



## Reclaiming You I.D.entity in Christ: Work ID

### Ephesians 2:1-9

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October 30, 2016

We are looking this month at who we are in Christ Jesus our Lord in an effort to reclaim our truest identity as children of God. See, identity, being the truest thing about us, has a tendency to shape our behavior. That is to say, what you think about yourself – the identity you claim to be the foundation of who you are – is the leading difference maker in your actions, your words, your beliefs, and even in your thoughts. Despite what some would say, the perceptions of others do make a difference, and can often times lead to our assuming false identities that end up negatively impacting our behavior.

We discussed last week the ‘early and often factor’ that plays a large role in our Photo ID. The information we receive about ourselves from others beginning at a young age, and the information that we receive about ourselves on a regular basis throughout our lives, tends to impact how we perceive ourselves. The information that comes early and often, while not always true, tends to take root in how we self-identify. Having shaped out identity, it becomes the basis of our behavior.

Again, we discussed last week the impact the early and often factor plays when we are defined by our Photo IDs: descriptors and comments that are based on visible characteristics and traits begin to shape our identity. The early and often factor also plays a role in our Work ID, which will be our focus today.

Our Work ID is best described as finding our identity in our successes and failures. “Most of us have a tendency, or a default, to find our identity in what we do.”<sup>i</sup> Don’t let the title confuse you, this isn’t just about your occupation, it could be whatever role defines your actions. Just to name some examples to get your minds thinking this morning, certainly occupational categories are being described here. We have Work IDs such as teacher, fireman, senator, chef, pastor, contractor, or bank teller. But occupational job titles do not have a stronghold on our Work IDs. Other descriptors that define the work we do could be such titles as: PTA president, coach, usher, community activist, weekend warrior, even mom and dad.

To once again emphasize, our premise in reclaiming our identity in Christ is not to stick our noses up at such titles; they are not necessarily bad titles to hold, and certainly some are not false titles to claim. It is not a negative or untrue remark to be called a lawyer, or a captain, or a vocalist, or an organist, or a liturgist. But none of those titles shape the truest identity we are given by Scripture as claimed, holy, blameless, adopted, and loved children of God. And we know, and scripture makes it clear, that our actions – our behavior – will be shaped by the identity we claim as our truest foundation.

The truest thing about you is not that you are divorced, addicted, college educated, a CEO, homeless, independently wealthy, customer service agent, a cheater or cheated on. These may be true of you, but they are not you.

Yet, when it comes to our Work IDs, being defined by our failures and successes, the things we do or have done, more often than not we focus on our past. We think that who we are today, and who we will be in the future, is based on what we *have* done, or on the ways we *have* acted previously. This is a common practice in our society, just ask any human resource agent or college admissions office whether or not they care about resumes. We tell our children that they need – emphasis on the word *need* – as many extra curriculars on their college applications forms as possible because their past behaviors, failures, and success will be the determining factors as to their acceptance.

As a society, we treat past behavior as the most indicative sign of what to expect in future behavior. In fact, even in the world of church leadership, there are all kinds of clergy training programs that try to determine for a clergy person what church scenarios they should or should not be appointed to based on past successes and failures. The idea of past behaviors predicting future behaviors assumes that we have always been living out of our truest identity, which has shaped all our previous behaviors. You can imagine how such failures and successes shape our identity. If I'm going to be treated as someone who is guilty of things from my past, then I'm going to live as if I'm guilty of them in the future. Or, if I have succeeded in using certain tools well in the past, then I'll continue to use those tools in the future. Our behavior shapes our identity, and then our identity shapes our behavior.

I had a senior pastor once, Rev. Alan Felumlee, who told the story of the first time he was ever invited to return to his home church to preach the homecoming service. He had been ordained and serving as a pastor for a few years and had been removed from his hometown for sometime having gone away to college and seminary. His hometown was a small, fairly rural community – the kind where everyone knows each other. The church ran ads in the local community papers and put signs up on the wallboards in the local stores and barbershop. They all highlighted that the church was celebrating their homecoming, and named that Rev. Alan Felumlee, a local son, was going to be returning to offer the sermon for the day.

Well, the day came and the church was packed, as you would expect for a homecoming celebration. Certainly some folks there had come specifically because of this pastor's guest appearance in the pulpit. Rev. Felumlee says he was somewhat distracted as he preached as there were two elderly women sitting about half way back in the room who kept turning to each other, whispering, and chuckling to each other. They did this a number of times as he preached. He says he didn't know who they were at the time, but that they looked vaguely familiar to him.

Following the service, he stood by the exit door in the narthex shaking hands as we pastors do. These two women came up to him, still laughing, and explained that they had seen his name in the local paper and just had to come and see it for themselves. They introduced themselves as

Mrs. Smith and Mrs. Truex, who had taught him in high school. They could not fathom that this man, who had been their student in grade school, had grown up to be a pastor. They just had to come and see it with their own eyes, the miracle that God can do in our lives. They knew him as a teenager – his behavior patterns, his actions, his successes and failures – and couldn't believe that he, with that past, had become a minister.

Paul addresses this mentality in our passage in Ephesians this morning. See, the Gentiles had been defined by what they had done – who they had been prior to joining in the life of Christ. Paul begins in verse 1 of this second chapter, “You were ...” He is speaking directly to the Gentiles, a group of converted persons to Christianity that had never before been part of the work of God in the world. They had not been a part of the faithful community of Israel. Paul says, “You *were* dead through your trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of the world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient.” There is no hope for those who are in denial of their sin. Paul paints a grim picture for those who have not come to know the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

In verse 3, Paul ropes the Jewish converts to Christianity back in to the conversation. He begins, “All of us ...”, that is, all who are a part of the Christian church, “All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else.” Paul says we have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. There is not one among us who has not at some time lived out of an evil passion that is marked by the sin of the world, that seeks to please the flesh and the self.

Paul has to name that we have all failed, because at the time, the Jewish community in the Christian church was trying to cast blame on the Gentile church for their lack of faith in the past. The Jewish converts were playing the holier than thou card on the Gentiles, saying that the failure of the Gentiles to believe in God in the past defined who they were going to be in the future. Paul comes along and doesn't write off the failures of the past in the Gentile community; he doesn't excuse them for their lack of faith prior. But Paul says, while you were dead because of your sin, we *all* have lived among you having had sinful passions of the flesh. Truly, we all have failures that could be used to define our pasts.

But then Paul continues, and hear this word, because it's an all important word in the scriptural text. Paul says, “But ...” “But ...” “Hold on,” he says, “there's more to be said that hasn't yet been said.”

“But,” Paul says, “But God ...”

“But God!”

“But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through trespasses, made us alive together with Christ.” God didn't wait to love you until you have finished all your failures. God loved you even when you were dead in your sin –

and God, God alone, has been the one to bring you together in Christ and to give you life. Verse 5 continues, “By grace you have been saved – and [God] raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness towards us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your doing. It is the gift of God – not the result of works, so that no one may boast.”

This is why identity is so important. If we classify ourselves as broken people, who are nothing more than the sum of our successes and failures ... if we classify ourselves as no better than our expressed capabilities and behaviors ... if we identify our core being as nothing more than our Work IDs ... then our behaviors will never change. We will always act, speak, think, believe, and do all things as if our truest identity going forward is determined by the that which we have done before.

Left to our own vices, that is what would be true. We would justified in using such small minded adjectives and descriptors to define one another.

There was historical figure in the life of the Christian church named Pelagius, who lived in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries. “[He] contended that down deep we are basically good people who are capable of making progress. The function of theology [he argued,] is to appeal to our better motives, to motivate us to be the story of people we know we ought to become.”<sup>ii</sup> Sounds really nice. Yet, he was declared a heretic by the Council of Carthage a few years before his death, the heresy of this belief in Christianity is known as Pelagianism. He was told he was wrong by the greater witness of the Christian community.

St. Augustine of Hippo was one of those at the front lines in rejecting Pelagianism. He claimed in opposition, “We are sinners. We are prone to do and to be wrong. God must therefore do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. We are saved by grace, not by our own works. Our salvation is an act of God, not the result of our earnest efforts.”<sup>iii</sup>

When we allow our Work IDs to shape our identity, when we let our Work IDs shape our behavior, a few things inevitably happen. First, we find this immense pressure to perform. We feel like we always have to be “on,” that we can never take time to rest in Sabbath. Second, we fear any and all failure. We live as if any failure will be indicative of continuing failures. Third, we experience constant comparisons. We compare ourselves to others and we place great importance on the comparisons made by others. Fourth, we end up with wrecked relationships. We see other people for what they can be for us, leading us to overlook people or to use them. And fifth, we experience great fatigue and frustration. We place so much importance on our identity as successful individuals (success being defined by society), that we wear ourselves out trying to please everyone else.

Paul says there is a better way in Christ. We need not be defined by the work we do; our identity is not dependent on our successes and failures. Our work is not that which defines us.

It is not your doing that will save you, it is the foundational identity of who you are as one who is claimed by God.

One last thing:

“God’s agency does not eliminate human agency. God’s grace enables and summons human agency.”<sup>iv</sup> As one whose truest identity is found and rooted in God’s claim on your life, it does not mean you will work no more. Your behavior, which flows from your identity as one who is claimed and adopted by God, will not cease to be a behavior that exhibits work being done in the world. But, it does mean that the work you do will not be about self-glorification, societal greatness, personal wealth, or self-identity. “God’s blessings enable and invite humans to bless God. It is not that God’s grace will take us only so far, and then the human agency must complete the task. It is God’s grace all along.” When we identify as called, claimed, loved, and holy children of God, the work we do will be an extension of what God is doing in us and through us.

That is our call as the faithful, that is our call as a church, to exemplify in the world the reality that exists when we live out of our truest identity as children of the risen Lord. So may you live, as a child of God.

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<sup>i</sup> Kyle Idleman. *Work ID*. <https://www.southeastchristian.org> Retrieved October 26, 2016.

<sup>ii</sup> Allen Verhey and Joseph S. Harvard. *Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible: Ephesians*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press. 1991

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid.