

LIVE|14 – Mistaken Identity **“I Am What I Have” (Part 3 of 4)**

Psalm 115:1-11, 1 Timothy 6:6-10

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Not to us, O LORD, not to us, but to your name give glory, for the sake of your steadfast love and your faithfulness!

Why should the nations say, “Where is their God?” Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases.

Their idols are silver and gold, the work of human hands. They have mouths, but do not speak; eyes, but do not see. They have ears, but do not hear; noses, but they do not smell. They have hands, but do not feel; feet, but do not walk; and they do not make a sound in their throat.

But godliness with contentment is great gain, for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world. But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content. But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs. 1 Timothy 6:6-10 (ESV)

Those who make them become like them; so do all who trust in them.

O Israel, trust in the LORD! He is their help and their shield. O house of Aaron, trust in the LORD! He is their help and their shield. You who fear the LORD, trust in the LORD!

He is their help and their shield.

Psalm 115:1-11 (ESV)

Before there was Xbox, Playstation, Wii, or Nintendo, there was the Atari 2600, which featured historic and timeless video games like Space Invaders, Asteroids, Frogger, and Donkey Kong. Now I know that I just seriously dated myself, but I remember going to school and all the talk in the hallway was about how cool the new Atari was.

But I also remember when Pac-Man hit the market as an Atari game. Previously Pac-Man was only available as a large game console that could be played at an arcade (think Chuckie Cheese). When I heard that Pac-Man was going to be available, I wanted it – bad! But my parents wisely refused to catch “Pac-Man Fever,” and they told me that if I wanted the new game, I’d have to earn it myself. The game was about \$36.00, but that is in the 1980’s so the equivalent value, given inflation, is about \$110 today. So, this was a major endeavor.

To raise this money, I collected old newspapers from our neighborhood. At the time, the recycling plant would give a penny for every pound of newspaper. Do the story problem: How many pounds of newspapers does a Pac-Man loving boy have to collect if the price of Pac-Man is \$36.00 and the paper exchange is one cent per pound? Answer: 3,600 lbs. of newspapers! That is over almost 2 tons of paper and 1,000 pounds more than a Toyota Corolla!

For weeks I went door-to-door with my red wagon collecting old, stinky newspapers, and when it was difficult to even get a car into the garage, we stuffed the papers into our wood-paneled station wagon and a borrowed trailer and brought them to the recycling plant. And they cut me a check for \$36 and some change. Just enough to satisfy my Pac-Man fever.

I remember that experience for a lot of reasons, but I also remember, very vividly, two thoughts or feelings in my ten-year old heart. First, I remember the awkwardness of answering this question after I asked our neighbors for their newspapers: “Oh, what charity are you collecting papers for?” And I also remember that it was only about six months later that a new game hit the market, Pac-Man lost its appeal, and I felt a bit frustrated that it was time for another paper drive. It was my first, very vivid experience with the shallowness of possessions.

Today is the third week of our LIVE series on the mistaken identities that we easily embrace. We are trying to answer fundamental questions like “Who am I?” “Where do I belong?” and “What is really important?” And so far we have looked at the mistaken identities of work (“I am what I do”) and appearance (“I am how I look”). Our focus this Sunday is to examine the power of possessions as it relates to our identity, and then I want to spend some time talking about what a gospel-script sounds like **as it relates to this and other issues of identity.**

The Power of Possessions

There are two texts that serve as the basis of our time in the Word today: Psalm 115 and 1 Timothy 6. Both of them speak to the issue of possessions. Let’s make some observations about what we see in these texts:

1. Possessions can compete with God

Psalm 115 sets up a contrast between the glory given to God and the worship of idols:

Not to us, O LORD, not to us, but to your name give glory, for the sake of your steadfast love and your faithfulness! Why should the nations say, “Where is their God?” Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases. Their idols are silver and gold, the work of human hands. Psalm 115:1–4 (ESV)

But the point of the passage is not just about idolatry; it is about the difference between a vertical, Godward focus and an earthly, “work of human hands” focus. Idols are a problem because they are human-made competitors with God. What should be given to God is instead given to something that a human being has made.

The first point I want you to see here is simply that our stuff is more than just stuff. The things that human beings create have the power to compete with God. Not everything we make necessarily has this power, but some things certainly can and do. And part of the problem with our possessions is that we do not really understand what we are dealing with. Possessions have the potential to compete with God for the shaping of our identity.

2. Possessions can become objects of trust

Psalm 115:8 tells us that idols are trust-objects, and in verses 9-11 there is a call to trust the Lord in three different places. The problem with idols is the trust that they garner. In other words, the real power of possessions is not the object itself, but in what the object seems to give us. The power of possessions is not the thing itself, but in what need, desire, or longing we hope the thing will fulfill. Possessions become objects of trust as we look to a physical object to give us what really is only satisfied by God. In this way, the possession becomes a symbol, a statement, a narrative, or part of a person's identity.

Suddenly a possession is so much more than a thing. It is THE thing. Things have scripts. The newest iPhone means you are just like everyone else at school. The luxury sedan signals that you are successful. The well-funded retirement plan makes you feel secure. The big screen TV says that you deserve to be entertained. The designer jeans tell people that you are unique. The new outfit means that you are attractive. The blue hoodie and ripped jeans means you are too cool to care. The old car means you are thrifty and cheap. The retro clothes mean that you are a non-conformist.

Possessions can easily become objects of trust as we try to use them to give us what we deeply desire: approval, security, satisfaction, control, uniqueness, attractiveness and popularity. Possessions can become our identity because of what we believe our possessions will bring us. We trust in our possessions by relying on them to give us what only God can really give us. Listen to how this theme emerges in two texts:

Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." So we can confidently say, "The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?" Hebrews 13:5-6 (ESV)

As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy. 1 Timothy 6:17 (ESV)

Possessions can become our identity as they become objects of trust.

3. Possessions can cause us to be delusional

This was a stunning thought to me as I studied the text this week. Psalm 115:5-7 identifies something very important about idols or the works of human hands. The Psalmist points to the fact that idols have mouths and eyes and ears and noses and hands and feet. He describes the idols with human terminology. Yet the point is that while the idols have all of these human qualities, they are not in fact alive. Now why is that important and why would he use six different descriptors? After all, no one reading this would have thought, "Seriously? I didn't realize that idols were not alive!" Why does the Psalmist talk about idols this way?

The reason that he takes this approach is because of the delusional nature of idol worship. Just think about it. A human being makes an image, and then treats that image as if it is alive and allows it to control his life. Imagine someone questioning him in his worship: "Here you are bowing down to this idol, believing that it controls your life, and serving it. But didn't you make it? Isn't it just an object? Why are you letting something you made control your life?" Good question! But the problem with our possessions is that it is

very easy to lose perspective and even become delusional. Dave Ramsey says it this way: “We buy things we don’t need with money we don’t have to impress people we don’t like.” What are we doing?!

Paul says the same thing in 1 Timothy 6, but he says it this way: “...for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world.” (1 Tim. 6:7). Is that a new thought for anyone? Of course not. But just because we know something to be true does not mean that we live as if it is true. And that is the problem with possessions.

They can cause us to be delusional. Have you ever purchased something only to ask yourself rather quickly, “What was I thinking?” Have you ever wanted a “thing” so badly that it consumed your thinking as you dreamed about what it would be like to have it? Or have you ever overreacted to the loss or the breakage of some “thing”? Tim Keller in his book called *Counterfeit Gods* identifies the difference between sorrow and despair when it comes to loss. He says that sorrow comes from losing one good thing among others, but despair is different and inconsolable because of the loss of the ultimate thing. “When you lose the ultimate source of your meaning {identity!} or hope, there are not alternatives to turn to. It breaks your spirit.”¹ Where does all of this come from? It comes from the connection between our identity and our possessions. Or better: the connection between our identity and the delusional belief of what possessions give us.

4. Possessions can open the door to other sins

Attaching your identity to what you have invariably leads to other sin issues. Possessions, in and of themselves, are not the problem; the problem with possessions is the desire behind them. In 1 Timothy 6:9-10, Paul gives us a strong warning and notice the caution regarding the open door of wrong desires:

*But those who **desire** to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs. 1 Timothy 6:9–10 (ESV, emphasis added)*

Notice the words “desire,” “love,” and “craving.” These emotions are not intrinsically bad. They could be very commendable and even righteous. But in this context they are bad because of the objects to which desire, love and craving are directed, and they are dangerous because of where they lead. The text lists the following: 1) to temptation, 2) to senseless and harmful desires, 3) to ruin and destruction, 4) to new forms of evil, 5) to wander away from the faith and 6) to self-destruction.

We can become like the spider Ungoliant in Tolkien’s *The Silmarillion* who built a web in the clefts of a mountain and sucked up all the light that she could find until there was no more. And in her famished state, she eventually devoured herself.

5. Possessions can make our lives empty

An identity based upon what you have is a tragically empty life. Psalm 115 makes this stunning statement about idolatry: “Those who make them become like them.” (Ps. 115:8) What does he mean by that? He means that the previous description regarding having an appearance of being alive but really being dead

¹ Timothy Keller, *Counterfeit Gods – The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power and the Only Hope that Matters*, (New York: Dutton Publishing, 2009).

(i.e., having eyes but not seeing, having noses but not smelling) is what idolaters are like. They are lifeless. They are empty. In other words, we live in a way that is less than what God has designed. Making your possessions your identity or making what you think possessions give you your identity means that you settle for something far less in value.

1 Timothy 6:6 says the same thing but a bit differently: “godliness with contentment is great gain.” Notice that Paul uses the offering of gain as a central part of his argument. It is not that God is against “gain.” God is against living for the wrong gain. 1 Timothy 6 calls us to find our identity in godliness and contentment as opposed to the longing for more and more and more. It is merely a matter of perspective. John Newton illustrated what I am talking about this way:

Suppose a man was going to New York to take possession of a large estate, and his [carriage] should break down a mile before he got to the city, which obliged him to walk the rest of the way; what a fool we should think him, if we saw him ringing his hands, and blubbering out all the remaining mile, ‘My [carriage] is broken! My [carriage] is broken!’²

Or maybe you could think of this like the TV program *Hoarders*. It is a series that highlights the tragedy and psychology of people whose houses are filled so many things that they can barely live or, in some cases, are dying because of their possessions. The show, at times, is very sad because you see the attempts to try and help this person who is sleeping on piles of junk, who cannot cook any food in the kitchen because there is no room, and who bought, for example, multiple toasters in fear of one breaking. Room after room is crammed full of stuff, and life looks awful. When the dumpster arrives and the cleanup starts, you see the depth of the problem as the hoarder often struggles deeply with letting their possessions go. As things are removed and thrown away the hoarder is often so preoccupied with loss that she doesn’t realize what she could gain if she’d just let go. So she clings to her toasters, refusing to give them up when she could gain a hallway or a kitchen. The tragedy of the show is a person whose life is so full of “things” and yet so empty.

Now you may not be a “hoarder” but I would guess that, at some level, you can resonate with the power that possessions can have over us. But the power in the “thing” is not the thing itself; it is what the “thing” gives us.

The Power of the Gospel

How does the script of the gospel work against the script of possessions? For the last two weeks we have spent more time dealing with the wrong script than the right one. So I want to spend some time more fully unpacking our identity through the gospel and show you how that applies to our possessions. And in doing so I think you will see how the gospel-script applies in other areas as well. What is the basic script of the gospel?

The entire Bible records the story of the gospel, but let me summarize the basics of a Christian’s identity and then explain to you how this relates to possessions:

² Richard Cecil, *Memoirs of the Rev. John Newton*, in *The Works of the Rev. John Newton*, Vol. 1 (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1985), p. 108

1. "God is holy"

Gospel identity begins by understanding that God is holy. This means that he is without sin but it also means that he is the most beautiful "thing" in the entire universe. His holiness is reflected through his glory, and everything in life is dependent upon and subordinate to his glory. Nothing is more beautiful or valuable than him, his glory, and his holiness.

2. "I am not"

The second part of the gospel script is that we are not holy. All of us have sinned and fallen short of God's glory (Rom. 3:23). In other words, we are tragically not like God, and our internal and external rebellion makes us unreconciled to God. The effect of this condition is an identity crisis whereby we search for wholeness in things other than God. Gospel identity clearly identifies that root problem with our identity: sin. I am not holy.

3. "Jesus saves"

The Good News of the Bible is that "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." (John 3:16) The gospel message is simply that Jesus died in my place in order to address the greatest need in my life: my sin. If God is holy, then my sin is eternally dangerous, and Jesus makes it possible for my sin to be forgiven. Jesus saves sinners. He makes sinful human beings forgiven and righteous. Jesus changes our relationship with God and that changes everything.

4. "Christ is my life"

The final statement is where a Christian lives and the lens through which he or she sees and experiences everything. Since the greatest need of your life has been settled by the work of Jesus, everything about who you are, what you do, what you feel, and what you desire has been eternally affected. In ways that are still unfolding and in ways that are apparent, everything become infused with this gospel-script that trumps all other scripts. It is the script under the other scripts. It is the one identity that changes all other identities. It infuses eternal meaning into every aspect of the human experience: your body, work, rest, money, singleness, marriage, sexuality, children, retirement and death. All of them now have new meaning because Christ is your life.

Jonathan Edwards believed deeply in an identity rooted in the glory of God. Here is what he said:

The redeemed have all their objective good in God. God himself is the great good which they are brought to the possession and enjoyment of by redemption. He is the highest good, and the sum of all that good which Christ purchased. God is the inheritance of the saints; he is the portion of their souls. God is their wealth and treasure, their food, their life, their dwelling place, their ornament and diadem, and their everlasting honor and glory.³

³ Jonathan Edwards, "God Glorified in the Work of Redemption, by the Greatness of Man's Dependence upon Him, in the Whole of It (1731)" (sermon on 1 Corinthians 1:29-31), in *The Sermons of Jonathan Edwards: A Reader*, ed. Wilson H. Kimnach, Kenneth P. Minkema, and Douglas A. Sweeney (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1999), 74-75.

The Power of Possessing the Gospel

Let me now try to show you how this gospel-identity affects your possessions and your view of them. What is the power of possessing the gospel as it relates to our possessions?

1. It exposes the scripts behind our possessions

By having an appetite for God's glory and what is eternally valuable, it uncovers the shallow, materialistic, and temporary appeal of possessions. When you have tasted and seen that the Lord is good (Ps. 34:8), you see the things in this world clearly and plainly for what they really are. The gospel empowers you to not put your identity in material goods because you know that "things" are not the ultimate "thing." Therefore, listen for the scripts!

2. It fills the need for more with more of God

To desire "more" is a natural for humans as it is to breathe. God created human beings with an appetite for more. We are created as consumers, and our problem is that we consume the wrong things. Or we try to use the wrong things to satisfy the craving of our hearts. Augustine said it this way: "You have made us for yourself and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee."

So the gospel gets to root of our desires by satisfying us with the greatness of God and our redemption. That is why it is hard to be covetous when you are singing a song rich with spiritual meaning, and why it is easier to be content when you are hearing big truths about God through a vibrant sermon. There is something so satisfying, so rich, and so captivating about the value of God and our redemption through Christ that all other desires seem so ridiculously mundane and worthless. Therefore, become a worshipper!

3. It allows you to enjoy God's gifts without making the gifts your god

If your identity is grounded in the gospel, then you experience all the joy that God intended for you to experience without guilt, regret, or half-hearted enthusiasm. You can smile, laugh, enjoy the moment, and rejoice in what is happening around. You can be grateful for food, housing, transportation, or whatever God has provided. But because these things are not your identity, they are not ultimate. You don't live for them. And they, in turn, are useful and helpful in turning your gaze toward God in gratitude for his gifts. Therefore, be full of joy!

4. It means you can be content because you know that God is the one who provides for you

If my life is based upon my performance and my security depends on my ability to control my future, I am going to be miserable. If my life depends on my ability to fully plan for my future or my ability to provide all of what I need, I am going to be filled with worry. But if God provides for me, then I can really be at rest. I can trust that God can meet my needs, and I can stop grumbling or complaining when my needs are not met just the way that I think they should. Therefore, embrace contentment.

5. It means that you can joyfully and intentionally give

Yes, we are going to talk about giving today, and here is the reason why: the best way to affirm that your identity is not in your money is to give it away. In fact, I would be so bold as to say that you know that your identity is too closely rooted to your possessions when you fail to give. A giving problem is an identity problem. There are some of you here today who need to put your possession identity to death by giving. I am not saying this today because our budget is hurting. On the contrary, we have hundreds and hundreds of people who already understand the connection between giving and identity. I'm saying this today because giving is good for your soul and it makes a statement to your soul. Every time you give, you are saying: "Christ is my life."

Do you see the power of possessing the gospel and how it can become a liberating identity for how you handle everything related to your possessions? It means that you could actually enjoy the things in life because you enjoy God more than any of them. It means that you are free to savor the gifts that God has given as gifts that God has given not as the gifts that make you god. Possessions, therefore, are not my identity, but the means by which I see my true identity in Christ. The gospel frees me to enjoy what God has given even more because they point me back to him.

This is the power of possessing the gospel. I am NOT what I have. I am what I have in Christ. And in having THAT, I have everything I truly need.

*Be Thou my Vision, O Lord of my heart;
Naught be all else to me, save that Thou art.
Thou my best Thought, by day or by night,
Waking or sleeping, Thy presence my light.*

*Riches I heed not, nor man's empty praise,
Thou mine Inheritance, now and always:
Thou and Thou only, first in my heart,
High King of Heaven, my Treasure Thou art.*