

## Week Three: The Gospel & The Self

### Introduction

Let's take a moment to review what we discussed last week. As we saw in our time together, we live in a world that is proclaiming many messages that are aimed at forming us in different ways. What we tend to think less about is that these messages are also aimed at forming our identities and how we live in certain ways. The world that we live in is quick to slap identifiers on us so that we can be quickly labeled as friend or foe to this cause or that cause.

Just think about the questions our culture is currently asking that strikes at the very core of our being:

- “Are you a loving and tolerant person or are you *hateful* and *intolerant*?”
- “Do you struggle with anxiety or depression? If so, you are *mentally ill*.”
- “Did you come from a broken and unloving home? No wonder you're so *broken and unloveable* yourself.
- “You really believe God is king of the nations? You must be a *bigoted* nationalist.

Again, the church even has its own set of questions that it's asking that are aimed at doing the same thing.

- “You do believe in the spiritual gifts? You must be a loony Charismatic.”
- “You don't believe in the spiritual gifts? You must not be filled with the Holy Spirit.”
- “You believe God is a Father? You serve a patriarchal god that I don't serve.”
- “You disagree with my denomination, view of baptism, view of the end times, view of etc, etc., etc.? Are you even a Christian?”

Notice that these messages all have something in common. They are aimed at shaping us to see ourselves and others in a certain way, which in turn causes us to live in a certain way. Hateful, intolerant, anxious, depressed, mentally ill, broken, unlovable, bigoted, Spirit-less, God-less, and Christ-less. Everyone is vying for an opportunity to tell us *who we are* so that we can be formed into the image of what they think we should be. The stories we tell ourselves are important, because they inevitably shape who we are. This is why we must be careful what stories we entertain.

### Stranded at Sea Without an Anchor

If we only give ear to the stories and identifiers that the world and even some well-meaning Christians place upon us, we're sure to end up with a crisis of identity. This is why we must give ear to the story and identifiers that God places upon us in His Son Jesus and His work for us. Only then we will not be tossed to and fro as spiritual infants. The Apostle Paul actually says this Himself, that the work of the church is to help young believers mature in their identity in Jesus so that they will not be deceived by the stories of the world. He writes:

- “. . . To equip the saints for works of ministry and to build up the body of Christ, until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God, as we mature to the full measure of the stature of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed about by the waves and carried around by every wind of teaching and by the clever cunning of men in their deceitful scheming.” - Ephesians 4:12-14

Don't take my word for it, see it here from the Apostle himself. Until young believers come to deeply understand the way of Jesus Christ, they are completely incapable of growing in spiritual maturity or being equipped to be disciples and make disciples. They will remain as spiritual infants, tossed about by life's waves and carried about by every different kind of teaching and deceitful scheming of men. Is this not exactly what we see not only in the world, but also the church today?

This is why it's important that we state right from the outset that the Gospel is something that we *never* graduate past. Many churches treat the Gospel *merely* as a story that we share with people to see that they might come to the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ and convert. After the message is shared, at least practically speaking, many believe it's necessary to graduate on to the deeper things of the faith. And, unfortunately, this is where many churches go wrong.

When we look at the Bible, we see that the Gospel is *not merely* the story of how God intervened and saved His people in the death, burial, and resurrection of His Son. It is that, but it's also the story that forms our identity, how we view the identity of others, and what we are to do in the world. To state it simply, it is the story that makes us disciples and forms us to be disciples. Without this story becoming the primary story that we see ourselves and the world through, we will be as spiritual infants in an unmanned ship sitting upon a chaotic sea with no crew and no anchor. That's not a good spot to be in, so we must take time to become familiar with the Anchor that grounds us as the rest of the world is tossed to and fro.

### **Beloved Identity**

The Gospel has much to say to our identity that ought to form the way we live in the world. First and foremost, it says that we're loved (Jn. 3:16) even from before the foundations of the world before we did anything good or bad (Eph. 1:5). God demonstrates this eternal, unconditional love for us by sending His Son for us. It also tells us that we are now children who have been adopted into God's family (Eph. 1:5). There is nothing that can snatch those who are His sons and daughters from our Father's hand (Jn. 10:28). Because we are now a part of God's family, we are now heirs with Christ (Rom. 8:17). Everything He has will be ours.

This is just a small amount of what the Bible tells us about our identity, but notice when this story begins to shape and form us, we begin to become people who love others with an unceasing love because we are loved with an unceasing love. We become people who adopt others who are outsiders into our families because we were outsiders to God and have been adopted into His family. We become people who share what we have because God has shared His inheritance with us. Notice how this story radically shapes us in a different way than the stories of the world.

The stories of the world shape us into people who are immature when it comes to people and our identity, and it also causes us to be people who are selfish, and skeptical of the God who created us. But the Christian story restores us to what we were always created to be – People created in God's image who were meant to bring His way to earth that in turn heals the nations.

### **Discussion Questions**

9. What are some unhelpful and gospel-less stories you've told yourself and believed? Can you see areas in your life where you have been tossed to and fro by other stories about yourself?

10. Do you struggle with accepting your identity in God? What are some things that are causing you to struggle with that? Things from your past? Failures? Be open and share.

11. What do you think are dangerous stories in our culture today that are leading people astray that we must be on guard against?