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# Identity Theft

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*Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine (Isaiah 43:1).*

Your bank calls you at home one day and a nice person on the phone says, “This is the credit card security department. Our records show that you bought a computer in Chicago on Tuesday. We’re just calling to verify that that’s correct.”

This is one of those aspects of the Information Age that are at the same time pretty cool and more than a little creepy. In an age of credit cards and electronic fund transfers, it’s not hard for someone to find your card, or get hold of your account number, and go on a spending spree pretending to be you. The bank’s computers are programmed to flag unusual expenditures, especially in places where you don’t ordinarily buy things, and then they call to make sure it really was you who did what their computers say you did. As it turns out, I really did buy a computer in Chicago some time ago, but I was glad that the bank was paying attention, just in case.

Identity theft is a huge concern these days, and we’re constantly being asked to show some ID to verify that we are who we claim to be. Most often the issue has something to do with money—making sure that no one is ripping off somebody else’s bank account or receiving some payment they’re not entitled to. Then again, people try to hack into computer systems to create all sorts of mischief, which is another way of pretending to be someone other than who they really are.

I’ve had occasion recently to think about identity theft in a deeper sense—not just pretending to be somebody else in order to steal some money, but the ways in which people get confused

about who they really are, either because they've never figured that out or because someone is trying to get them to be something else, or something they don't really want to be.

I read a story in a magazine called *The Week* recently about the young actress Emma Watson. She's 25 now, but she was only ten when she got the part of Hermione Granger in the *Harry Potter* film series. Suddenly, while she was still a child, she found herself in an enormous spotlight, and all that attention was terrifying. She tells about "People asking me, 'Who are you, who are you, who are you?' I felt so inadequate, because I just didn't have any answers yet." She was so focused on figuring out who the character Hermione was that she had a hard time deciding who Emma wanted to be. "I needed privacy to figure myself out," she says. Now she's a successful actress and an international women's rights activist, but it was a hard struggle to sort out who she was and what she really wanted to become.

Most of us struggle with the question of who we are and what we want to be at various times in our lives. Even as children we have to figure out where we fit in, who will be our friends and be nice to us and who won't like us and might even be mean. Then again as teenagers we need to figure out who we are that isn't just what our parents want us to be, so we look for some group that will accept us and let us know we're okay.

Yet again as adults we try to find a job that won't just pay the bills but might also bring some measure of identity through what we can achieve or the reputation we make for ourselves at work. Some of us become parents, and we start to define ourselves as our children's mother or father, the one who provides for them, and takes care of them, and shows them all the things they need to do.

Our identity is so tied up in what we do that it's hard for many people when they retire, because they don't know who they are any more when they no longer have to go work. And it's hard for some parents when their kids grow up, for pretty much the same reason. Though we never stop being parents, the role has to change over time, and lots of parents have trouble making that adjustment. Parents who never learn to step back run into all sorts of conflicts when their children become adults and don't want to be treated as children any more.

We Americans like to focus on individuality, and some of us like to think of ourselves as “self-made” men or women, but the truth is that human beings are deeply social creatures and we're always defining ourselves in terms of where we belong, and how we fit in, and who will accept us, and why. And because identity is such an important thing, there are all sorts of temptations for someone or something to come along and steal our identity from us—our deepest sense of who we really are.

Now if we claim to be Christians, followers of Jesus Christ, that means we've staked an important part of our identity, and ultimately the most important part, on seeing ourselves as sons and daughters of God, brothers and sisters of Jesus, who is himself the Son of God. That has all sorts of implications for the way we live, because it has to do with who we really are—or at least who we really want to be.

If we know ourselves to be sons and daughters of God, then we know we belong to the one Person whose opinion matters most, and that means who we are and what we do really matters too. So if anyone comes along and tries to tell us that we don't matter, or if any voice arises in our own mind that says, “You're

not worth much, your life doesn't count," then someone or something is trying to steal our identity from us.

If someone tries to tell us that we're all alone in this world when we go through difficult times, then that person is trying to steal our identity from us. God says through the prophet Isaiah, "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned and the flame shall not consume you. Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you. Do not fear, for I am with you."

When voices around us and within us want to fill us with all kinds of fears—fears that we can't face the challenges before us, inordinate fears that other individuals or groups of people want to hurt us, fears of things we can't control but keep worrying about anyway—when the voices of fear threaten to overcome us, someone is trying to steal our identity. Because our true identity lies in the love that God has for us and the love that we are to have for other people, and as John says, "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear."

If we really are Christians, then we have work to do in this world, which means that our lives are never without purpose or meaning. Our work includes caring for all God's people. So if someone comes along and tries to tell us that all we have to do is look out for ourselves, that other people's challenges and struggles are no concern of ours, then something or someone is trying to steal our identity from us. Jesus says, "By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." And John asks, "How does God's love abide in anyone who sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help? Let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. And this is his

commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another.”

All the more, then, when someone encourages us to hate other people, or when the temptation to excessive anger or bitterness or resentment wells up within us, someone or something is trying to steal our identity from us. As John tells us, “Those who say, ‘I love God,’ and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen.”

Now it’s a hard thing to follow Jesus sometimes, because the kind of love God has for us and the kind of love we are to show to all God’s people do not come naturally to us. We find ourselves falling short again and again, and then the voice of guilt and condemnation rises up within us. But the scripture tells us that the Holy Spirit will “reassure our hearts whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.”

I was invited to teach a class session at Washington and Jefferson College last week on some topics in science and religion. We talked about the kinds of things students find to be challenges that keep them from believing in the Christian faith and becoming Christians themselves. Some of those challenges are intellectual and have to do with science or other areas of knowledge, but some of them also have to do with the way Christians behave. So the inevitable question of hypocrisy came up, as somebody asked, “What about the charge that there are so many hypocrites in the church?”

I said, of course there are some hypocrites in the church, but that’s because hypocrisy is a pervasive trait among human



beings in general. The church has no franchise on hypocrisy, and it's at least as rampant among nonbelievers as it is among people of faith. What makes the charge more conspicuous against Christians is that we have such high aspirations, and we preach such high ideals: that we should love God with all our heart and mind and soul and strength, and love our neighbors as ourselves. It's hard to do that, and we always fall short of our own ideals. But sincerely wanting to do something and falling short is not hypocrisy. It's just human nature, part of what we call "sin," and we're always trying, by the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit, to overcome that tendency in ourselves.

The students seemed to think that was a reasonable response, but I got to thinking about the question later and I realized that the problem of identity theft goes both ways.

It's true that there are people and other influences that try to steal our identity as Christians by robbing us of some fundamental realizations about who we are and what we want to become. But it's also true that some people come to church or claim to be Christians and they really don't have much interest in living a Christian life. It's as if they have a kind of firewall that keeps the claims of Christ and the cost of discipleship from getting through to them. In that sense, there are people in the church who engage in their own kind of identity theft. They claim to be Christians but they don't let Jesus shape the way they live, or how they relate to other people—especially the strangers that Jesus says we need to love if we truly want to be his disciples.

Imagine that you come to the Pearly Gates, or long before that, you just show up at the entrance to the church, and St. Peter is standing at the door. He wants to know what you're doing there, and you say you're a Christian and you've come to worship. Now

suppose Peter says, “Can you show me some ID?” Peter isn’t asking to see your driver’s license or a passport. He’s not interested in *where* you live; he wants to know *how* you live. He’s looking for evidence that you really are who you claim to be, and the only evidence that would count is the way you conduct your life. What would you have to show him?

That’s a challenging thought. There are all sorts of things that try to steal our identity, even when we really do want to be followers of Jesus, but some people pretend to be Christians when they have no intention of living the way Jesus wants us to live. This problem of identity theft can run both ways when it comes to matters of faith.

I mentioned an article about Emma Watson in a recent issue of *The Week*. There was a little story in the same issue about another actor, Jamie Foxx. Apparently, not long ago, he heard a loud noise outside his home in California, and he rushed outside to see what happened. A truck had crashed, and the driver was disabled, so Jamie Foxx ran over and got the driver out of the truck just before it burst into flames. When he was asked about it later, the actor said, “God had his arms wrapped around all of us.”

Some people manage to become famous celebrities, and yet they maintain their sense of belonging to God and depending on God. Jamie Foxx was right. God has his arms wrapped around all of us. When we remember that God has his arms around us, we know who we are. And when we remember that God has his arms around other people, we know who they are too. When we remember all of that, then no one can steal our identity from us, and if we keep at it long enough, sooner or later we’ll become the people we really want to be.



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