

You are Here

“You need to find yourself.”

August 13, 2017

Flip over to Colossians 2. Our goal as a church is to make disciples -- people who follow Jesus, baptizing them and teaching them to obey Jesus. That's the great commission. And in order to do that, we've got to know where people are starting from; what are their questions, values, beliefs; what are their resistances toward God? So that we can help them.

Here's the truth of how life works: We all live out of our beliefs. So, the question then for us is, what is normal belief where we are? That's what we're talking about. What do the average majority of people in our culture believe and value? And this is about more than just our stated beliefs. When something becomes normalized in a culture, people will live out beliefs they've never actually articulated, just absorbed. How do we think when we're not even thinking about it? All of us are being affected and influenced by the normal beliefs of our culture.

This is exactly what Jesus does in the Sermon on the Mount -- Over and over, “you have heard it said, but...” He's pointing out and deconstructing what is normal to them. That's what we want to do with this series. “You have heard it said...”

- “Follow your heart. Do whatever makes you happy. You can be anything you want to be!”
- You've heard it said “If you do good things, good things will happen to you.”
- “Eliminate negative people from your life.” ... “Haters gonna hate.” ... “Don't let anyone stand in the way of your dreams.” The gospel according to America's Got Talent.
- “One day you will find the one.” Single people especially... you have heard this from an annoying family member at every single wedding you've ever gone to.

Here's our first one for today: “You need to find yourself.” You'll hear it in different ways:

- You need to discover yourself, explore yourself, actualize and express your true self.
- You are very special and unique. You just need more self-esteem.
- Before you can love others, you have to learn to love yourself.
- Or how Modern philosopher Whitney Houston put it, “I found the greatest love of all: inside of me.”

All of these are different ways of saying the same thing. They're all about how to find out and define who we are. Now this is interesting for us because if we happened to live in a more Traditional society: and this is still true anywhere on earth that you find more traditional, conservative societies. Identity building and defining is fairly straightforward. Your identity is given to you from outside. From your family and society's expectations of you. You are defined by how well you live up to their expectations. Where you do you'll be celebrated. Where you don't, you'll be shamed.

By contrast, in our more modern/progressive society, we see it almost the exact opposite. Your identity isn't given to you from outside. It's buried deep down inside. And it needs to be looked for, discovered, actualized and expressed. And whatever you find, embrace it, love it. Flaunt it! Colloquially it's summed up in the phrase, “You do you, boo-boo.”

So I want to look at Colossians 2 where Paul's got some insight about our identity:

Colossians 2:1-10

For I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you and for those at Laodicea and for all who have not seen me face to face, that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, to reach all the riches of

full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. I say this in order that no one may delude you with plausible arguments. For though I am absent in body, yet I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good order and the firmness of your faith in Christ. Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving. See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ. For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority.

Notice his language. He says he wants them to be “encouraged, reaching the riches of full assurance, rooted and built up and established.” He is sensing insecurity and trying to build them up in a confident sense of their identity. He wants them to know who they are.

Says I don't want you to be deluded or tricked. I don't want you to fall for nice sounding arguments or empty philosophies about who you are. This is exactly what we said we wanted for this series. To look at the philosophies we are all being constantly taught; to examine them and see if they hold up to scrutiny.

So, let's examine our “You have to look inside yourself” belief a bit more. Because there seem to be some common trends for what people look toward when they look inside:

1) We are what we do.

I am my accomplishments. In school, I made good grades. In sports, I won trophies. In my career, I'm on a non-stop run of promotions and these are proof of what I suspected about myself all along: That deep down on the inside I'm a success. All I do is win. This might be the kind of person who puts a 26.2 sticker on their car to remind you that you haven't run a marathon.

And then for some of us, it's “no no, it's not about your job. It's about what you do for the world.” Their bumper stickers are going to be the causes they've advocated for. Or it's about what you do for yourself - “I am the sum of my experiences. I've travelled and seen more than you.” I'm a good person because I've been to Thailand. #eat, pray, love.

2) We are what we have.

What neighborhood do you live in? I wear certain brands, not others. Wouldn't be caught dead driving that! In our desire to build our identity, we look to our things to show off who we are. And it isn't just our purchased items. Some of us look to our looks. You feel significant when you are the most attractive one in the room. You can see this is happening when someone rich and beautiful starts to age and they panic.

Or some people look to their skills and talents. For me in middle school I looked inside and found some ability to make people laugh.

3) We are who we have.

Family. I'm a husband. I'm a wife. Mom, dad. You might have stick figure family stickers on your car.

I've got that one person's attention. Miss Keyes killed this when she said I don't care about accomplishments and I don't about what I have... “if I ain't got you”. You'll know this is you if a breakup is not just sad but crippling. Person who gets married and you never see them again.

Or for some, it's not about that one person, it's that I'm the kind of person that the opposite sex wants to be with. Maybe it's not even about a relationship, it's just having people interested in you. So, you flirt all the time, trying to keep people on the hook.

Not just family and romance, for some people it's our groups. Political groups.

4) We are our desires

This one is pretty new to contemporary culture. Who I am is my deepest desires. Getting completely free from expectation and religion and fear and repression will allow the real me to emerge like a butterfly and no longer remain hidden.

This happens all the time with sexuality in our culture. We take a sexual desire we have and make an identity statement about ourselves because of it. Who we want sexually becomes who we are socially. People will create an entire identity around their sexuality, have a community, social life, political party, even predisposed attitude towards religion.

There are some gaping problems with all of these.

- First off, you will perpetually end up self-righteous or despairing. Successes will puff you up and failures will destroy you. Because it's not just a success or a failure. It's your whole identity that's at stake here.
 - In Meghan Trainor's song, *Me Too*, she sings, "If I was you, I'd want to be me too. I thank God everyday. I can't help loving myself." She has another song called *I Love Me*. So fun. So catchy. And what she's trying to do is a good impulse. She's correctly discerned that people have followed our "You have to look inside to find yourself" belief, but they've ended up depressed. They don't like everything they've found inside. So, she's trying to help them out and give people confidence. The impulse is good, but the solution she's got isn't quite enough. It's not big enough or sturdy enough.
- That's the second problem with all of these. They aren't secure... at all. You can lose your job. You can get sick. You can lose your creativity, your looks. You can lose people. Significant others can break up with you. Spouses can cheat on you. Roles change. Kids leave the house. Who are you then. Mom after divorce. Who am I?
- Same goes for your desires. Simple realities and circumstances will keep you from getting everything you desire and what happens then? Also our desires not only change but regularly change over time. Not a solid enough foundation to build your identity on. Our desires also tend to have an illusory effect. The reality never turns out to be quite what we thought it would be. Perpetual disappointment.
- Lastly, all of these ways to define ourselves put us in a permanent state of earning. I will constantly feel like I have to make myself until I have the perfect job. Until girls pay me enough attention. Until I've got enough of my desires. Never-ending treadmill.

And this is huge because of what we said at the beginning. We live out of our beliefs. The belief that you have to be constantly searching inside of you to find yourself will leave you with an identity that is constantly shaky, changing, never solid. You'll feel trapped in a permanent state of I have to earn and prove myself and my worth. This is why we're anxious, stressed, angry, proud, insecure, self-righteous...all of it. And Paul says here in Colossians that Jesus offers a much better, more secure identity source. Look back starting at verse 6.

There is a higher self-esteem and self-confidence offered by being filled with the fulness of God. We need God-esteem and God-confidence that comes from the outside.

God actually has the power and authority to give you an identity.

This is a whole new identity source offered to those who put their hope in Jesus. In Christ. It's over and over in this passage. As you received Him, so walk in Him. Rooted and built up in Him. You have been filled in Him. Read further in verses 12-13 and it's a whole new identity, in Him raised from death to life. Other places in the New Testament describe it as being clothed in Him; wrapped in His righteousness. In chapter 3, Paul calls Him "Christ, who is your life."

1) What I do.

No longer need what I do to define me. He succeeded so I can fail. My security doesn't come from the work of my hands, but by the work of his hands.

2) What I have.

It's not my clothing that shows who I am. It's the fact that I am clothed in Jesus righteousness that shows who I am. It's not what I own, it's that I am owned by God. Bought with a price. Now stuff can just be stuff. And I increasingly want to store my treasure in heaven and not here.

3) Who I have.

No wife, husband, child, best friend or group could possibly fulfill me when what I need is God. He or she is not gonna fix you. You need the confidence of a love that will never leave nor forsake you.

4) My desires.

I have access to God, at whose right hand are pleasures forevermore. In denying my immediate desires I gain access to gratifying deeper, soul level desires. I have access to living water, why would I look to quench my thirst elsewhere.

If you're a Christian, then the truest true thing about you is that you are in Christ. Your identity is anchored in his accomplishments, not yours. His strength, not yours. His performance, not yours. His victory, not yours.

Nothing can shake that identity. Nothing can take it away. It cannot be lost by poor performance because it wasn't received due to good performance. This means if you are in Him, you are now free from what others think about you and from what you think about yourself.

- Now you can spend your life giving up your place for others instead of guarding it from others, because your identity is in Christ and not your place.
- You can help others succeed and accomplish. You can rejoice when they do because you aren't competing with them to prove yourself through your accomplishments.
- You can give instead of take, because your identity is in Christ and not your possessions.
- You can serve instead of being served, because your identity isn't in lofty position.
- You can make a big deal out of others instead of always needing to draw attention to yourself, because your identity is in Christ and not in others affirmation and approval.

Do you see how free this makes you? Free to succeed without getting proud, free to fail without despairing. Free to love, sacrifice, give, risk. Flip over to chapter 3 and Paul will wrap up with how to build our identity by looking upward, not inward.

Colossians 3:1-4

If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

"Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth."

According to the American gospel of looking inside to find yourself, "The most important thing we can think about is ourselves. The most important thing to understand is ourselves." But the most important thing is not understanding who I am. The most important thing is understanding God. Who He is. What He's done for us. Who He's made us to be.

Setting our minds on His glory, His perfection, His beauty, His accomplishments, His power, His graciousness, His generosity. Fill your mind with the beautiful, unbelievable glory of God! And then realize that this God has bended to love you. Paused to notice you. Suffered to redeem you.

Our deepest joy and freedom is not found in focusing on ourselves more but in losing ourselves as we focus on him.

If we spend more time finding ourselves than finding God, something is wrong.

If I'm more interested in studying myself and my personality type than I am interested in learning God's character and attributes, something is wrong.

What we need ultimately is not more self-care. But more worship. Which turns out to be the greatest self-care possible.

And certainly there are some aspects of learning how He's made us, what my gifts and strengths are and how I'm wired...that's all good stuff. But it's not ultimate. Valuable though you are, your soul was made to gaze at eternal things. To truly find your identity, take your eyes off yourself and set them on God.

For those of you who aren't believers - I want you to know this is what's available to you. I think any other way you try to build your identity is going to be lacking.