

The Great Questions of Life
“Who Am I?”

Kevin Haah
Romans 8: 14-17



January 28, 2018

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[Slide Title] We are in the middle of the series called, **The Great Questions of Life**. We are looking at some of the first order questions of life. A lot of go through life without thinking about the most important questions: Where do we come from? How do I know what is right and wrong? Who am I? Where are we going? What is the meaning of life? We are going to look at these questions as we start out the new year.

[Slide] Today, I am going to focus on the question: **“Who Am I?”**

I remember my life as a teenager. I was a little nervous about asking girls out. I didn't know how to act at times. I would say the wrong things. I remember my friend telling me, just be yourself. Have you had people say that to you? I remember thinking, who is that? Who am I?

[Slide] I think there are three ways to approach our identity: (1) discover the true self in the inside (“self-discovery approach”); (2) be who you want to be (“build your identity approach”); and (3) the gospel-identity approach.

[Slide] Let's start with the first approach. There are a lot of people who say you need look deeply within yourself and find your true self. If you Google “finding your identity,” you get a huge list of how to find yourself, three questions to ask to find your true self, etc. The assumption is that there is a true self, and you need to find that and live your life authentically. You could dig into your desires, gifts, passions, skills, character, etc and find yourself. I would call this “identity by self-discovery approach.” But, there are some problems with this approach.

First, our self-perspective is often (although not always) a conglomeration of what people say about us. If people told you that you are a good person, a loving person, a gentle person, then you think of yourself as such. If people told you that you are a loser and you won't amount to much, no matter what you think about yourself, what others say often defines you. Now, if you are a sort of person who do not care what others say about you, believing that you are the person you believe you are on the inside, that sounds good, but still, it begs the questions regarding how to got to believe who you are on the inside. What if what you believe you are on the inside were just a product of what

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others said about you? How do you determine who you are in the midst of this confusion?

Second, what if you examined your heart, your inside, and saw that you are full of deception, you are not as smart, you are not as pretty, you are not as good. What if you find that your heart is full of resentment? What do you do? I know some of you ended up medicating yourselves because you didn't like the person who saw in the inside. Maybe you didn't like the person you saw on the outside. You didn't like who you are. It's a confusing world. Or, what if you have an inflated view of yourself? What if you believe that you are the best thing in the world. You believe you are the smartest in the world. "I am the least racist person in the world." "I am the most loving person in the world." While we are at it: "I am the humblest person in the world." What if you are narcissistic? Are you supposed to find that and just be that?

Third, this perspective assumes that who you are in the inside is the real self that you need to wake up. Is there a true self? I think the answer might be yes in some areas: maybe your personality, maybe your base passions, maybe your underlying gifts. But, is your identity merely your personality, passion and gifts? Is there more to who you are? How about what kind of character you have? You know, you can find your personality, passion and gift and still want to kill yourself. You don't have a sense of worth about who you are. Where do you find an identity that tells you you are worth something, that you are somebody?

[Slide] So, let's go to the second approach. Another way that we approach identity is to say that we should be who we want to be. I remember when I was in the sixth grade, my cousin who graduated from college came to visit us. He said he has the secret to success. He made us guess what that secret is for hours. He was so sure that it was the way. He finally said, just be who you want to be. I think he meant we should believe in ourselves and build our own identity. Don't let anyone tell you who you are, just be who you want to be. Underlying this approach is that we can work hard to be who we want to be. Let me call this approach, "build your own identity approach." But, this approach has its problems.

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First, what if you fail or think you failed? I went to Cornell Law School in Ithaca New York. The campus has beautiful huge gorges. There are bridges over the gorges that are hundreds of feet above the base of the gorge. And Cornell is known to be a school that has a lot of students committing suicide jumping into these gorges. So, they had to build a railing around the bridge to prevent people from jumping especially during the finals. A lot of these students built their identity on being a smart person. They made it to the school and they find thousands of other students who are smarter than them. Somehow, their identity of being smart went down the drain. When your identity is shaken, that's the time when you get depressed and feel like you've lost yourself. Getting an F is not just getting an F and maybe not getting that job you dreamed of. It destroys who you are if you built your identity on being a smart guy.

Second, if we build our identity on our work, we become enslaved to that which we are working for. You fear failure so much that you become workaholic. You fear failure so much that you ignore other priorities in your life. You know you should spend more time with your family, but you don't. If you are building your identity on being a strong person, a caring person, an open person, and these are all good things, but you can fly off the handle when someone even insinuates that you are weak, or that you are not as caring, or you are somewhat close minded. Why? Because they are not just criticizing your behavior; they are messing with your identity. A life of building our identity on our work is tiring. You always feel like you don't measure up. You fear being found out. So, you hide. Now, there is also a problem with this view the way we view others. If you build your identity on your works, you can't help but to criticize those who don't measure up. You do that to yourself. Don't you think you do that to others?

Now, we all need to feel good about ourselves morally as well. We have a need to believe that we are a good person. So, if you work hard and become somewhat good in your definition of good, you judge other who you believe are not. How can you not? You worked so hard to be good. And if you can't be good enough, you either change the rules and focus on the rules that you can keep and ignore others (that's what the Pharisees

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were doing) or you become blind to your faults. You can't face the part of yourself that is not as good. This is a problem.

[Slide] Is there another way to approach identity? Let's look at the gospel-identity approach.

The gospel tells us three things about who we are. First, you and I were created in the image of God to have a relationship with God and with one another. We are not just animals that happened to be smarter. We are a spiritual being with the dignity and capacity for a relationship with our Creator. Our identity was clear. We were friends of God. We were children of God. We were lovers of God. We joined in the fellowship of the Triune God. Our life flowed out of our identity in him. When our identity was in him, there was life.

Second, we, however, walked away from God and sinned and marred the beauty of what God has created, both in ourselves and in our world. As we were separated from God, we lost a sense of who we are. This is not just about what happened to Adam and Eve. This is a story of us. We have walked away from God and tried to find our identity in something else. We tried to find it deep within us through self-discovery, but found that there is actually darkness within us. When we became honest with ourselves, we found that we are full of resentments, full of lies that we have been told and we tell ourselves about ourselves, full of desires we don't want to have but have, full of blame and self-righteousness, full of pride and judgment, and we don't like what we see. We are often trying to find something new to either forget or medicate what we find in ourselves. There is sin in us. **[Slide]** Jeremiah 17:9 says:

**⁹ The heart is deceitful above all things
and beyond cure.**

Who can understand it?

Jesus said, **[Slide]** Matthew 15:19:

**¹⁹ For out of the heart come evil thoughts—murder, adultery, sexual immorality,
theft, false testimony, slander.**

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The gospel tells us that when we dig deep inside our hearts, we don't find goodness. We find evil.

Even if we tried to be better, even when we tried to build our identity in something good, we can't find it. That's what the Pharisees during the time of Jesus was doing. They were finding their identity in their works. They worked hard to obey the laws of God. They put their identity on their ability to follow God's laws. But, this ended disastrously. They became self-righteous, hypocritical, and judgmental towards others. They excluded others in the name of God. They failed to love others because they were trying to find their identity through what they did.

Third, God continued to love all of us. And when time came, he came in the person of Jesus Christ and gave himself for us. He died for us. Through death, he atoned for our sins. **[Slide]** He loved us so much that Apostle Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:21 that: ²¹ God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. He paid the debt we couldn't pay. He redeemed us. That means he paid the ransom to free us from slavery to sin. Why? Because he loves us. God's love is forever and unending. Do you know what this means? It means that we are adopted into the family of God. We are a child of God. That's who we are!

[Slide] Romans 8:14-17, which is really the pinnacle of the Bible, says this:

¹⁴ For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God. ¹⁵ The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father." ¹⁶ The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. ¹⁷ Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.

You are a son of God. You are a child of God. We cry out "abba father" which means daddy, father. This is the most intimate way to address a father: abba! He uses the word sons not because he is patriarchal and sexist but because sons had all the rights in that society. He is saying that when we repent and put our faith in the work of Jesus, instead

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of in our hearts through self-discovery or in our own effort, we are adopted as the sons of God. This identity as an adopted son does not come because we are good, because we are successful, because we followed all the rules, because we are beautiful, or because of anything we have accomplished. It comes by grace, which just means an undeserved gift. God loves us so much that he adopted us. That's who we are. That's unshakable. That's at the foundation of our identity. If God is the King, you are a prince, a princess.

[Slide—Keep this Slide up Until the End] Let's review for a second. First, God tells us that we are created in His image. We are a person of worth and intrinsic value. Second, we became more messed up than we think we are. But, third, God loves us so much that he gave his life for us that whosoever believes in him should have life, and not just good life but life as a child of God in relationship with God, with a new identity in Christ.

Each of these aspects are very important to our identity. We need to know and understand that all men and women are of intrinsic value and worth. God loves each and everyone of us, whether we believe in him or not. God wants a relationship with all of us and God wants us to treat everyone with dignity and honor.

Let me skip to the third aspect first and will get to the second aspect.

We need to know that God loves us and we are his sons. That's our identity no matter what because we didn't earn it. He gave it to us because he loves us. We merely received as a gift, through grace. When we build our identity on who God says we are, it is something that completely frees us.

- You don't have to do something to be somebody; you are already somebody because of what Jesus has done for you.
- You have to be beautiful to be somebody; you are already somebody because of what Jesus has done for you.
- You don't have to be successful to be somebody; you are already somebody because of what Jesus has done for you.
- You don't have to hide your heart and pretend like you are somebody to be somebody; you are already somebody because of what Jesus has done for you.

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- You don't even have to clean yourself up to be somebody; you are already somebody because of what Jesus has done for you.

When we hold on to this identity that comes by grace through his everlasting love for us, we are now ready to dig into our hearts and see the reality of who we are and start the process of cleaning the inside of our heart, what our recovery ministry calls, the cleaning of the inside of the cup.

Knowing we are accepted as sons no matter what gives us the courage to face the reality of our mess inside of us. That's the second aspect of who we are. We are messed up. Brothers and sisters in the Lord, we don't build on identity on our goodness. We build on our identity on God's goodness and grace. So, we can be bold and look into our heart and identify our resentment, identify our lust, identify our racism, identify our injustice, identify our hatred, identify our bitterness, identify our false identities and idols of our heart, and begin the process of ridding them from our hearts. Not only that, we can also become authentic and real with who we are to other people. We don't have to hide our faults. If our identity was based on our goodness and our accomplishments, we never want to reveal anything that might shed negative light on our identity; but, since our identity is in Christ, we can be real. We can be humble about who we are. That's how we get humble. We don't get humble by trying to be humble; we get humble by looking at the plank in our own eyes, meaning by looking into our hearts and seeing the sins of our hearts. The gospel identity allows us to become both humble and confident at the same time. We are humble because we acknowledge that we still have a long way to go because of the authenticity we have with ourselves; yet, we are confident because we know that we are a child of God no matter what because our identity in Christ is not based on our sins or failures; it is based on grace. Humble yet confident. The world can't produce this. Only gospel identity can produce this. And it is beautiful.

Let me tell you a little bit more on how good this gospel identity is.

It affects the way we interact with other people. New City is an inclusive gospel-centered community. When we say that we are gospel-centered, it means that we are community firmly founded on gospel-identity. It is the only identity that creates

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authenticity in community. It is the only identity that creates true inclusiveness. When we are in by grace, by God love and not our own effort, who are we to judge anyone? Who are we to exclude anyone? That's why we include everyone. This is the only way to get to the beautiful inclusive character of Jesus. This is so important! Without gospel identity, we can't really be inclusive at the core.

It affects the way we live. We now live out of gratefulness to God. We don't live to find ourselves. Of course, we can still find out more about ourselves. But, our core identity issue is settled. So, even if someone hits us on one cheek, we can turn the other cheek to wake up their conscience, because our identity is not based on being macho or even being respected; our identity is in Christ who loves us. We can now demonstrate grace and love even others even if they don't show it to us. Think about all of what seems to be impossible commands of Jesus in the sermon on the mount. How can you do all that? The only way is if you build your life on the gospel-identity and live out of that identity. This is arguably the most powerful thing in your life. Grounding your identity in Jesus. You know how some people need to boast all the time and prop themselves up? Well, they are having identity issues. They are trying to build their identity. If you have gospel-identity, you don't have to look like you are somebody to others. You don't need to. Paul said, there is no boasting for those who are in Christ Jesus.

This also affects that way we love cross culturally and cross ethnically and cross socioeconomically and cross sexual orientations. One of the greatest blessings God gave New City is her diversity. I am often asked how we can be one in midst of all the diversity. My answer is always simple: the gospel identity. Racism, classism, sexism, homophobia often come from a hidden tendency to build our identity in something other than Jesus. I am not saying that your ethnicity, class, sex, and sexual orientation are not a part of our identity. They are. But, I am saying that they are secondary identities that must be subservient to your primary identity as a sinner adopted as a child of God. If they become your primary identity, you will be prone to be exclusive and judgmental towards others who are not in that group.

Let me close.

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The question of who we are is one of the most important questions. The gospel answers this question with a lot of nuance. It is a different answer than anything in this world. If you don't have gospel identity, you have to build our identity by work. You will very quickly learn that finding who you are deep in your heart does not work. There is too much mess. And working to build your identity is slavery. It does not work. Allow the spirit of God to testify to you of who you are. Listen to the voice of the Spirit.