

TRINITY SUNDAY ~ JUNE 4, 2023

IDENTITY THEFT

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel- not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed.

Galatians 1:5-8

In this Bible passage, God is saying through Paul that the Gospel of Jesus is true. The Gospel says that although you are thoroughly sinful, still God loves you more than you can understand. He loves you so much that He gave His Son, Jesus. Jesus lived and died and rose to life again to guarantee your forgiveness. It's all completely done for you, and this forgiveness is offered to you as a free gift through faith in Jesus. This Gospel is true. Your hope of heaven is based on this truth. This truth ought never be changed. We urge you, like Paul did in this Bible verse, CLING to this truth. Never change out this truth of God for any substitute, false belief!

One hundred and two years ago, in 1921 an unnamed soldier from World War I was buried in Arlington National Cemetery at the Tomb of the Unknowns. Since then three others were buried at this grave. The inscription on the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier reads, **"Here rests in honored glory an American soldier known but to God."** What you might not know is that one of those soldiers was later identified as Michael Blassie and interred by his family in St. Louis, Missouri.

That grave proves our identities are important to us. Nobody likes to lose their identity.

Claiming to be some you're not, using someone else's social security number and credit card information to purchase expensive items but leave a victim to pay the cost – that is a crime

called Identity Theft. Nobody likes to be the victim of financial identity theft. I know that to be true. Several times we have found false charges on our credit card statements. Someone, somehow, stole our credit identity and purchased things in stores I've never heard of and in places I've never been. Thankfully, the credit card company has always been helpful to us in resolving these problems and we have never had to pay from our own pockets what some thief has done.

Maybe that has happened to you. I have known families who have had their identity stolen and home mortgages were taken out in their name. It can take years and lots of headaches to get your identity back.

Identity theft. Nobody likes to be the victim of identity theft. Who we are is important. Your family experiences that shaped you to be you, and your family history are important to you. The genetic predispositions to heart disease or diabetes that are part of the biological make up you inherited from your parents is important, because you're more likely to have the same health problems. It is an important part of your identity.

More and more people are having their DNA tested to see where their ancestors came from. People are surprised to find out they're not German like they always thought, but are actually 75% Irish. That explains why they never cared for sauerkraut but always had a craving for bangers and mash and a pint of ale. This kind of thing happens all the time. Who you are is important. Knowing your identity and presenting to the world who you actually are is important. Nobody likes to have their identity taken from them. Nobody likes it when another individual takes his good name and misuses it. Nobody likes to be the victim of identity theft and that includes the Lord God.

That's why, after God had worked mighty miracles to free His people from Egypt's slavery, the first stop after Egypt was Mt. Sinai. There God sat them down and gave them Commandments that they were to live by. They were to be new people – God's people. God's list of Commandments touches upon important aspects of life. They

were to be different than every other nation of people: no envy, no theft, no murder. Family gatherings every Saturday. They were to help preserve another person's reputation and good name.

Still from God's point of view, the most important rule He gave was the one which says: ***"You shall have no other gods before Me."*** (Ex 20:3) In that rule God said He didn't want anyone to steal *His* identity. He didn't want anyone or anything to take the respect, reverence, and love which ought only be given to Him. The Lord was so serious about the theft of His identity, that God doubled down by clarifying Himself and warning His people: ***"take care lest you forget the LORD, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. It is the LORD your God you shall fear. ...You shall not go after other gods, the gods of the peoples who are around you- ...lest the anger of the LORD your God be kindled against you, and he destroy you..."***

Deuteronomy 6 (v. 12-15)

Did the people listen? Did they follow God only? No! After His people had repeatedly disregarded and disobeyed His most important Command, God gave this reminder: ***"You shall not fear other gods or bow yourselves to them or serve them or sacrifice to them, but you shall fear the LORD, who brought you out of the land of Egypt... You shall bow yourselves to him, and to him you shall sacrifice. And the statutes and the rules and the law and the commandment that he wrote for you, you shall always be careful to do. You shall not fear other gods, but you shall fear the LORD your God, and he will deliver you out of the hand of all your enemies."*** (2 Kings 17:35b-39) Hearing those words you can tell God wasn't joking and He wasn't giving His people a whole lot of wiggle room.

And did the Lord's people listen? They did not. They gave their allegiance to any false deity who came wandering down the road. That's why that same passage sadly says: ***"However, they would not listen, but they did according to their former manner."*** (2 Kings 17:40)

As a punishment, the Lord took away much of His people's identity. They lost their country; they lost their temple; they lost their

kingdom and they lost their freedom. It was only after the Holy Spirit brought God's people to repentance; only after they remembered to worship Him and Him alone, that some of them were brought home and given back some semblance of their identity.

Let me ask you: If you were God, how would you respond when the people trashed your good name? How would you treat the folks who were supposed to reflect God's holiness, God's powerful works, God's love – but they refused? Instead, they chose to follow other man-made gods like everyone else. They chose to live in the garbage and filth of sexual immorality, greed, and disregard for the weak, the poor, and the marginalized. They chose to corrupt justice instead of treat others with love as human lives precious to God the Creator. If you were God, how would you respond to that kind of theft of your identity?

Well, let me tell you what God DID do. Instead of giving them the thumpin they deserved, God said that He would put a new heart within them. Instead of commanding respect, God chose to forgive their disrespect, even though it meant God Himself would have to pay for their idolatry.

So God came down to us people to show us even clearer who He is and what He is like. Jesus entered this world. He is God the Father's Son. His heart of love displays the Father's love for all people.

What's crazy about this chapter in history is that Jesus clearly made His identity known! Jesus fulfilled all the prophecies which ought to have identified Him as the Savior they had been waiting so long for. He lived His life doing miracles that no human could possibly do, which should have made it clear that He is God. In spite of all this, the people then could never bring themselves to see His true identity. They never respected Him or proclaimed Him the Son of God and the Savior from sin that they desperately needed.

How did they treat Jesus? As just the opposite of who Jesus really was! Rather than receiving Jesus as their God and as their Savior who had come to offer Himself, to take the punishment for sin they deserved, to win their forgiveness and save their souls,

instead of revering Jesus, they called Him a sinner, a Samaritan, a demon, a devil, a liar and a blasphemer. It was a case of identity theft pure and simple! Rather than loving Him, they hated and despised Him. The leaders of those people set up kangaroo courts to bring in false witnesses to spin their lies and assure Jesus' death sentence. They rejected Jesus so much that He was condemned to the cross where, according to God's plan, He gave up His life for us.

But those Jewish leaders were not yet done. Their hatred of Jesus was so strong and ugly that they went to the governor and pleaded to have soldiers posted at Jesus' tomb to keep Him in. It was the final act of trying to strip Jesus of His true identity as God and your Savior.

And thank God they did that. Because Jesus' tomb was secured by His self-appointed enemies, there can be no doubt that He actually, physically, did indeed RISE from the dead three days after He had been murdered. There can be no doubt that Jesus conquered death and grave. Only God can do that! After His resurrection, again and again Jesus appeared to many, many people, changing their minds. They no longer doubted Jesus was just another dead teacher. Instead, hundreds of eye-witnesses knew and gave the rest of their lives to proclaim that Jesus Christ's identity is God's Son and the world's only Savior.

Folks, Jesus' resurrection was the final and absolute proof that Jesus had fulfilled the laws we have broken. He paid for your wrongs – *ALL* of them. Jesus proved He did all that was necessary for sinners to be rescued and saved.

This is a simple message. This is the saving message. This is an unchangeable message. This is the only message which saves and it is the message of the Holy Spirit that He uses to call to faith any person who is not yet saved.

Now, let me ask, what was your reaction when I said, "Jesus is the only Savior, the only Way to heaven?" I would not be surprised if your response was less than positive. No, I wouldn't be surprised because, just like when Jesus walked the earth, today many, many, many people try to disprove and dispose of Jesus' identity as Savior.

Some people say Jesus' story was incomplete and they had a new revelation; Others tell you the disciples got it wrong and they had been given the information to make things right. There have been those who have said Jesus was only a part-time Savior; that He wasn't anybody special; that He was only an example on how we were to live.

Again and again we have seen people commit identity theft against our God. In today's religious circles it is not unusual to find that Jesus' goal of saving souls is transformed to become the means to obtain worldly riches. Just make a pledge, or order some sacred water from the Jordan, or buy a specially blessed holy handkerchief, and God will make you rich!

Then there are those identity thieves who would demote the Savior and make Him One of many equal and interchangeable deities.

Here's a very popular one today: There are those say Jesus didn't come to pay for SIN. "Sin" is so archaic! Besides, what's right for me is right for me. It may not be right for you. Everyone has their own idea of what's right and no one is wrong. So, there is no sin to be sorry for. Instead, Jesus came to teach us to BE KIND to one another. Just love everybody for everything. And don't talk about God's truth or about sin to be repented of. That's just "hate speech" they say.

That, friends, is identity theft. It is stealing the holy, righteous, loving, and sin-forgiving identity of the true God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit!

These new gospels, these different gospels, are only devil-inspired gospels. These lies are designed to steal the Savior's identity. God the Holy Spirit guided Saint Paul to write *clearly* in the Bible that there is only one Gospel and anything else proclaimed by anyone else is wrong, perverted, and must be condemned. Any Gospel which does not point unerringly and accurately to Jesus being our Savior is leading its followers on a path which will lead to hell and not to heaven. Friends, nobody likes identity theft... especially not the Lord our God. God hates this identity theft

because it destroys the life-saving message of His Son, Jesus, who was sacrificed so we might be redeemed, rescued, recycled, restored, and saved.

This is getting pretty intense. Let's take the intensity down a few notches and allow me to introduce you to Henrichus Antonius Han van Meegeren. That's a lot of name, so I'll just call him van Meegeren. Van Meegeren was an artist who lived most of his life in the last century. Unfortunately, the critics didn't like van Meegeren's paintings. They called him tired, uninspiring, and unoriginal. With those bad reviews van Meegeren found it difficult to sell enough of his work to make a living at it.

So, van Meegeren decided to use his skill by forging paintings. Working in the style of many old masters, van Meegeren went to work. The results were nothing less than astounding. He managed to copy the strokes, the colors, the shadows, the very style of some of the great masters. Not even the experts were able to tell the difference between van Meegeren's work and the greatest artists of all time. So, van Meegeren got rich selling them as recently discovered masterpieces.

All went well until, after World War II. It was discovered that van Meegeren had sold one of his forgeries to the Nazi Reichsmarshall Herrmann Göring. On May 29, 1945, van Meegeren was arrested by the Allies for having sold Dutch cultural property to the Germans. If he were found guilty of being a Nazi collaborator, van Meegeren would be sentenced to death. Realizing his life was on the line; van Meegeren came clean and confessed what he had been doing for the last few decades. As a result of his admission, van Meegeren's spared his life and his sentence was reduced to one year in jail for the lesser crime of art forgery. Those who have studied his work estimate that van Meegeren's identity theft of the art world's great masters duped buyers out of an equivalent of more than thirty million dollars in today's money.

Now some would say that figure makes van Meegeren's this world's most successful identity thief. They might say it, but they would be wrong. That title belongs to all those who try to transform

Jesus into being anything less than the one, only, and ultimate Savior from sin. I say that because while van Meegeren stole a great deal of money, these people are stealing the souls for whom Jesus suffered, died, and rose.

Jesus came to live, to die, and to rise again to pay for all the times you've turned from Him. Times you've committed identity theft – putting anyone, anything, any ambition, any social cause as more important than Christ. Anytime you've accepted a false gospel as a substitute to following Jesus in truth and purity.

St. Paul says all thieves of God's identity should be damned, and they will be. But don't you let them take you with them. Believe with all your heart that God loved this world... including you, so much that He gave His only-begotten Son, so that all who believe on Him will not perish but live forever with Him in heaven. This is the Savior we believe in. This is the truth of the one, living God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Cling to Him! To Him alone!

AMEN.