clearly. Notice that the statement of fact "if you have been raised" precedes the command "seek the things that are above." Position precedes practice. The spiritual position associated with Christ's victory becomes the basis or the reason for seeking things that are above.

⁴ I am indebted to Dustin Crowe for this helpful and memorable summation of the issue of scripts.

You can also see this in verse 3 where Paul talks about how the believer has died with Christ and that his or her life is "hidden with Christ in God." And that is the reason for the imperative to "set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on the earth." The order different in verse 2-3 but the argument is the same: being precedes doing, "who" before "how?", indicatives before imperatives."

When you understand this, you will see it all over the New Testament. Three examples:

"We know that our old self was crucified with him (indicative)...let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body" (imperative). (Romans 6:6,12)

"Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh (indicative)...walk by the Spirit and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh" (imperative). (Galatians 5:24, 16)

"Having been set free from sin {and} have become slaves of righteousness (indicative)...so now present your members as slaves to righteousness"(imperative). (Romans 6:18-19)

This "being before doing" paradigm is really the essence of the gospel or the Good News. It is foundational to understanding Christianity. The Good News of the Bible is simply that my actions are only part of the problem with my relationship with God. The ultimate issue is not just what I have done but who I am. And the message of the Bible is that Jesus makes it possible for people to be "born again" (John 3:3). Through believing His death and resurrection and trusting in His sacrifice for our sins on the cross, God changes not just what we do but who we are.

In C.S. Lewis' book *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, there is an English schoolboy named Eustace who does not want to be in Narnia and who makes everyone's life miserable. He is a self-absorbed brat who complains about everything. At one point in the story, he wanders away and is turned into a fire-breathing dragon. Eustace tries to redeem himself by helping his friends in any way that he can. He hates being a dragon, and he tries to cut away the scales of his dragon-life, only to discover that beneath each layer of scales is another layer. His self-surgery is pointless and ineffective. All the while, Aslan – the Lion and Messiah-like figure – watches until Eustace comes to an end of himself. Then Aslan unfolds his claws and cut the scales off Eustace. "The first tear he made was so deep that I thought it had gone right into my heart . . . the only thing that made me bear it I was the pleasure of seeing the stuff peel off." And when Aslan is done, Eustace is restored to being a human, but the "new" Eustace is never the same again. Aslan had changed who he was.

If you picked up one of the LIVE|14 wrist-bands, the verse on there is 2 Corinthians 5:17 which says, "¹⁷ Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come." That verse means that the effect of being born again is a total change in being and a totally new orientation in life. That is why Paul says in verse 4 that "your life is hidden with Christ in God." There is a new reality, a new power, and a new identity because of Christ. Jesus changes people's lives by changing their identities. Notice that Paul even describes this as a contrast between the "old self" and the "new self" in verses 9-10, and that their actions flow from who they really are. Paul is not saying that they are to actively "put on" the new self. Rather, their actions are a by-product of having put off the old and having put on the new. The new self has already been put on; the key is living like it. "Who?" precedes "How?"

A new identity is formed in and through Christ. Verse 10 even describes it as "being renewed after the image of its creator." We will look extensively at this phrase next week, but I just want you to notice that the

new identity is directly connected to an image other than ourselves. In this way the Christian's identity is directly tied to who Christ is. His identity becomes ours since we belong to him.

The key, therefore, is to live through this new identity. Colossians 3 describes it as "setting the mind on things above" (3:2) and "seeking the things that are above" (3:1). In Romans 8 and after, Paul says, "there is no condemnation for the those who are in Christ Jesus" (8:1) (indicative); he says "those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit" (8:5). Once you understand your identity and who you are in Christ, you must continually read from the "hidden in Christ" script.

This new identity and new script as regarding who you are dismantles every other category in life by which we would identify ourselves. Look at what Paul says in Colossians 3:11.

¹¹ Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all. "

What a sweeping and stunning statement! Paul redefines the categories as we know them. Whether it is ethnicity ("Greek or Jew"), religious heritage ("circumcised and uncircumcised"), culture ("barbarian, Scythian") or economic ("slave or free"), there is a new identity that trumps all of them: "Christ is all and in all." This phrase grabbed my attention. What does it mean?

Interestingly, the phrase "Christ is all, and in all" is only used here in Colossians 3. There are three other times when "all in all" is used. In 1 Corinthians 15:28 it is used for the way that God will make everything submit to Him at the end of age so that "God may be all and in all." In Ephesians 1:23 the church is called the "fullness of him who fills all in all." And in 1 Corinthians 12:6 it means the way in which the spiritual gifts operate, such that God works "all in all." Putting all of this together, the meaning in Colossians 3 is that Christ is everything, supreme, ultimate, and central. It means that He is the meaning under any other meaning, the essence of all reality, and the center of all sense of identity. The church will have people from different ethnicities, religious backgrounds, cultures, and socio-economic statuses, but there is an identity more central than all of the other things by which we might define identity. Christ is all and in all. It means who Jesus is and what He has done has become everything. Or, to put it in terms of Colossians 3:4 – "Christ is your life!"

So how do you come to know the God's script for your life? Well, that is what becoming a follower of Jesus is all about. That is why we read the Scriptures, pray, worship together, and do life together. That is why you should memorize the Bible, why you should read the book by Jerry Bridges, and why you should listen intently to what God is saying this morning. God has not left us without His "script" for our identity. We have everything we need for life and godliness (2 Peter 1:3).

God's identity script for our lives means, to borrow from Jerry Bridges' chapters, that we are in Christ, justified, adopted, a new creation, a servant of Christ, and not yet perfect. It means that we belong to Jesus. It means that you will never hear the following from Jesus: "Go play somewhere, I'm busy" or "I just don't think it's gonna work out between us" or "I don't care" or "Its not you, it's me but we're through" or "Good job on _____ but what about _____?" or "Who are you again?" or "Beat it."⁵

⁵ <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/gospeldrivenchurch/2014/06/30/things-jesus-will-never-say-to-you/>

The beauty of the gospel is that it changes who we are before it changes how we live. God's script for our identity is all about "who?" before "how?"

Application: God's Script on Work

We have spent a lot of time working through the subject of identity, and I want to briefly apply this concept of identity to the things that we do or to the issue of work. What is God's identity script on work? Let me give you a few things to think about:

1. Work is good thing but a bad god.

Next week we will look at the way that we are made in God's image, but central to that concept is the value of work. God has made human beings different than all the created order. He has given us individual talents and abilities. He has supplied the resources. The Creation Mandate in Genesis is to fill the earth, subdue it, and have dominion over every living thing on the earth (Genesis 1:28). Work, even after the entrance of sin in the world, is good. But when our work shapes our basic identity, when it defines who we are, it has become an idol. Work is a good thing but a bad god.

2. Glorifying God transforms work that feels under-valued or ultimate.

If we settle the issue of "who?" before "how?" then something beautiful can happen: work can be transformed no matter what we are doing. Colossians 3:17 says, "17 And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him." In Colossians 3:23 Paul makes this statement: "Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men." The idea is that every aspect of our human activity can be infused with new meaning by doing it "in the name of Jesus" or working "as for the Lord." Everything that I do is impacted by this new identity that I have. Work that seems under-valued, menial or personally unfulfilling can be transformed into joyful service when we work through our biblical identity as opposed to working for trying to create our identity. Work that seems very important, fulfilling and even "ultimate" is also transformed as we see that success, achievement, and effectiveness are good but they are not the core. The gospel-narrative of the Bible frees us to make our work a conduit for something greater than us: the glory of God.

3. Gospel-identity grounds us in our failures or success

Sometimes the things we do go very well. And then there are other times that our work is marked by failure. Throughout our lives there will be moments of success, and there will be moments of disappointment. The highs and lows of this journey can be extreme. But knowing who you are, what your biblical identity is, and how it is all connected to the gospel anchors you in the midst of every season of life. Your gospel-identity reminds you that any success or blessing you have achieved did not happen independent of God's care, provision and blessing. Gospel-identity reminds you that without God's intervention in your life, there will be no success, and it reminds you that as good as success feels, it will not fully satisfy. You were made for more.

But gospel-identity also grounds us in our failures – when our work has not worked. When we've failed to live up to expectations, performed badly, blew it morally, lost a job, or simply not done our best, gospel-identity keeps our work in its place by keeping "who?" we are in Christ at the center. The gospel, Christ's work for us, frees us from allowing our failures to define who we are.

So it is important to “preach the gospel” to ourselves at the top and at the bottom. We need to have our identity defined by God’s script, not the script of the world, the culture, our failures, or our successes. That is one of the reasons why we are encouraging you to memorize Scripture during LIVE¹⁴. We want you to have the Word in you so that it defines you.

Dealing with mistaken identity starts by understanding who you are before dealing with how to live. “Who?” before “How?” Let me close with a great illustration of what we are talking about:

A few years back I was driving one of my sons home from his basketball game and he was crying. He’s a great basketball player but had had a less than stellar performance and he was, as a result, crushed. After doing my best to comfort him by listening to him and reminding him that his game was not nearly as bad as he thought it was and that even the best basketball players in the world have an off game here and there, I asked him why he was so upset. He told me plainly, “Dad, I played terrible.” I said, “I know you don’t think you played well, but why does not playing well make you so sad?” He said (with tremendously keen self-awareness), “Because I’m a basketball player. That’s who I am.” Somewhere along the way he had concluded (due to success on the basketball court over the years) that his self-worth and value as a person was inextricably tied to his achievements as a basketball player. If he was a good basketball player, then he mattered. If he wasn’t, he didn’t. So a bad game was more than a bad game. It was a direct assault on his identity. I realized in the moment that any attempt to assure him that he was a great basketball player wasn’t going to help him, because basketball wasn’t the issue—identity was. He was suffering an identity crisis, not a basketball crisis. A basketball crisis is easy to solve—a little more practice and a lot of encouragement typically does the trick. But an identity crisis is deep. It’s an under the surface problem requiring an under the surface solution.

When most of us stop long enough to consider what establishes our identity, what really makes us who we are, many of us naturally assume the answer is “our performance.” This is precisely what my son was facing.

I reminded him of the gospel. I showed him how the gospel frees us from this obsessive pressure to perform, this slavish demand to “become.” I showed him how the gospel liberatingly declares that in Christ “we already are.” While the world, the flesh, and the Devil constantly tempt us to locate our identity in something or someone smaller than Jesus, the gospel liberates us by revealing that our true identity is locked in Christ. Our connection in and with Christ is the truest definition of who we are.

I told him that since he was a Christian, who he really was had nothing to do with him—how much he can accomplish, who he can become, his strengths, his weaknesses, his athletic ability, what people thought of him, and so on. I reminded him that his identity is firmly anchored in Christ’s accomplishment, not his; Christ’s performance, not his; Christ’s victory, not his. So much of parenting, I’ve discovered, involves reminding. Simply reminding our children of who they are in Christ, what they already possess in Christ and how nothing—nothing—that Christ has secured for them can ever be taken away.

After listening to this, he stopped crying, and from the back seat said, “Dad, why can’t you preach this way all the time. This makes sense.” Feeling like a failure as a preacher in that moment, I realized that none of us ever outgrow our need for robust reminders of the gospel.⁶

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⁶ <http://www.pastortullian.com/2014/08/06/grace-and-identity/>