



TAKEAWAY THOUGHT: The core of your identity is your being made in the image of God.

SCRIPTURE: Genesis 1:26, Ephesians 2:4-7, Philippians 3:5-8, John 21:15-17

[Author Note: I share about how I introduced myself as a substitute. The point is to show how we introduce ourselves isn't always a good insight into who we are.]

I used to work as a substitute teacher on my day off. When I did, it was important for me to break down walls and connect with students quickly. One suggestion the company I worked for had was to make an introduction to let students get to know me. I always introduced myself the same way:

“Hi, my name is Mr. Selph. If you attend or have attended my youth group and call me something else normally, please call me Mr. Selph while we're here. Just to help you know a little about me, I'll tell you a few things that I love: I love my wife and kids, Star Wars and The Office, doing Tae Kwon Do with my kids, and I love being a youth pastor.”

All those things are true, but it's not really a very good introduction. I had to summarize myself in just a few words, but those things aren't who I am. I told them what I do, I told them whom I'm connected with, and I told them a few things I liked but not why I liked them. I didn't tell anyone how I think or why anyone or anything mattered to me. I didn't talk about aspirations or dreams, or what made me tick. I just gave a few surface-level facts about me and called it good enough. I really couldn't say what makes me tick. I couldn't tell them that I loved Jesus and wanted to honor Him with all I did. I couldn't tell them that I try to love others like He loved me. It was a public school, and talking religion was specifically on the no-fly list.

The truth is I probably didn't introduce myself much differently than the way I think of myself most of the time. We tend to view ourselves by the things we do, the things we like, the people we know, the stuff we have, and even things we've done that we regret. We allow what we know about ourselves to shape how we view ourselves, and then we fear others may view us the same way – sometimes including God. We hold a balance between two

images: the one we have cultivated for others to see and maybe admire, and the one we have of ourselves that we fear others will actually see.

The truth is our identity isn't rooted in any of the things we tend to think. The core of our identity is that we are made in the image of God.

Genesis 1:26a (NLT)

26 Then God said, "Let us make human beings in our image, to be like us..."

That's the starting point. Before you knew anybody, before you did anything, before you had anything, you were made in the image of God. When you look in the mirror with no obstruction, you are seeing the image of God. Beyond anything you could ever do, beyond anyone you could ever know, your original connection to God, being made in His image, is at the core of who you are.

Still, we have this habit of redefining ourselves, in both good and bad ways. How do you see yourself? What clouds your view of yourself? If you're anything like me, what you've done probably strongly affects you. This cuts both ways. I take pride in the good things I've done, and I feel shame for the bad things I've done.

You are not defined by what you have done. That's the truth of the matter, but it's easy to allow the good and bad things we've done to affect our view of ourselves. We get into this battle of good versus bad. Maybe I've done more good things than bad, so my good things will outweigh the bad.

[Author Note: I wrote on a mirror with glass markers while listing good and bad things I'd done. I used one or two words to summarize each thing.]

I GET GOOD GRADES.
BUT I DID CHEAT ONCE.
I GO TO CHURCH EVERY WEEK.
BUT I NEVER TALK ABOUT THAT WITH MY FRIENDS.
I HELP MY PARENTS AROUND THE HOUSE.
BUT I ALSO TALK BACK TO MY PARENTS.
I READ MY BIBLE, AT LEAST MOST OF THE TIME.

AND I TALK TO GOD MOST DAYS.
BUT I ALSO LOOK AT THINGS I SHOULDN'T.
AND I SAY THINGS I SHOULDN'T.

Our mirror fills up, and we start to see ourselves through a new filter, the filter of what we've done. Maybe we can sometimes look around those things and catch a glimpse of who we really are, but those things are often what we tend to see.

Maybe you lean toward dismissing what's wrong in your life, because you're pretty impressed with what's going right. Church attendance. Model student. Good kid. Kind to others. You think you are doing a good job earning your spot with God. *Of course God loves me. Have you seen me?*

Or maybe you lean toward dismissing yourself because of the wrong in your life. You feel defined, maybe even disqualified by your sins, those things you've done in disobedience to God. *God can't love me. If you knew what I had done, you'd know God can't use me. There's no way He could even forgive me. This is all that I am. I can't do better, so why should I even try?*

I would say the same thing to both camps: God loves you because of who He is, not because of what you have done. Romans 5 says that we only have peace with God because of what He has done for us. Paul says that we are in a place of undeserved privilege. Undeserved! God doesn't love you because you've got it going on. God's love for you is undeserved. You also can't stop God from loving you and wanting a relationship with you because you've messed up so much.

Ephesians 2:4-7 (NLT)

⁴ But God is so rich in mercy, and he loved us so much, ⁵ that even though we were dead because of our sins, he gave us life when he raised Christ from the dead. (It is only by God's grace that you have been saved!) ⁶ For he raised us from the dead along with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms because we are united with Christ Jesus. ⁷ So God can point to us in all future ages as examples of the incredible wealth of his grace and kindness toward us, as shown in all he has done for us who are united with Christ Jesus.

God wants you see a clear picture of yourself, a clear reflection of Him. He doesn't want your view obscured by successes, failures, accomplishments, mistakes, friends, family, whatever. He just wants you to love Him and see yourself the way He sees you.

Do you love Jesus? Then it doesn't matter if you think you're in the "in" crowd or not. [REMOVE PICTURES]

Do you love Jesus? Then stop thinking your accomplishments have given you your value or that next accomplishment will finally give you your value.

[SPRAY MIRROR WITH CLEANER]

Do you love Jesus? Then stop thinking He can't love you and doesn't want to use you because of your failures. [WIPE AND DRYMIRROR]

Would you begin to see yourself as God sees you today?

[Author Note: If time allows, presenting the Gospel and giving a chance to respond worked well for us here. If time would not allow, or your context is different, you can just end and pray here.]

REFLECTION // SMALL GROUP GUIDE

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SURFACE

How would you introduce yourself to someone you were meeting for the first time? What would you want them to know about you?

SERIOUS

What sort of things do we generally hope people don't know about us? How do we go about keeping them from knowing those things?

SPIRITUAL

Where are you most tempted to find your identity outside of God?

What do you think it means to reflect God's nature in your home? Your school? Your friendships?

What steps do you need to take to remove the clutter blocking your view?

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