

Crisis Management *Identity*

When you think about yourself, what kind of thoughts do you have? Do you like yourself? What goes through your mind when you look in the mirror? Do you wish you were taller, shorter, thinner, more intelligent, better looking?

Sometimes we have a hard time accepting ourselves, don't we? This is something that affects us at all ages, accentuated at some times more than others. A deficient self-concept is one of those things that can be a real stumbling block to becoming all that God wants you to be, to real freedom in Christ.

Dr. Maurice Wagner says: "Self-concept is the sense of being somebody" (*The Sensation of Being Somebody*). He goes on to describe self-concept as a "mental picture that represents a person's opinion of himself."

We all have a mental picture of who we are. It goes to the concept of identity.

The dictionary definition of the word *identity* includes:

- The condition of being oneself or itself, and not another
- Condition or character as to who a person or what a thing is

We all have an identity, a self-concept. It shapes how we think of ourselves and conditions us to the way we live in light of those thoughts. The writer of Proverbs says, "As one thinks within himself, so is he" (*Proverbs 23:7*).

Erwin Lutzer writes: "Ever give a four-year-old a cowboy hat? He'll ride every article of furniture. The carpet becomes a pasture and every imaginable object becomes a cow. It's a basic axiom of psychology that we become what we perceive ourselves to be. (Erwin Lutzer, *You're Richer Than You Think*)

I want us to consider three questions today: 1) How do we define ourselves? 2) Why do we struggle with identity? And, 3) how do you develop a good self-concept?

I. How do we define ourselves?

When someone asks you the question: "Who are you," how do you usually answer? "I'm pastor at Knollwood Community Church." "If you are asked that by

another mother at your children's school, "I'm Mary's mother." Asked at work, "I'm an Air Force major;" "I'm a system's analyst;" "I'm a program manager;" etc.

How often we answer the question, "Who are you," by what we do. Our job defines us; our title or position defines us. Or maybe our spouse defines us. Or our hobbies, our talents, our passions define us.

The beginning of our self-concept comes by how our parents, siblings and friends define us. And the consequences of that last far into adulthood.

One day Charlie Brown was talking to his friend Linus about the pervasive sense of inadequacy he felt all the time. Charlie moaned, "You see, Linus, it goes all the way back to the beginning. The moment I was born and set foot on the stage of life they took one look at me and said, 'Not right for the part.'"

There is a fellow in the Old Testament whose beginning was defined by the name his parents gave him. We're going to talk about him throughout this morning. Turn in your Bible to the book of Genesis, chapter 25.

Genesis 25:21-28

The younger's name is Jacob, which means "cheater" or "deceiver." Can you imagine how his view of himself developed over time? His brother and friends might have constantly been: "Hey deceiver. Cheat anybody today?" Do you think that's going to affect him?

Genesis 25:29-34 He cheated his brother out of his birthright. We will come back to Jacob later.

II. Why do we struggle identity? There are many reasons, but let me suggest three.

A. We don't know *why* we have worth, value or meaning.

Psychologists, counselors, etc. today cannot tell you why you should have meaning. They just know we need to *feel good* about ourselves. And so you are told to do certain things that will make you feel good, but they are never able to tell you *why* life should be of value, why you should feel good.

When one of our boys was in junior high school, he came home one day with an assignment from his math class. He was to write a report on Michelangelo. That sounded a little strange. This was a time when the Fairfax County education system was working on what was called “outcome-based” education.

The purpose of writing a report on Michelangelo, we found out, was so those who weren't good in math could still feel good about themselves. The whole thrust of this approach to education was to build self-esteem.

Not long ago I read that there was a movement among teachers to stop using red pens to point out mistakes in children's homework. The reason? It makes them feel bad about themselves.

The Bible is very clear in its teaching about the basis of value and worth. We'll come back to Genesis, but turn in your Bible to the Psalms – Psalm 139.

Psalm 139:13-18

David says that every person has intrinsic value and worth because they were created by God. This truth has been severely impacted by what the Bible calls sin. It has marred our experience and obscured this image of God in whom we were created.

But the world that denies God today can't find a basis for intrinsic worth that needs to lie at the foundation of a healthy self-concept. One of the consequences of this:

B. We struggle to live up to the expectations of others. This might be our family, our friends, our culture.

Jacob fell under the spell of his mother who helped him build upon the meaning of his name. Before Jacob and Esau were born, God had said that the younger would be served by the older. He would be the more prominent. Jacob's mom was going to help God out.

Genesis 27 – Isaac is getting near to death so he summons his firstborn, tells him to go out and kill some game and prepare a meal for him. Then he would bless Esau with the blessing of the firstborn before he died.

Isaac's wife, Rebekah – who favored Jacob of the two sons, overheard and helped Jacob plan to deceive his father. So they carried out a plan of deception that had

Jacob disguise himself in a way that his father would mistake him for his older brother. The deceit worked and Isaac blessed Jacob thinking him Esau. Now...

Genesis 27:30-36

Jacob, living out the life of a cheater, a deceiver, runs for his life. We'll continue on with his story after a bit.

I remember a Hill staffer I met in my early years of ministering in Washington. Lee was from Wisconsin. He was brilliant, had his Ph.D., had a responsible position working for a Member of Congress.

But all his life growing up, his parents compared him to his older brother. "Why can't you be like him?" "You'll never amount to anything." It developed a lack of self-esteem even though he had accomplished much more than his brother. But it was beat into him that he wouldn't amount to anything.

A few years before I met Lee, he had gone home to visit his parents. He heard the same refrain from his father. The day before he left to return to Washington, he dropped his dad off at the front door of his office building. It was a circular drive. As Lee drove out of the driveway, his father collapsed on the sidewalk and died.

Lee felt that if he had only looked in his rear-view mirror and seen his dad collapse, he could have gone back and saved him. He knew CPR. Lee was now living with the reality that he would never be able to prove he was different that his dad believed. He could never live up to his dad's expectations, his father's standards.

The world tells us who should think well of themselves – those who are "cool," beautiful, talented, poised, athletic, successful, etc. We try to live up to these standards, but we usually fall so far short. And what happens to our self-concept? What happens to our sense of value and worth as a person? Down the tubes!

Our perception of other's evaluations of us affects us greatly. Someone once said, "You're not what you think you are; you're not what others think you are. You are what you think others think you are."

We also tend to believe what others say about us, whether true or not. Nancy and I enjoy watching American Idol. Of course, the most delightful part for me is the

beginning auditions. It is fascinating to see how people's perception of themselves is sometimes so wrong. Here's a good example. Watch this audition:

youtube.com clip – Mary Roach

It is easy to become enslaved to other's perceptions of us. And our self-concept ends up in bondage to other's opinions or our perception of their opinions. This can often lead to one of three courses of action:

1) We fear failure so much that we never even try. We don't attempt anything; we have no track record, nothing to reinforce a healthy self-concept.

2) We masquerade. We pretend to be somebody we really are not.

Story of the circus gorilla.

When we see we really don't measure up, it is easy to pretend. We try to create an image which isn't representative of our inner person.

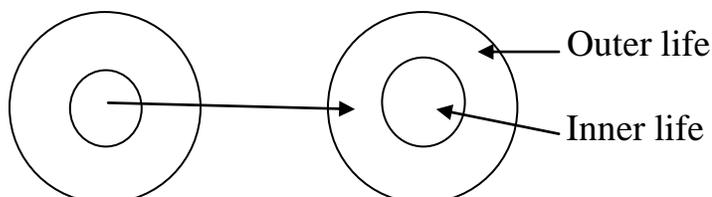
3) We live under a cloud of failure, trying harder and harder to catch up to that phantom image of who we would like to be. But like the oasis mirage in the desert, when we approach, it fades from sight only to appear again, faraway, and we drive on.

The danger is that we just assume this is who we are. This is the way it's going to be. Charlie Brown tells Lucy about his birdhouse project: "Well, I'm a lousy carpenter. I can't nail straight. I can't saw straight, and I always split the wood. I'm nervous, I lack confidence, I'm stupid, I have poor taste and absolutely no sense of design."

And then in the last frame he concludes: "So, all things considered, it's coming along okay."

A third reason why we struggle with a healthy self-image is because:

C. We make false comparisons. Here's how it works.



Comparing:

Inner —————> Outer
Reality —————> Image

You will never win this comparison. So why compare? I can always find someone worse off than I am. But I can also find someone smarter, better looking, more accomplished, etc. I saddle myself with a poor self-concept.

III. How do you develop a good, healthy self-concept?

A. Realize that you have a right to one and a basis for one.

Genesis 1:26 tells us that each one of us was created in the image of God. We need to get our perspective correct. Our view can be deceiving. Like the man who walked into the psychiatrist's office with a bullfrog sticking out of his forehead.

The psychiatrist couldn't believe what he saw. He brought the man into his office, had him sit down, and then said: "Now tell me what's wrong."

The bullfrog said, "It all started with this wart on my back!"

Even though every person is God's creation, not all are God's children. Look what the Apostle John writes in the beginning of his Gospel:

But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God. – *John 1:12*

When you believe that Jesus Christ died for your sins, that through his death you can be forgiven, and you place your trust in him alone for salvation, God brings you into his eternal family.

Let's go back to talk about Jacob. Jacob's life continues to be shaped by his name – deceiver, cheater. After he runs away from his brother who is seeking to kill him, he ends up at his uncle's place, working for him. He falls in love with Rachel, the younger daughter of Uncle Laban and agrees to work for seven years in exchange for her hand in marriage.

But this is where his name and life caught up with him. On his wedding night, Laban got Jacob royally plowed, drunk as a skunk. When Jacob went into the

marriage chamber, three sheets to the wind, good old Uncle Laban snuck his older daughter Leah into the tent. Jacob woke up the next morning to a little surprise.

The deceiver was deceived! The cheater was cheated! So he agrees to work another seven years for the right to marry his real love, Rachel. Boy, does this family become dysfunctional!

Jacob prospers and eventually decides to return home. And this is where he has an amazing encounter with God. In Genesis, chapter 32, Jacob wrestles with God.

Genesis 32:22-30

This was the story of Jacob's life: he had wrestled with his brother, cheating him; he had wrestled with his father, cheating him; he had wrestled with Laban and been cheated; and now he is wrestling with God.

Something, though, was changing with Jacob. He clings to the angel, perhaps as we see often in the Old Testament – the pre-incarnate Christ, and cries out for a blessing. He wants change. And the angel responds to his request with a question that is very telling. Kent Hughes, in his commentary on Genesis, writes:

In the context of the Bible, to disclose your name could be an act of self-disclosure, a revelation of your character, your deepest identity. So the assailant asked the question, "What is your name?" And he said, 'Jacob'." Here it was a confession of guilt – "I am a fraud. I am a deceiver. I am supplanter. I am rightly named Jacob, for I cheated my brother twice!" This confession evoked amazing, transforming grace, because instead of merely blessing him, his assailant changed Jacob's name, announcing his new character.

This new name would come to characterize his life; it would be the source of a new identity, a new self-concept. Jacob would never be the same, and his life would never be the same. He would begin to demonstrate through his words and actions a new identity, a new character.

Turn over in the New Testament to the book of Ephesians (page 1242). This is a section we were in on Wednesday night's Bible study. It speaks to a change in identity that needs to lead to a change in how we see ourselves that needs to lead to a change in how we live.

First, in chapter two, Paul describes our identity before and apart from Christ.

Ephesians 2:1-3

If you are here this morning and have never placed your trust in Jesus Christ, this is your identity: dead in your trespasses and sins, a child of God's wrath – as we all were!

But in chapter one, Paul describes a change in identity when we come to faith in Christ. Here's your identity in and through Jesus, the Messiah:

- You are blessed with every spiritual blessing
- You are chosen by God for himself
- You are adopted as his child
- You are redeemed, purchased out of the slave market of sin
- You are forgiven
- You are enlightened, that you might know God's purposes
- You are made God's inheritance
- You are secured in your salvation through the indwelling Spirit

Who are you? "I'm a child of the King." That's my identity. That's how God sees me today. And that's how you and I, as God's children, must see ourselves.

Here's another essential thing you must do develop a healthy, Biblical self-concept:

B. Learn to live in Christ

Pascal, the French physicist, philosopher, mathematician and writer of the mid 17th century wrote:

Not only do we know God by Jesus Christ alone, but we know ourselves only by Jesus Christ.

Your life is written in two volumes. Volume One is who you were apart from Christ. That's Ephesians, chapter two. Volume Two is your identity in Christ, your great spiritual wealth in Christ. That's Ephesians, chapter one. You are immensely rich, blessed beyond measure or imagination.

Volume One: under judgment and condemnation

Volume Two: a child of the King, and heir to eternal life, forgiven and restored.

Which volume are you living in today?

If you have never trusted in Christ, the message for you today is an invitation to become part of God's family, to have a new identity. All that is necessary is to believe that Jesus Christ died for your sins, that he is the only way to forgiveness and eternal life. As an act of your will, put your trust in him. Ask him to be the Savior of your life.

If you know Christ, live in him. No longer allow the identity you had apart from Christ to rule your thoughts and actions. Submit to God's gracious control and choose to live in the way that accurately reflects who you really are in Christ.

You need to change the way you think about yourself. Life is still a struggle for control: my identity without Christ versus my identity as a child of God, a joint-heir with Christ.

This is where we must take command of our thoughts and think rightly about who we are, what is our identity. Harold Blake Walker writes:

There are times when our children, perhaps unconsciously, see into the heart of life, after the fashion of the little girl who remarked: "Mother, I've had such a happy time today."

"Really," her mother answered. "What made today different from yesterday?" The child thought a moment and responded, "Yesterday my thoughts pushed me around and today I pushed my thoughts around."

As one thinks within himself, so is he.