Believe: “Who Am I?”
John 1:12

We are on the fifth week of our Believe series where we are addressing 30 of the most important questions that all people ask such as “Who is God?” “How Can I know God and His will for my Life?” and today our question is perhaps one of the most important questions that we all ask at some point, “Who Am I?”

As Christians, our belief statement regarding our identity can be summed up this way: I believe I am significant because of my position as a child of God.

Our scripture memory verse that anchors this belief statement is found in John 1:12: But as many as received Him, He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name.

The biblical declaration of our identity is central to the Christian faith, and I’m going to wager that many of us here today may actually be unaware of how powerful and liberating this belief is when it actually makes its way into our hearts.

Now, once again, this subject is wide and deep, and I only have a few minutes. So my outline this morning will fall into four main headings: 1) defining “identity”; 2) three sources of identity; and finally, 3) living into our identity.

1. Defining identity.
In his book, Making Sense of God, Dr. Timothy Keller devotes several chapters to this question of identity, and I STRONGLY encourage you all to pick up a copy of that book and read the very well researched and insightful work that Keller provides there. Here’s a bit about how Keller defines this concept of identity. He writes that our identity consists of at least two things. The first is a sense of self that is durable. Given that we move in many different spheres from family, to work, to time with friends, to times alone, your identity is that part of yourself that is sustained and always true of you in every setting. Without this sense of self that is durable, there would only be a series of masks that you wear depending on the setting, but there would be no actual sense of self. The second key component of our identity is a sense of worth, an assessment of your own value. Keller contends that it’s not enough to know things about yourself…we must also come to a place where we understand why our lives matter. In other words, what about you makes you feel that your life is worthwhile. It is the combination of our sense of self with our sense of worth that composes our identity. Now…how is our identity formed?

2) There are three primary sources of identity.
First, in ancient cultures, and many eastern cultures even to this day, identity formation comes from the community. You are defined by your family or your tribe. Your station in life is something that you are born into. So for instance, you might be born the son of a blacksmith, so you are the “blacksmith’s son” and it would be expected that your value would come from serving your father and eventually continuing on with his business after he ages or passes on. Your value would also be enhanced by serving the community as a fireman or a warrior of the tribe. Even though you may have desires to spread your wings and do something other than bang horseshoes, honor in the ancient cultures was gained by denying your individual desires for the sake of fulfilling your duty to the community.

Now, in the Western world and our modern culture, our identity formation comes through “expressive individualism” (Robert Bellah, Habits of the Heart). Modern secularism teaches that we can develop ourselves only by looking inward, by detaching and leaving home, religious communities, and all other requirements so that we can make our own choices and determine who we are for ourselves. Consider the messaging we hear in every movie we watch, every song that we listen to on the radio…every motivational speaker at work--they all say essentially the same thing: Don’t worry what others think about you…you don’t need their affirmation. Just affirm yourself because you are doing what you want to do. You can be whoever you want to be, and it doesn’t matter what anyone thinks.

So…we have two primary ways to form our identity: 1) what the community thinks about me; or 2) what I think about me. Both of these cultural modes of identity have pros and cons, and both can lead to a crushing existence. For example, the eastern cultures can crush your identity when you lose your honor. We’ve all seen those movies when the Japanese warrior has lost his honor…he is very quick to shove a sword through his heart, right? Once honor is lost in the traditional community, it is all but impossible for your “value” to be restored. Your dishonorable “self” follows you wherever you go, and since your identity is tied to the community, to leave the community would be to abandon your identity all together.

The modern, western identity will also crush you, and here’s the primary reason why: we really cannot “affirm” ourselves. We don’t have enough objectivity to look deep within ourselves and then assess how we are doing, particularly given the competing desires that we all have within us. For example: If I have a deep desire to own my own company, our culture tells me that I should pursue my dream and not give a thought to what other people think of me. However, that desire may likely compete and even contradict my desire to be a good husband and father. Now, if I am the only source of my affirmation, how will I ever discern if I am both a great boss and at the same time a great father and husband? Am I qualified to declare myself as a great husband, or do I need some input from my wife on that subject? Is there any chance of being a great husband and father when you are pursuing your selfish dream to own your company and you don’t care what anyone else thinks about you? What if I don’t care what my wife thinks about
me? You see what I mean? As much as we hate to admit it, all human beings are desperate to be affirmed by outside sources, and particularly sources that we trust. Such is why we are constantly posting pictures of ourselves on social media, right? We may think we are rugged individuals who don’t care what others think, but that is not actually true. We generally don’t care what the other side thinks of us, but we are desperate for the affirmation of “our people” who think like us, look like us, and generally agree with us. For example: if I post one of my sermons online, it doesn’t bother me all that much if a snarky atheist takes a shot at what I said in my sermon…I would expect that person to disagree with me and to devalue my work. However, if another pastor takes issue with my sermon, then I am likely to question the value of my work because I need qualified people to provide feedback and evaluation of how I am doing.

Once again, if my sense of self and my sense of worth are self-created, when I don’t get the affirmation that I need, my whole identity can be shaken. If my work doesn’t get affirmed, I am not only crushed by the appraisal of others, I am also crushed by my failure to live up to my self-appointed identity. This vulnerability to have our identity crushed is even more exasperated by the fickle nature of our cultural norms. In other words, “your people” keep changing their minds! What is “in” and “appropriate” today may very well change tomorrow, so the standard by which we are measured is inconsistent…and that is maddening.

Now, there is a third source of our identity formation, and I would suggest that it is the healthiest and most reliable source for us to base our sense of self and our sense of worth. Of course I am referring to 3) A biblical definition of our identity.

Within the biblical worldview, my identity does not rest on what the community thinks of me, nor does my identity rest on what I think of me; rather, my identity is formed and informed by what God thinks of me.

Why would it matter what God thinks of me? First of all, there is no higher authority than God …so God’s opinion of me should and does matter more than the fickle opinions and assessments of men and women, even myself right? Second, God’s standard for how I am doing is both objective and unchanging, so we can actually get a sense of how we’re doing that is not constantly changing based on our conflicting desires or our cultural biases.

So…what does the Bible say about our identity? Well, let’s look at what the Bible says about 1) our identity in our natural state, and then 2) what the Bible offers us in terms of a new identity in Christ.

According to the Bible, in our natural state, our identity is a mix of good news and bad news! The good news is this: we are fearfully and wonderfully made (Psalm 139). God knit us together in our mother’s womb. He knows us intimately and has every hair on our head numbered. We
learn in Genesis that we were made by God in God’s image; we are both personal and moral; and we are stewards of the creation with responsibilities to manage all that God has given to us.

The bad news about our natural identity is that we carry within us the curse of disobedience. This condition is a big deal, because our sin against God separates us from Him.

Paul writes in Ephesians 2, “And you were dead in your transgressions and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the desires of the body and the mind and were by nature children of wrath like the rest of mankind.”

Here in Eph. 2 we find a clear definition of our identity in the natural state. We are “sons of disobedience,”…we are by nature children of wrath. Now…that may seem a bit heavy for a Sunday morning, and perhaps you feel like that perspective is too negative and you would like to find a different God who has a more cheerful disposition. But listen friends: did anything about what we just read sound all that unreasonable given what’s happening in the world around us and what’s happening in us? Not really. The course of this world is crazy, right? And we know, don’t we, that if we were held up against God’s standard…we would be condemned for what we have done and what we have left undone. So…in our natural, fallen state, we are beautiful, but we are terribly broken. In our natural state, we are sons of disobedience and children of wrath…which means we are NOT naturally in a relationship with the God who created us.

BUT…God has done something about our natural condition, and that leads us to the offer of a new identity in Christ. Look at what comes next in Ephesians 2 beginning with vs. 4, “But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ!”

In Jesus, God made a way for human beings to be reconciled to God…and Paul tells us in Ephesians 1…that was always God’s plan. In vss.4-7 we read, “In love, God predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace…”

So here is the new identity that we find all throughout the New Testament for those who receive what Jesus accomplished on the cross and believe on His name.

1) You have infinite value! God gave us His Son, Jesus Christ, who is infinite, beautiful, and perfect…because HE thought us worthy of that investment. Your value does not come from what the culture thinks of you or what you think of you…your value comes from what God thinks of
you. Jesus thought you and I were worth dying for. That is how much God values your life…God truly does love you.

2) You are made alive! When you repent and receive Jesus Christ, believing in His name, you are made alive…you are born…again (John 3). But this time you are not born into the natural state of condemnation; you are born anew in the spirit so that when God looks upon you, He no longer sees your sin…He sees His Son. Such is why Paul writes in Romans 8:1, “There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. For God has done what the law…could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.” In Colossians 2:13 Paul writes, “And you, who were dead in your trespasses…God made alive together with him having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands.”

3) That leads us to the third hugely important aspect of your Christian identity: You are forgiven! A biblical identity in Christ means that you are one who has been forgiven…your debt has been canceled…you are no longer condemned…you are free. That truth is so powerful you could spend the rest of your life trying to absorb it. The Gospel declares that your case has been settled. Jesus paid your fine. He purchased your soul for God with His own blood. It is finished. Paul writes in Colossians 3:3, “Your life is hidden with Christ in God.” From now on and for all eternity, your life is hidden with Christ. When God looks at you, He sees His son. And that brings us to the pinnacle of your new identity in Christ.

4) You are adopted as a child of God! Paul writes again in Romans 8, “You have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry ‘Abba! Father!’ The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God…”

As we read earlier from the gospel of John: To all who received Jesus, who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.

As Christians, you are children of God…and your Father in Heaven delights in you. God no longer looks upon your sin and turns away…your sins have been washed away. Your relationship with God has been fully restored, and your Father delights in you.

3) Living Into Our Identity

Now, let me ask a question of those who are Christians here this morning: how many of you know that your identity in Christ is all that I’ve just said? How many of you know in your head…you believe this to be true…that you have infinite value, that you are loved, that you have been made alive/born again, that you have been forgiven, and that you have been adopted in God’s family as children of God? Now…how many of you live every day as though that was
true? Many of us know the declarations of our new identity that are found in the scripture, but most of us struggle with living into that identity. That brings us to the last point of my message this morning, and that is: Living into our Identity.

All Christians initially struggle with accepting and living into the new identity that Jesus purchased for us on the cross. There are several obstacles that we must overcome with time.

First, there are the lies that we hear all day long from the Father of Lies…Satan himself. Yes, Satan is real, and He hates the Children of God. Scripture reveals that our Enemy has been a liar from the beginning, and he constantly lies to God’s children, just as he lied to Adam and Eve. Every day, we hear suggestions in our minds as to our identity, and many of those suggestions are lies. When you hear how pathetic you are, that’s a lie. When you hear how disappointed God is in the way you have turned out, that’s a lie. When you hear that you are totally alone and that nobody understands you, that’s a lie. When you hear that you are so messed up that nobody could ever love you, that’s a lie. When you hear that God would accept you if just tried harder and did more good deeds…that’s a lie. There are so many lies that we hear every day, and sometimes we can brush them off. But when we’re tired, when we are sick, when we are suffering, when we are depressed…those lies can be overwhelming. I hear those lies, too, and they drive me crazy because I’m inclined to agree with the Liar rather than God; but I must resist the lies. In order to live into my identity as a child of God, I must resist the lies of Satan and cling to what is true as we find it written in God’s Word. Such is why regular time in the Word, regular times of worship, and regular times of meaningful, transparent sharing in Christian community is so crucial to embracing and maintaining our Christian identity.

Another challenge we face is our battle with shame. Shame comes about when we are convinced that we are damaged goods either because of something we did or something that was done to us. Remember, guilt is feeling bad about what you’ve done; shame is feeling bad about who you are. Shame is an identity statement…and shame is a hard thing to shake for many people. For most people who battle shame, their crushed sense of identity leads them to avoid people or to hide from people. But listen: that is exactly the opposite of what we actually need. We need a safe community of believers where we can be affirmed of our identity in Christ. I need that kind of community…we all do.

We also battle our bad habits. Bad habits are hard to break, and when we find ourselves doing those things we know we should not be doing, we are very quick to fall back into old patterns of thinking, including the way we think of our identity. That’s a problem for all of us, but let me remind you: your identity is not based upon what you do—your identity is now established in what Christ has done. No matter how poorly you think of yourself, your opinion has no bearing on your identity. Your identity is now defined exclusively based upon how the Father thinks about you, and His love is not fickle or fleeting. Those old habits will need to go, but the best
medicine for breaking old habits is gratitude. Practice gratitude for who you are now in Christ, and you will be amazed how that sets you free from old patterns of thinking and behavior.

I will close with a recent story of battling the satanic lies, re-discovering my true identity in Christian community, and the transforming power that had on my life.

Earlier this spring I was invited to join a group of pastors on a fly-fishing trip. The stated goal of the trip was to build unity among various pastor/leaders in our city, to pray for our city, and to enjoy some quality time together. Of course, the goal for me was to catch fish! If you are visiting with us today, our congregation is well acquainted with my fishing obsession!

So, we were on our third day of the trip. It was late in the afternoon and there were several us fishing in the stream. We were all catching a fish here and there, but at some point I entered into what I call, “The Zone.” Having worked the stream for a few days, and having found the right lure and the right presentation, I was in the zone for about 90 minutes. I must have caught 20-30 trout in that period of time…it was magical. I remember it vividly, because everything slowed down and it was all breathtaking for me….the sun on the water, the sound of the current on the rocks, the rhythm of my rod and the line screaming off my reel with each run of those giant trout…it was mesmerizing…and it was FUN! I mean, it was like heaven for me. When I get in that zone, nothing else matters. I’m unaware of everything else…I am literally in my happy place!

So naturally, I was the last one to finally, begrudgingly get out of the river for dinner. Then, as I made my way back to the cabin, I remember hearing, “You love fishing too much. You should have been talking with the other pastors and spending time getting to know them, but instead you just got in the zone and totally ignored everyone else. And you probably ticked off several of those guys who were not catching dozens of fish like you were. You’re pathetic.” That’s all it took…I agreed with what I heard, and I immediately felt ashamed and I found myself once again feeling that I was a poor excuse for a pastor.

A few hours later, as we were waiting for the food to be served at the restaurant where we were gathered, Pastor Michael---an old friend and a wonderful pastor--came over to me, looked me in the eye, and said, “Jim, I need to tell you what happened this afternoon. I don’t know if you noticed, but I quit early and was chilling out underneath the shade tree up there on the bank not far from where you were fishing. And for some time I was watching you fish, and man, you were catching fish left and right. And as I was watching you, I heard the Father say, “Look at him! That’s my boy!”

At that moment, and for just a moment, I caught a glimpse of the way my Father sees me…and I was undone. I broke down into tears right there in the restaurant. It never…never occurred to me
that my Father in Heaven might ENJOY watching me fish! It never occurred to me that He might elbow some poor bystander and brag proudly, “That’s my boy! Look at him cast that rod! Isn’t he something?” But then it occurred to me: that’s exactly the way I feel when I see my boys doing their thing…totally forgetting themselves…when they are “in the zone” of whatever they are doing. I delight in my sons. And I realized…I have been hearing and agreeing with lies about my identity, when all this time, my Father delights in me. He delights in me, and He enjoys me.

Is that biblically accurate? You bet it is Psalm 147:11, “The Lord takes pleasure in those who fear him, in those who hope in his steadfast love.” My Father takes pleasure in me…His son. He gets a kick out of watching me fish.

That short glimpse into how I look in my Father’s eyes has changed my life. You know what…If you could ever see how God sees you…it would change your life as well.

Church, claim your identity. Live into your identity. Resist the lie, take to heart who God says you are.

For those who have not been forgiven in Christ, I invite you to consider the claims of the Gospel and this offer of a new identity…an identity as one who has infinite value, as one who is forgiven, as one who has been made alive, as one who has been adopted as a child of God…as one who is deeply loved and enjoyed by your Father in Heaven. The invitation is for all who will repent and place their faith in the Jesus.

Will you pray with me?