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Chapter One: Identify Yourself

Before we can look into the ways in which our identity is stolen from us we must first know our own identity. In the movies when they shine a bright light in the main character's eyes and the voice from behind the source of the light says, "Identify yourself", how do they answer? Usually the answer to that question begins with a name; a first and last name. What happens when you state your name? When you meet someone and you say, "My name is 'John Doe'", what effect does it have on the person? What kind of response does your name get when it is spoken to a group of people who know you? When you think about who you are, how significant of a role does your given name play? Do you think more about your name, or about your values, your opinions, likes and dislikes, personality, when you "identify yourself"?

In chapter thirty two of the book of Genesis Jacob is preparing to meet his brother Esau. During the night he has a wrestling match with God. At the conclusion of the struggle in verse twenty eight we read, "Then [God] said, 'Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome.'" Jacob receives a name change. And while both his original name and his new one carry great significance in scripture the real issue is why his name was changed. He has overcome tremendous struggles. No matter what your name is, the ability to overcoming great struggles is an important part of a person's identity. However nothing within our personality or character can compare with the power of the Holy Spirit when it comes to forming our identity. "Therefore if anyone is in Christ he is a new creation, the old has gone, the new has come" 2 Corinthians 5:17. If we are to

have a proper understanding of who we are, we must begin by answering this crucial question. Who are we going to allow to determine who we are? Will we determine our own identity? Will we allow parents or close family members to determine who we are? Will our identity be decided by those in the world around us, friends or worse yet enemies? Or will we allow the God of the universe to provide us with our identity?

Read the following verses and construct a list of characteristics that God uses to describing the identity of a believer in Christ.

Romans 8:1-2. Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law sin and death.

Romans 8:8-9. Those controlled by the flesh cannot please God. You, however, are controlled not by the flesh but by the Spirit

Romans 8:37. No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

Galatians 3:26-27. You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.

Galatians 5:24. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires

Ephesians 2:4-5. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions it is by grace you have been saved.

Ephesians 5:8. You were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord.

Colossians 1:13. For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves

Colossians 1:21-22. Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death, to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation.

Colossians 2:13. When you were dead in your sins and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins.

1 Peter 2:9. But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

Does the reading of these verses change your understanding of your identity? These statements concerning who you are have been written to you by the God of the universe! If you are in Christ, you are a new creation, you are who God says you are! Your identity is no longer defined by anyone else, not even by you. Who you are is determined by Jesus Christ and his righteousness.

This takes time to internalize. The Spirit certainly helps us, but we have been living in a word that fills us full of lies regarding our identity and that cannot be completely corrected overnight.

The goal of this first chapter is to help us construct a clear and concise understanding of who we really are. It is true that we are many things, a son or daughter, a mother or father, a brother or sister, a student, and employee, a spouse and a friend. But we need to come to the understanding that these do not define us in the same way or at the same level as what God has said about us. Being a believer supersedes and

affects all of the other things that we are. When we begin to see ourselves not as a student or an employee, but rather as a believer who happens to be in school, or a believer who happens to have a job, our true identity becomes more secure. If my identity is wrapped up in being a student or an employee and I fail a test or mess up on the job, now my identity is challenged. But if I am first and foremost a new creation in Christ, test scores and job performance do not compromise my identity.

The goal cannot be to try and trick ourselves into feeling a certain way about ourselves. The goal is to come to a proper understanding of the truth. It is not part of our true identity to think of ourselves more highly than we ought, or more lowly than we ought. It is far better to accurately assess ourselves and that begins and ends with understanding who Christ has declared us to be.

The final key to understanding our identity is that God did not place us “in Christ” in order to make us feel good about ourselves. We are “in Christ” in order to bring glory to Christ. Understanding that it is not about us is not detrimental to our identity, rather, it is instrumental to our identity.

We all come from different places, different experiences, but the ground is level at the foot of the cross. In Christ there is no poor student or good student, no popular or insignificant person, there are just those who are “in Christ”.

Spend some time in prayer and ask the Father to help you by his Spirit to understand better who you are in his Son Christ.

Chapter Two: Our own worst enemy

There are many things in life that can rob us of our identity. Truthfully there are few influences in our lives that do not in some way contribute to our identity in Christ being challenged, questioned or completely destroyed. Perhaps the most significant factor, or at least the one we need to investigate first, is ourselves.

When we look in the mirror what do we see? Do we see a member of the royal priesthood, the holy nation, a new creation; or do we see someone who is not the leader of their peer group, someone who lies to others about who they really are, someone who is proud or weak or lonely.

Let's take a closer look at the way we can steal our own identity by examining the call of Moses. Read Exodus chapter three through chapter four verse seventeen, specifically 3:11; 3:13; 4:1; and 4:10 and then answer the following questions.

In what ways did Moses rob himself of the identity that God has given him? Make a list of the times that you have done something similar. Why do you think Moses was reluctant? What do you know about his past? Read Exodus 2:11-15. In what ways do you allow things from your past to rob you of your identity in Christ?

Our identity in Christ is at risk because of our past, as well as other issues that affect the way we see ourselves. What can be done to eliminate this threat to our identity? How can the verses listed on pages two and three of this booklet be used as a tool to eliminate this threat?

The good news as far as Moses is concerned is that ultimately he does go to Egypt and he does lead the Hebrew people to freedom. The good news for us is "that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" Philippians 1:6.

It is unlikely that we will be able to change the way we see ourselves overnight. God always has the power to miraculously change us into the image of his son, but the scriptures are pretty clear about the fact that he uses trials in our lives to develop perseverance. So while there may be some issues that are dealt with right away, part of his plan is for some things to be resolved over a period of time.

While it is true that we can be our own worst enemy, we can also become a tool in God's hand to help preserve our identity in Christ. If we allow his Word to penetrate our hearts and we remind ourselves daily of the truth concerning who Christ says we are, our identity in Christ will be secure.

This can lay the groundwork for overcoming other struggles. Any time that we do battle with the desires of the flesh, starting with the proper understanding of who we are in Christ is of immeasurable benefit. When the enemy comes to accuse us of being sinful and worthless in the kingdom, we can just tell him to take that us with our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ who says that we are members of the kingdom of God; that we are his cherished bride, the church.

Chapter Three: Those closest to us

We have spent some time studying our true identity. The Word of God very clearly defines who we are in Christ. We need to remind ourselves regularly of those truths. Being grounded in the Word is the best way to prevent us from steeling our own identity. Listening to lies is easy, especially when we are the one doing the lying. Perhaps that next strongest influence in our lives are those closest to us. When we think about the struggles that we experience in life we are quick to blame our enemies. But all too often family and friends can be a source of our struggles. Often times this happens inadvertently, but some of us have not been blessed with a family that loves God. Even those of us who do love God sometimes do and say things that can be damaging to a family member's identity in Christ.

To examine this threat on our identity further let's look at the life of Jacob. Even from birth, his mother and father and brother played a part in damaging Jacob's true identity. Jacob had a twin brother who was older by just a few seconds. We know this because scripture tells us that Jacob came out of his mother's womb grabbing Esau's heel. The Hebrew word that sounds like Jacob can mean to grasp or to come after or even usurper. Aren't you glad we no longer name our children in this manner? When my oldest son was born he was very long and thin and some commented on how long he was. But we did not name him "very long"! Esau had a "ruddy complexion" and was very hair suit. Esau means "harry". He was also called Edom which means "red".

From the very beginning Jacob had an uphill battle to fight with regard to his true identity. Read Romans 9:11-13. What was Jacob's true identity? (See also Genesis 32:28) Now read Genesis 25:21-28. How did things begin for Jacob? Describe the difference between Jacob and Esau. To

read the entire story of Jacob's life would involve reading all the way to the end of Genesis as he is the father of Joseph. Remember that Jacob's life ends in Egypt because God uses Joseph to save the world from famine. All throughout Jacob's life his true identity is threatened; and in most cases, it is the people closest to him who are at the root of the problem.

Jacob's true identity as "Israel", the father of the twelve tribes, is given to him by God in more ways than one. Not only does God make the pronouncement at the end of their wrestling match, but he also takes him to Laban's house where he meets the women who will produce the sons who are the twelve tribal leaders.

This is where history begins to repeat itself. Just like Jacob's parents played favorites, Jacob continues in their footsteps. He loves Rachel and therefore he loves Joseph and eventually Benjamin. The special attention that he gives Joseph becomes a threat to Joseph's identity in much the same way the love of Jacob's mother became a threat to his.

Read Genesis chapter thirty seven. What is Joseph's true identity? How did those closest to him try to steal that identity from him? Remember that in Joseph's day, the Holy Spirit did not indwell people like his does today. God did not speak to people through his Spirit, so it was not uncommon for him to speak through a dream. If you know the story of Joseph you know how the dreams end up being fulfilled. Remember that what we can read in a matter of minutes took decades to unfold in the life of Joseph. This is a good lesson to learn when dealing with the theft of our own identity. Sometime God chooses to wait years to reveal his plan to us. Along the way it can feel like we are wrong about our identity in Christ. God is looking at the big picture. That is not to say that God is unconcerned about our "years in prison", we just need to stay focused on the truth, and in many cases, truth takes time.

Now read Genesis chapter 39. With regard to sexual purity, what is Joseph's true identity? How was that identity stolen from him? What is the key ingredient to a stolen identity? It has been said that reputation is "who people say you are" character is "who God knows you are". How often are we more concerned with reputation than character? How is this demonstrated in our lives? We must train ourselves to be more concerned with God's opinion of us than with what others think or say. This is a very difficult task, and we will certainly need the help of the Holy Spirit; but with God's help it is not impossible, and he has given us tools to use. Truth is, perhaps, the most powerful of these tools. The truth is "it really does *not* matter what others think". The truth is "it really *does* matter what God thinks". The truth is that God demands and deserves to be the most important thing in our lives.

Think of someone whose opinion you value greatly. Why is their opinion so important to you? Inevitably the answer is because they are important to you. Your relationship with that person matters to you; you respect them or admire them and, therefore, value their opinion. If Jesus really is our very best friend, and our relationship with him is the most important relationship we have on this earth, then his opinion will matter more to us than anyone else's.

Chapter Four: Those whose opinions we value

It is easy to underestimate the power that our peers have over us. Looking on from the outside, others can see how our peer group can dictate what we wear, how we talk, even what we think and believe. It is harder for us to assess the situation ourselves since we are right in the middle of it. It is like the age-old story of the frog in the pot. When the pot is first placed on the stove and the water temperature rises, the frog is unaware of the change. As we spend time with our peers, we are unaware of how our values may shift over a period of time.

Read John 3:1-10. Why do you think Nicodemus came to Jesus at night? What did Nicodemus seem to know about Jesus? Why then was he confused about who Jesus was? What does Jesus imply about the peer group that Nicodemus was spending time with in verse 10? What would Jesus say about the peers with which you spend your time? Name some of the beliefs you have that are shared beliefs of your peers. Name some that are not!

Now read Mark 15:6-15. Have you ever been in a crowd and acted a certain way because of the way everyone around you was acting? If you answered “no”, have you ever been to a sporting event and yelled at the officials? Why did the crowd asked to have Barabbas released? Why is Pilate confused by their choice? Why do they scream to have Christ crucified? How many of those people in the crowd even knew what they were doing?

It is easy for us to fail to see just how much we are influenced by those around us. The key to understanding peer pressure and how to avoid the negative influence of others is to realize that we are the one that gives them the power. The opinion of others only matters if it matters to us. We need to trust the Holy Spirit to make us into people who value Christ’s opinion more than anything else.

Chapter Five: The world in which we live

It is estimated that the average American sees more than 5000 advertisements in a day. How many times have you been told exactly what to do in order to be the happiest, healthiest, wealthiest person you can possibly be? The problem is not trying to sift through all those lies to figure out which things actually work. The problem is that we have been so deluded we have forgotten that being happy or healthy or rich is not even a goal in the first place.

Many people are familiar with the verse that says it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than it is for a rich man to get into heaven (Matthew 19:24). Some may even be aware of the fact that there is a gate in the wall of the city of Jerusalem that is called “The Eye of a Needle Gate”. The gate is very small, so for a camel to get through, they have to get on their knees and crawl. To understand this verse better, take a look at the verses that preceded it. Matthew 19:16-22 is the story of the rich young ruler.

There are two things that are often overlooked in this passage. One, when Jesus asked the man to sell everything he had and give the money to the poor, he was merely trying to point out that the man had not kept all of the commandments. The man’s idea of keeping all of the commandments was simply that he had not murdered anyone. Christ’s idea of keeping the commandments is that hatred is murder. The second issue is that the man went away sad. Having great wealth is not the issue. The verse could just have easily read “He went away happy because he had great wealth!” If his attitude towards his wealth is that it was given to him to bless others, the instructions to give it all to the poor would fill him with joy. It was his love for money that caused his sadness. The book of James makes it very clear; money is not a root for all kinds of evil; it is the love of money!

As the rich young ruler walks away, the disciples are astonished and ask a really good question, “Who then can be saved?” The answer Jesus gives in verse twenty six is the answer to all of our problems. With man this is impossible but with God all things are possible.

So what does all of this have to do with identity theft? We live in a world, where at every turn, we are convinced that the amount of money we have is directly related to how valuable or important or desirable we are. We need to get back to the truth which is the Word of God. While he was here on earth, the Word of God said things like “Many who are first will be last” (Matthew 19:30), and “If you want to follow me you must deny yourself and take up your cross and follow me” (Matthew 16:24), and “If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters - yes, even his own life - such a person cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:26).

Jesus does not want us to love money or wealth or happiness or anything other than him. When we learn to love Jesus more than everything, including our own life, then we are being true to our true identity in Christ.

Chapter 6: Misconceptions

It is easy to read the things that Jesus said regarding our true identity. It is more challenging to understand everything he said about us, and it is even harder to live out our lives like we believe everything he said. But one big step in the right direction is to straighten out any misunderstandings.

Most of our struggles understanding the words of Jesus arise from our lack of balance. Obviously, we are not talking about physical balance, but rather keeping things that we read in balance. We read that we are his special possession and we think it is because we are special. We read that our mouths are open graves and we think that we are horrible. The point is that it is not about us! It is about him. We are his special possession because he is special, not because we are. The only reason we are not horrible and worthless is because of redemption. Apart from Christ we are of no value, but in Christ and because of Christ, we are part of a holy nation.

Understanding the balance between these things helps us to accurately assess who we are. Romans 12:3 says, “For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has given to each of you.” It is the gift of faith (Ephesians 2:8-9) that enables us to make a sober judgment. God has given us gifts by his Holy Spirit, and as a result, we are able to make valuable contributions to his kingdom. It is not accurate to say that we are not good at something if it is something God has gifted us to do. If you have the gift of hospitality, and you are complemented on a particular event you have hosted, it is not right to say that you are not really that good at playing host. True humility is acknowledging that you are good at some things, and also understanding that it is because of the gift of God.

It is the world in which we live that causes the misconceptions. We allow ourselves to be convinced of the world's way of thinking. To say that you are good at something is to be arrogant according to the world. But for the believer who understands that God is sovereignly in control of all things, arrogance is an impossibility. The opposite is also true. For the person who does not believe in the sovereignty of God, humility is an impossibility. Unfortunately, the believer's understanding of arrogance and humility, along with many other things, has been destroyed by being too easily influenced by the world.

Too many believers try to be in the world but not of the world. Once again we have misunderstood what Christ said about us. He did not say that we should try to be in the world but not of the world. He said that we are in the world, but that we are not of the world. If we are in Christ, we are not of this world. We will not have to try to despise the things of this world and glory in the things of God; we just will. We will not be entertained by the worldly pleasures that entertain those outside of the faith. Yes, we live in a body of flesh and it has evil desires, but as the Holy Spirit begins to take over, those desires begin to fade.

When we see him, we will be like him, not because of how good we are, but because of how good he is. Christ has declared who we are, now it is up to us, by the power of the Spirit, to live a life worthy of the gospel.

Chapter 7: Getting it right

There is nothing better than getting it right. Whether it is the right answer on a test, or while playing a game, we like to be right. There is nothing more important than being right when it comes to who we are in Christ. And there is no way to say it any better than the way God has already said it.

Ephesians 1:4 – 6 For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love ⁵he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will – ⁶to the praise of his glorious grace.

Ephesians 2:1 – 5 As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, ²in which you used to live when you follow the ways of this world and the ruler of the kingdom of the air the Spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. ³All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath. ⁴But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, ⁵made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions – it is by grace you have been saved.

Colossians 2:13 When you were dead in your sins and in the circumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins.

Romans 9:16 It does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy.

2Thessalonians 2:13 But we ought always to thank God for you, brothers loved by the Lord, because from the beginning God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth.

Romans 8:29 – 30 For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. ³⁰And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.

That is how we came to be in Christ, and this is how we are going to stay in Christ.

Philippians 1:6 He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

1 Peter 5:10 And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast.

1 Thessalonians 5:23 – 24 May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.

So find out who you really are according to the God of the universe, and then live the life he has called you to and be blessed.