

Reclaiming Our Stolen Identity

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Welcome everyone to this third part of our online healing retreat in which I'm going to be talking about reclaiming our stolen identity. Let's pray. *In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen. Heavenly Father, we beg you to send your Holy Spirit upon us to enlighten our minds, and to reveal to us, oh God, the two things that are most important for any human being to know. Who are you, Lord? And who am I? We pray, Father, that you would give us that revelation that would renew our minds and that would equip us and strengthen us to carry out the mission that you have for each one of us. And we ask all this through Christ our Lord, Amen. Mary, star of evangelization, pray for us. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.*

Well, recently I have had to deal with the issue of identity theft. Someone actually stole my personal information. I don't know how they got ahold of it. They used it to open a fraudulent bank account, several accounts, actually, and then overdrew on those accounts. It caused a big mess, it's a headache, it took a lot to clean it up, and a couple times it became easy to lose my peace and joy. But that whole experience has caused me to think more deeply about greater identity theft, the biggest identity theft in history. -Which was when the Evil One came into the Garden of Eden and robbed our first parents of their identity as royal children of God and stewards of God over all creation.

He came in and insinuated lies that made them feel unprotected, uncared for, unloved, on their own. They had to grasp what they needed and wanted for themselves instead of trusting God. And really the Evil One has been doing the same to the children of Adam and Eve throughout all history. And I think he spends a lot of time, actually, thinking about how he can plunder you specifically of your identity as a daughter or Son of God. And he's a fallen angel who's very smart. Of course, nothing compared to God, but very smart, and he knows how to push our buttons, and he knows how to do things that will rob us of what belongs to us as our inheritance as children of God.

Well, when Jesus, the Son of God, became man, the Evil One actually tried the same strategy on him. Jesus knows our experience from within. Remember, at the baptism of Jesus, a key moment in the life of Jesus which launched his whole public ministry, he heard the voice of God from heaven. ***"You are my beloved Son, in whom I'm well pleased."*** That's exactly what God says to each one of us at

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our baptism. -These words of incredible affirmation and love and being pleased with each one of us whom he has created in his image.

Well, God says that to Jesus, said that to Jesus at his baptism, and immediately afterward, Jesus was tempted by the Evil One in the desert. Notice the very first thing that Satan said to him, according to the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. Satan said, *"If you are the Son of God, do this, do that."* Notice how he's sowing doubt and suspicion about the very thing that God had just affirmed to Jesus. And he's trying to get Jesus to do these great spectacular miracles in order to prove his identity as Son of God. So why is the Evil One doing that? Because if he can get Jesus to doubt his identity as the beloved Son, then he can get Jesus to try to build up or puff up his own identity based on what he does. -These spectacles that will attract crowds and make him popular and feed people with bread and win approval and esteem from other people. And if Jesus does that, then he'll be a messiah other than that willed by the Father, and Satan will have won.

Well, of course, Jesus refused that temptation, he didn't buy it, because his whole human heart was so anchored in the Father, and he believed and rooted his whole life in what the Father had said to him. *"You are my beloved Son."* He lived his whole life with his eyes fixed on the Father. And you see that through his whole public ministry. Jesus never needed his ego to be supported or stroked or propped up by any human being. He was never defensive, he had nothing to defend. Flattery couldn't move him at all, nor could insult move him at all. He would not budge from his position rooted and grounded in the Father, confident in the Father's love for him and the mission the Father had given him. He lived in the heart of the Father.

There are times in the Gospels when his adversaries would really lay on the flattery. And they said things like, "Teacher, we know that you are true and teach the ways of God truthfully and are not concerned with anyone's opinion. You do not regard a person's status. Now tell us whether we need to pay taxes to Caesar." They're hoping that all of this effusive praise will make him let down his guard and he can fall into their trap. And he doesn't buy it, he doesn't budge. Other times, they take the opposite tactic. "Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners. Look at the lowlife company he hangs out with." One time, they even say in the Gospel of John, "Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and have a demon?" There is no worse insult that could be imagined for a Jew. Jesus ignored it. Or they would threaten him. "Jesus, Herod wants to kill you." He simply says, "Go tell that fox, behold, I cast out demons and perform healings today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my course." In other words, I don't move from the course on which the Father has sent me. I don't get

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knocked off my position by any human threats. Nothing could derail him from the Father's plan. And finally, in the end, he's condemned as a common criminal. He's crucified between two crooks. -Such an affront to his holiness, his righteousness as the Son of God. But he bore it in incredible humility, because his identity wasn't rooted in what people thought of him or how they treated him. It was rooted in the Father.

So that's Jesus. Now what about us? Well, because of our stolen identity, we're all born with a kind of identity crisis, and we're all in some ways deeply insecure about who we are. And so it's a tendency of fallen human nature that we base our identity on created things, like what we achieve, or what others think of you, or how beautiful or sexy or athletic or esteemed or popular or intellectually brilliant you are. Or for those of us who are believers in the Lord, even how holy you are and how holy other people think you are. All of those are a false foundation for our identity. Today also people build their identity or base their identity on their sexual inclinations, or what ethnic group they belong to, or what political party they belong to. And again, none of those are enduring or stable foundations for our identity.

We also tend to compare ourselves. Because of that insecure position, because of our lack of confidence in our identity as God's children, we tend to compare ourselves with other people. We measure ourselves against other people. We're constantly thinking about, who am I above or who am I below? And what follows from that is if anyone says something that undermines our sense of who we are, we can react out of offense. We can get deeply offended. Sometimes we may even get crushed.

And just as with Jesus, the Evil One is trying to do everything in his power to undermine our identity. And the reason he wants to undermine our identity is so that he can derail our destiny, because our destiny is rooted in our identity. -And so just like he said to Jesus, "If you are the Son of God, do this to prove it." So he says to us, in our thinking, in our minds, "If you are a daughter of God, if you are a son of God, then how come you've blown it so often? How come you've sinned so often? How come you've failed in that way? How come that prayer didn't get answered? How come God didn't seem to be providing for you in that circumstance?" And the Evil One is always insinuating lies, like, "You're a loser." "You'll never get holy." "You might as well just give up." "You don't pray enough." "You're not virtuous enough." "You fail too often, you're probably always going to fail." And actually following from that, the Evil One says, "Well, you need to make up for your sins. It's your effort that is going to make up for your sins. You're not worthy to be used by God." All of those are lies that can tend to

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distract us and derail us from the beautiful mission that the Lord has for us, walking with him, walking in the Holy Spirit. So we have to be aware of those strategies of the enemy, and we have to know how to combat them in Christ.

One of the parables Jesus told I think illustrates this really well. It's the parable of the prodigal son in the Gospel of Luke 15. I think, really, in a way, the more interesting part of the story is the part about the older son. Not the one who ran away and wasted his inheritance, but the one who was always with the father and obedient. And, in many ways, he represents faithful Christians. So the younger brother comes home and the father throws a party to celebrate. And when the older boy hears about it, he's furious. And he complains to his father. "Look, these many years I have served you and I never disobeyed your command. Yet you never even gave me a kid go to have a party with my friends." So it's as if he's saying, as if we're saying to God, "All these years I've served you." Actually, the word there is literally, "I have slaved for you." "I slaved for you." "I never missed mass." "I never disobeyed your commands." "I served the parish, I donated regularly," "I've volunteered my time, I've tried to be good. And yet you let this happen to me. It's not fair, you haven't given me what I deserve."

But what's underlying this mentality in the older brother? It's a slave mentality. He actually doesn't see himself as a son. His identity is not the identity of a son, but a slave. He's a hard worker and he's obedient, but he doesn't really know his father. And his father speaks to him with such love. "My son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours." Wow. What's the key to this story? This older son has been living beneath his privileges as a son. Why did he get no kid go to have a party with his friends? He didn't realize that every goat on the estate and everything on the estate is his. The father says, "Everything I have is yours. It's yours to use and enjoy." He was living beneath his status as a son, living beneath his privileges. He was ignorant of his father's love for him and generosity. How many Christians are similarly living with a slave mentality, not knowing who they are as a royal son or daughter? Even those serving the Lord sometimes can have a slave or servant mentality rather than the mentality of a beloved son or daughter. The Lord has many servants, but not as many lovers.

Well, it's only the Holy Spirit who can reveal to us in the deepest part of our being who we really are as sons and daughters of God. If I were to ask you, you know, are you a child of God? Probably 100% of people listening would say, "Yes, I know. I know I'm a son or daughter of God. I learned that when I was catechized, or I heard it from the priest, or I've heard it many times. I know I'm a child of God." But it's one thing to get the answer right, and it's another thing to really know it in your knower. And only the Holy Spirit can do that.

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Saint Paul says in Romans 8:15, ***"You have not received the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the spirit of sonship."*** That's the Holy Spirit who shows us in our heart that we are truly sons and daughters in the Son, sons and daughters beloved by God. And Paul goes on, ***"When we cry, 'Abba, Father,' it is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God."*** The Holy Spirit testifies to us interiorly. He gives us that powerful, powerful testimony that nobody can deny, that you are God's beloved child.

So I'd like to end by praying and just inviting you to pray with me. *In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen. Holy Spirit, we ask you to show us who or what has robbed us of our identity. It may be an experience of having been judged unfairly. For some, it may be a very painful experience of rejection or abandonment, even abandonment by a parent that can deeply wound a child's identity, or abandonment by a spouse, or other forms of rejection, or other ways that you may not have been honored in your dignity as a woman or man, as a child of God.*

Lord, we ask you to reach down into our memory of those times when our identity was not recognized; our dignity was not honored, and heal us. Lord, we pray that by the sword of your Holy Spirit you would cut away whatever is false, whatever lies may have been planted in us by the sins of other people or even our own sins, and restore our identity, who we truly are as your beloved children.

And Holy Spirit, we also ask you to show us any false foundations that we have built our identity on. Lord, help us to see where we find our security. Is it in my achievements? My looks? My popularity? My successes? My income? My talents and gifts? Even my sexual inclinations? Or belonging to a certain group? Lord, not all of those things are wrong, but they cannot be the foundation of who we are.

Help us, oh God, to look to you and to base our lives on the truth that you have revealed. That though we were once alienated from you because of sin, we have been redeemed in Christ. We have been reconciled to you, adopted by you, held up, Lord, like a little child, embraced by the Father, held to your cheek, embraced with infinite love and affection. Help us, oh Lord, to rest our head on your shoulder. To hear your heartbeat. To abide in the dwelling place of your love for us. And we ask all this through Christ our Lord. Amen.