

Sermon – ESTABLISH Identity
Sunday May 9, 2021

We're in a series called *Following Jesus: Find Your Next Step*. This series is about discipleship.

What is discipleship? Discipleship is the life-long process of living daily with Jesus and being transformed into his character. At Cornerstone, we say that discipleship is:

BEING with Jesus to LEARN from Jesus how to BECOME like Jesus.

As a church, this is our number one job - to make disciples.

How do we do that? At Cornerstone, we use a 5-part framework that we call the Discipleship Pathway. Pastor Steve touched on this last week and in the coming weeks we'll go deeper into each of the five areas, that we call the five Es.

On the final Sunday, you'll get to try our very own custom online discipleship assessment tool that we've been developing. So we hope you're excited!

Today, we'll going to look at the first E in our Discipleship Pathway: **Establishing our Identity in Jesus**. These are spaces for Jesus to shape our sense of who we are in him. Because as disciples, the most important thing about you is who you are in Jesus.

Personally, this is an area where God has been doing a deep work in my life.

When I was five, I had a favourite superhero. You probably didn't know that. But if you have a guess about who it might be, **type it into the chat. ("Guess who Pastor Jeremy's favourite superhero is?")**

So who was my favourite superhero? The answer of course is Superman! I would run around the house with a red towel tied around my neck. I would jump off stairs pretending I could fly.

You can imagine how excited I was when our school announced a Halloween parade. Every kid would dress up in their Halloween costume and march throughout the school. Of course, I wanted to dress up as Superman, but there was only one problem. I didn't have a costume.

But my dad came to the rescue. He drew the Superman "S" on a piece of paper, coloured it with markers, and taped it onto my blue t-shirt.

That "S" was like the Earth's yellow sun giving me my superpowers. I was over the moon! But all those feelings would change the next day when I went to school. Because when I walked into my classroom, guess what every other boy was dressed as? Superman. Only they had these amazing store-bought costumes.

My excitement for the parade instantly turned to dread. The "S" on my chest could have stood for shame. And as if things couldn't get any worse, my "S" actually came off my shirt. It must have fallen off somewhere in between classes because when I looked down at my shirt, the only thing on it were the three pieces of masking tape that were holding up my "S".

Can you believe that? I wasn't even discount Superman... I was Tape Boy!

Type into the chat, "Go get'em Tape Boy!"

That day was supposed to be a day of glory for the son of Krypton. All the other boys looked great in their costumes, while I felt like a fake! I wanted to get out of there faster than a speeding bullet!

This was decades ago. But do you know that even now, there are times when I still feel like that little boy. Times when I feel like an impostor. Times when I feel like everyone in the room is better than me.

Have you ever experienced a moment that marked you?

[Response Moment: Have you ever experienced a moment that marked you? Yes]

- A hurtful word that was spoken
- A mistake that you made
- Something someone did to you

These moments have a way of marking us and defining our identity. And your identity is the most important thing about you.

Your identity is who you are. It's how you think about yourself. It's what makes you you. Your identity determines how you make sense of the world and how you'll live.

But here's the thing. You and I hear voices all the time telling you who you are and who you should be.

- Sometimes the voices come in your pain.
- Sometimes the voices come in what others say about you.
- Sometimes the voices come through culture and the messages you get about how you should look or what success really looks like.

Someone once said that life is about identity construction. And the sad truth is, many of us have allowed these other voices to construct our identity for us. As a result, we don't really know who we are. Like a chameleon, we change our identity to adapt to the circumstances and the people around us.

Have you ever noticed how you're one person in one setting? But in another setting, you're a different person. And then on social media, you're someone else?

That's not an identity, that's an image. So here's a question for you: **Do you have an IDENTITY or an IMAGE?**

Maybe you're exhausted because you're constantly trying to project a certain image to others. Maybe you're anxious because you're always afraid people will find out you're a fraud. You spend all your energy trying to maintain an external image while inside you feel empty. There's nothing there.

One author says that real identity is who you are when you think no one is watching, not the image you project because of what you want others to think about you.

So who are you? That's our question today. What I want to do is look at how we can establish our identity in Jesus by looking at how Jesus established his identity. To do that, we're going to look at the book of Mark.

Who was this book written to? It was written to Christians in Rome who were being persecuted. The Roman emperor Nero had started a fire and blamed the Christians. He wanted to torture and kill them.

Back then, to be a follower of Jesus meant persecution. This was enormous pressure! I don't know about you, but it's easy for me to follow Jesus when things are going well. But it's much harder when it involves suffering.

You and I might not be facing persecution, but we are facing tremendous pressures.

- Health concerns
- Uncertainty about the future
- Financial strain
- Relational stress
- Anxiety and depression

It's to people who were struggling with what it means to follow Jesus in adversity that Mark writes his gospel. Mark chapter 1, verse 9:

One day Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee, and John baptized him in the Jordan River. As Jesus came up out of the water, he saw the heavens splitting apart and the Holy Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice from heaven said, "You are my dearly loved Son, and you bring me great joy." (Mark 1:9-11, NLT)

A major theme in the book of Mark is the theme of identity.

When the disciples argue over who was the greatest, what does Jesus do? He takes a little child and tells them to welcome a child like this in his name. In doing so, he exposes their identity around power and invites them to establish their identity in him.

When a rich young ruler asks Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life, what does Jesus do? He tells him to sell all his possessions and give the money to the poor. In doing so, he exposes his identity around wealth and invites him to establish his identity in him.

Throughout Mark's gospel, Jesus invites his followers to establish their identity in him.

In this passage, before Jesus begins his ministry, what does he do? He establishes his identity. He settles the question of Who am I? Because he knows who he is. He knows where his significance comes from. Where does Jesus get his identity?

Verse 11: And a voice from heaven said, "You are my dearly loved Son, and you bring me great joy."

It's like Jesus is asking, Who am I? And his Heavenly Father says, You are my dearly loved Son. This is who you are, over and against all the voices that will come against you.

Jesus would battle those other voices all his life. Those voices would tell him who he should be and what he should do.

Those voices spoke through his pain. When he prayed in the garden at his impending death. When his friends abandoned him. When he was rejected and tortured.

Those voices spoke through other people. Through the disciples who wanted him to be a different kind of Saviour. Through the religious leaders who wanted him to keep the status quo. Through his own family who thought he was crazy.

Those voices spoke through culture. The religious culture at the time believed that the Messiah wasn't supposed to come in weakness, but in power.

How does Jesus overcome all this pressure?

Jesus knew who he was. He knew his identity. He knew that he was loved by God. And he lived his life and completed his assignment *out of that identity*.

You are my dearly loved Son, and you bring me great joy.

If you're going to overcome the pressures you face and complete the assignment God has given you, you need to know who you are. You need to establish your identity in Jesus because **everything in your life flows out of your identity**.

So who are you? Are you who others think you are? Are you what you've accomplished? Are you what you have? How can you know who you are?

Blaise Pascal, the famous French philosopher said, **Not only can we know God through Jesus Christ alone, but we also can only know ourselves through Jesus Christ alone.** [Show quote on screen]

Apart from Jesus, you can't know who you are. Your identity, meaning and significance are all found in Christ.

This phrase "in Christ" is used about a hundred forty times in the Bible. The Bible uses this term more than any other term to describe a follower of Jesus. These passages refer to our identity. In other words, the Bible is saying, because you're in Christ, this is your identity, this is who you are.

When you're in Christ, God looks at you the way he looks at Jesus. He looks at you and says, you are my beloved child and you bring me great joy.

The Apostle John says: See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called the children of God! And that is what we are! (1 John 3:1)

You need to remember that the most important thing about you is that you are loved by God.

- Even when your boyfriend or girlfriend dumps you.
- Even when you don't get into the school you want.
- Even when you someone else gets that promotion.
- Even when a friend betrays you.
- Even when you're sick.
- Even when your marriage falls apart.

Even when all these things happen, when you're in Christ, God says, you are my beloved child.

Would you type that into the chat: I am God's beloved child.

At Cornerstone, we have resources and ministries designed to help you establish your identity in Jesus as a beloved child of God.

In addition to this identity marker, we've identified other identity markers as well. In Jesus:

- You're a disciple
- You're a participant in God's story
- You're a soldier of Christ (engaged in spiritual warfare)
- You're a member of God's family
- You're a steward of your time, talent and treasure
- You're a disciple-maker

But central to all these identity markers is that you are a beloved child of God.

The most important thing about you is that you are loved by God. That is who you are. Over and against all the other voices that want to define you.

Jesus battled those voices all his life. In fact, right after his baptism, he was tempted in the wilderness.

Author Henri Nouwen says that Satan tempted Jesus, just as he tempts you and me with three counterfeit identities.

The first counterfeit identity is **You are what you do**. You're the roles you play – you're a mother, a doctor, a student, an athlete. Your significance is found in these roles and in the success you achieve.

But the problem with this identity is that you'll only feel good about yourself as long as you perform. Because if you fail a test, miss a goal or lose your role, you won't know who you are anymore.

The second counterfeit identity is **You are what other people think**. When you don't know who you are, you need others to tell you. So you change your identity depending on who you're with.

But the problem with this your identity is that you'll only feel good about yourself as long as people like you. But if you lose your friends and popularity, you'll fall into depression.

The third counterfeit identity is **You are what you have**. The idea is that you'll have more worth if you have more stuff. More status, more education, more wealth.

But the problem with this identity is that you'll never have enough. Celebrities have more power and money than we can imagine, but many of them still feel empty. Having more stuff doesn't mean you'll feel significant.

Why? Because every counterfeit identity is only an illusion. It's an image, there's no substance to it. Because it's not who you really are. And the irony is that you and I spend so much of our time and energy maintaining this image. Projecting this image to others. Using and manipulating people instead of loving them.

But the truth is, these counterfeits can't give you significance.

The only identity that can do that is an identity established in Jesus. Because you're not what you do, you're not what other people think of you and you're not what you have. Who are you? You are God's beloved child.

Maybe you're thinking, this isn't anything new. I've heard this before. And you probably have. Maybe you even grew up in church hearing that God loves you. But for some reason, you know it in your head but you don't feel it in your heart. It hasn't transformed you. Why not?

How many of you know what the largest land animal is? **Type your guess into the chat.**

If you guessed an elephant, way to go! But how is this related to your identity?

Here's how. Even though the elephant is the largest animal on earth, did you know that it can be kept in place by just by a piece of rope?

How is that possible?

What happened was this. When the elephant was just a baby, someone used a rope to hold it in place.

[Show picture of elephant with rope around leg]

Back then the baby elephant was weak and vulnerable. It would struggle and pull against the rope, but despite its best efforts, it soon realized that it was powerless against it.

So what did it do? It lost hope. It believed the lie that the rope had power over him. Even as he grew stronger and could have easily broken free, it was too late. The lie had been planted. The elephant was a captive not because of the rope but because of the lie that it was powerless.

Do you realize that this is your story as well?

The truth is, **there's a spiritual battle over your identity.** The Bible says that you have an Enemy who has a goal: to destroy your life.

Jesus says,

"I tell you the truth, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me were thieves and robbers. But the true sheep did not listen to them. Yes, I am the gate. Those who come in through me will be saved. They will come and go freely and will find good pastures. The thief's purpose is to steal and kill and destroy. My purpose is to give them a rich and satisfying life. (John 10:7-10, NLT)

You and I have an enemy. He's trying to destroy us. He can't create anything new so his strategy is to use lies. That's why Jesus calls him a liar and the father of lies (John 8:44).

Because he knows that if he can tie you up with a rope when you're vulnerable, he can keep you from discovering who you were meant to be.

Elephants weren't meant to be captives. Elephants were meant to be free. And do you know what an elephant that's just been set free looks like?

It looks like this.

[Show picture of running elephant.]

Don't you love this image? It always brings a smile to my face! The joy, the freedom. Do you realize that this is a picture of what you were created for?

Would you say a blessing over someone right now and **type into the chat, “Run free, you crazy elephant!”**

Many years ago, a piece of rope was used against an innocent and heartbroken kid... with tape on his shirt. It told him the lie that he didn't belong, that he was an impostor and that others were better than him. And that boy believed it.

For years, he lived out of a counterfeit identity. He found significance by working hard and performing - first at school and later at work. Because as long as he did well, he felt good about himself. But when he didn't, he felt like a failure.

That is, until God helped him to establish his identity in Jesus. God helped him to name that lie and break free of his rope. God gave him the love and significance he had been searching for his whole life.

And you know what? With God's help, that boy broke free.

I want to share another picture with you now. It's a picture of that same boy who wanted to be Superman many years ago but now as an adult. This picture is a picture of not only of his wedding day when he married the woman of his dreams. It's also a picture of the redeeming power (and the sense of humour) of our loving Heavenly Father.

[Show: Jeremy's Wedding Photo]

This Superman-wannabe is now a crazy elephant, running free because he knows that he's a beloved child of God. But he also keeps coming back to this truth. Why? Because that rope hasn't entirely lost all of its power yet. But he's growing in his identity and with God's help overcoming.

So what's your story? What lie has the enemy planted in your mind? What rope is tying you down?

- Maybe you never got the attention you needed and you believed the lie that you're unloved.
- Maybe others always got things that you wanted and you believed the lie that you're insignificant.
- Maybe you're not where you hoped you would be and you believed the lie that you're a failure.
- Maybe you were betrayed, someone walked away from you and you believed the lie that you're rejected.
- Maybe you were hurt and abused and you believed the lie that you're damaged.

Listen up, guys. Your circumstances may have marked you, but they don't define you. Your parents may have wounded you, but they can't tell you who you are.

To reclaim your identity, you need to recognize that there's a spiritual battle. Other voices are telling you who you are. You have an enemy who's trying to steal your identity through lies.

But Jesus is the Good Shepherd and his sheep know his voice. Because the truth is, you're not defined by your mistakes, struggles, addictions, divorce, feelings, failures or circumstances.

Who are you? You are who God says you are. You're his beloved child.

So it doesn't matter what's happened to you. It doesn't matter what others have called you. It doesn't even matter what you've called yourself. There's only One who has the authority to tell you who you are and he says that

- You are loved with an everlasting love (Jeremiah 31:3)
- You are chosen before the creation of the world (Ephesians 1:4, 11)
- You are adopted as his child (Ephesians 1:5)
- You are holy and blameless (Ephesians 1:4)
- You are healed and forgiven (Ephesians 1:8; Colossians 1:14)
- You are no longer condemned (Romans 8:1, 2)
- You are a dwelling for his Spirit (Ephesians 2:22)
- You are more than a conqueror (Romans 8:37)
- And you can be confident that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion (Philippians 1:6)
- Because you are God's beloved child (John 1:12)

I know we're all online, but can I get an Amen?

Establishing your identity in Jesus isn't something you just do once. It's not a one and done. You need to come back to it, over and over again.

Jesus went away regularly to pray. And during those times, he surely reminded himself of who he is. If Jesus needed to do that, how much more do you and I need to do that?

You need to spend regular time with Jesus in scripture, prayer and worship. You need to come back to these truths and claim them personally for yourself. You need to let them sink deep in your soul so that they move from your head to your heart.

For some of you, maybe you don't have a personal relationship with Jesus yet. Maybe you've defined yourself by other things instead of by Jesus.

What you need is God's identity, what you need is God's love, what you need is God. If that's you, **type into the chat, "I need you God."**

God wants to reveal himself to you today. That's why he sent his son, Jesus. Jesus demonstrates God's love for the world. He has compassion for hurting and broken people like you and me. People flocked to him because when he was around, they felt known and accepted.

Jesus was sent to die on a cross. Why? So that your sins can be forgiven, so that you can be a new creation, so that you can be part of God's mission. It's his death that breaks the rope and sets the captives free. So that if you call on the name of Jesus, God will say to you, You are my beloved son, you are my beloved daughter – now run free you crazy elephant!

I want to encourage you now to come to Jesus. Come to him with your fears, come to him with your wounds, come to him with your sins. Just come, and say to Jesus, I need you. Forgive my sins and set me free. Give me a new identity.

If that's you, would you join me in praying this prayer now.

Heavenly Father,

Would you forgive my sins. Thank you for Jesus who died for me to make me new and to give me a new identity. I don't want to be a fan anymore; I want to be a follower. Set me free from the lies. I reject all those counterfeit identities and I establish my identity in Jesus today. Fill me with your Spirit so that I can live out my identity by loving others and bringing healing to the world.

Amen

[Show prayer on screen]

If you just prayed that prayer, would you say, "Jesus, I give you my life" and click the button in the chat.

[Response moment: Jesus, I give you my life!]

If you'd like someone to pray with you now, there are people who would love to do that. Just click the prayer button.

Who are you? You are God's beloved child.

Keep coming back to this truth, over and over again. Claim it personally for yourself until it moves from your head to your heart.

At this time, we have a special treat. The amazing mother and daughter duo of Kristy and Claire are going to sing a powerful song over us. As you listen to these words, take it all in and let your heart respond to the one who alone has the right to tell you who you are.