

Identity Day 1 : Independence.

Having recorded a 60 second sermon for BBC Radio Berkshire last week on 'Identity,' I offer a 60 second daily thought based on an Identity acrostic for the next 8 days. For me knowing the security of personal identity can be the difference between success and failure in so many aspects of life. Do feel free to share your own stories and make your own comments - I am sure you will! Here's the first, INDEPENDENCE;

Whilst growing up and maturing to become an independent adult is an important part of life, we are not made to live independent lives from one another or God who is the Father of all humanity. God's best is for the lonely to be part of a caring and compassionate family. This is a key culture we should find when we discover church; a place to grow in security from where we are affirmed and encouraged to use the gifts we have been given. Inter-dependency and diversity are precious aspects of belonging to a healthy church family. An environment where we learn to sacrifice our independence, for the sake of our family and to function as a secure part of the team.

I could have chosen the word imagination. Ephesians 3 shows us that God is able to do more than all we ask or imagine - He works from our hopes, dreams and imagination. I am always imagining teams of God's people working and serving together, strong in individual identity but serving and loving in inter-dependency.

Identity Day 2: Dying to self

As I reflect on my life and consider how God has helped me to conquer the limiting affect of introversion, shyness and embarrassment in order to become a leader, I am more convinced than ever that this process began when I chose to die to myself. The bible shows us that to truly find ourselves we must first die to the selfish and self-centred person we cannot help being. As we die to ourselves and embrace the life we are made for in Jesus Christ, and as we are daily filled with the Holy Spirit, a remarkable transfer happens and we can literally do everything in the strength Jesus provides. Remember, there is no greater love than flows from he who chooses to lay down his life for his friends. Demonstrated beautifully in the perfect sacrifice of Jesus for us all.

Identity Day 3: Encouragement

Who doesn't like encouragement? The mantra of days gone by was something like, "if we encourage our children they will grow up to be proud." In churches the philosophy towards pastors and leaders was, "we'll keep them poor so they are kept humble!" Our society seems to delight in knocking down successful people and hammering them when they make mistakes. My personal security has grown immeasurably by being around people who give me lots of encouragement and affirmation. It's important to have people in our lives who feed us by building us up and when they bring constructive feedback, we know it's to help strengthen us. My default setting is to generally hear the criticisms more loudly than the quieter voices of encouragement. God is doing remarkable things in our town of Reading UK, in no small part because of the encouragement and honour leaders are giving to one another, helping to grow the kind of unity irresistible to God's blessings. Who will you encourage today?

Identity Day 4: Nobodies

Nobodies with influence, or Influential Nobodies. Amazingly the economy of God is based around Him utilising the 'weak and foolish things of this world.' The disciples Peter and John stood accused before the council of Jerusalem but it was noted that they had been with Jesus and were unschooled, ordinary people. What had happened to them to fill them with such confidence and boldness? Do forget, only a matter of about 10 weeks earlier, an embarrassed Peter had denied knowing Jesus three times! What changed? Peter had been obedient by waiting in Jerusalem with the other disciples and had then encountered an in-filling of the Holy Spirit. There is undeniable power when we know for sure that we are children of God, with His lavished love flowing to us, and we are filled with heaven's power. It's ironic that when we are secure in our identity, we can welcome a life that exercises remarkable influence but without the need for credit or recognition. Living this way means we are ready for our lives and attitudes to point to the one who is deserving of all the glory and honour.

Identity Day 5: Threat

Security is what we experience when we live our lives without the fear of threat. We can find ourselves immobilised by the fear and thoughts of threat. Ultimately our greatest fear is death and so to remove the fear of death is to nullify this powerful threat. Jesus Christ has conquered death once and for all and has rescued me from living my life as its victim. Sure, one day my body will die and I will be separated from those I love and who love me. This causes great sadness but joy can come when we know that it's only a temporary separation because of an eternity set before us. Once we deal with this threat we can face into the countless lies that bombard our minds on a daily basis. Removing threat in the truth of God's promises helps build our personal security, which in turn helps us to flourish and enjoy being team players as we work and serve with others. As the Psalmist famously wrote, "yet though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil." This is real security.

Identity Day 6: Image in an i-world

Image in an i-world. Advertisers appeal to our inner instincts to have more possessions and increase an idolatrous culture. The continual desire to want things we don't really need can fuel insecurity as we watch others acquiring things at rapid rates. The irony is that the often accompanying debt to achieve such illusionary goals actually makes us more insecure! When we learn that life isn't all about me, we are better placed to nurture the passion of giving, sacrificing and serving - which is much more fulfilling and satisfying. The real secret of receiving the things of life that matter, is giving generously of our time, money and possessions. The bible teaches us to store up treasures in heaven rather than on earth, treasures of eternal and not temporary value. We are sold the lie that our self-image will be improved if we own this product, or wear this make-up, or those clothes. If we are made in the image of God it's impossible to better being the person He created us to be! Insecurity means we try to project an image that isn't really us, usually accompanied by a real fear of people discovering the real me - will I be accepted?

Identity Day 7: Truth

Our biggest battles are fought in our minds. Fears and anxieties creep in and suddenly we are dominated by negative thoughts about a whole range of things. Someone once said, "Why pray when you can worry?!" The way we deal with the lies that bombard our minds is by knowing and standing in the truth of God's word, the bible. I have found that my identity as a child of God is the thing that comes under the most attack, my greatest vulnerability. I am a child of God before anything else. When this knowledge is embedded in my heart and mind I can literally do everything in the strength I receive from Jesus and I can find myself in extraordinary places that I can never have dreamed of. When we are secure in our identities and we live our lives in Christ it will impact those around us in our daily lives and routines.

Identity Day 8: You!

It's you! You are the person God created you to be. You are unique and made in His image. Whilst the things we learn as a result of placing ourselves around people from whom we can draw down experience, wisdom and gifts, God's goal is that we discover who He has made us to be and do the things He has called us to do. I was thinking of the word "yield" for this letter but if we have learned how to 'die daily', that is already pretty yielded! We can live forever comparing ourselves to others and trying to be like those we admire. The truly secure person is content to live as the amazing and outstanding human-being God made you to be. You will not mind the lives of others close to you being celebrated when you live in the safety and comfort of His everlasting arms. Competition and driven-ness fade, and we recognise we are part of the team.

I hope these thoughts contribute to helping your journey into greater security in knowing your true identity. The greatest favour we can do ourselves, our families and friends, our work colleagues and church family, is finding the great contentment we can enjoy in Father God as we live as His special child. Let Him re-enforce these things to you by discovering what God's word says about Him and how He feels about you. There really is nothing to prove!