

## Finding Your Identity in the Gospel Story

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**Intro:** Three ways I'd like for us to look at Gospel Identity today: 1) Relearn the Gospel Story 2) Repent of False Gospel Stories 3) Relive the Gospel Story. If we are to recover a biblical masculinity, our identity must be shaped by the gospel.

### Relearn the Gospel Story

The first way we can recover our identity is to relearn the Gospel. What is the Gospel? The good and true *story* that Jesus has defeated sin, death, and evil through his own death and resurrection and is making all things new, even us. Most of you probably liked that definition, except when I said "story". You flinched. Perhaps you would prefer "the good and true *doctrine* that Jesus..." Why the preference for doctrine over story? Doctrine is more measurable, manageable, something we can master, but a story, that's more slippery, uncontainable, bigger, beyond us. I was part of a large church in college where men were challenged to: "Palm the Bible (like a basketball)" as if that was the sign of true biblical masculinity. Mastery of the bible and doctrine. To be sure, the gospel is doctrinal, but it is not doctrinaire. Many Christian men are doctrinaire. They have so invested their identity into the mastery of gospel doctrine, that to call the gospel something else threatens their identity. They get angry. Start ungodly disputes because their righteousness comes from being right, not from being made right *in Jesus*. We see the gospel as doctrine to be mastered, not as a story we live in. We need to recover a humility that, I believe, springs from understanding the gospel as Story, a vast, comprehensive, totalizing story. My brother has a condition called hemi-hypertrophy. It's when one side of your body is bigger than the other. So, his right bicep and calf muscle are noticeably bigger than his left. Evangelical men have a case of gospel hemi-hypertrophy, our doctrinal understanding of the gospel is much bigger than our narrative understanding of the gospel. We're distorted, our identity is whacked, not attractive to our wives, our friends, our church, our neighbors. Doctrine can be kept at arms length but a story, when told well, forces us to enter into it, to be overcome by it. **We can have right gospel doctrine and wrong gospel identity.** Relearning the gospel as a story is the way back to our true identity, to true humanity. What then is the Gospel Story?

### *The Gospel is Jesus-centered*

Theologians have made much of the search for the theological center of the Bible. Poythress thinks its holiness, Beale thinks its new creation, Reformed guys covenant. I suggest that the center of biblical theology is Jesus Christ is Lord. I won't argue extensively for that, but Luke the historian records the Story of Jesus and shows us that Jesus is the center of the biblical story. Jesus is no Deus ex Machina, a unbelievable plot device used to bring a Hollywood. No, Jesus is a character that has been anticipated by the Biblical Story all along. In the first three chapters of his Gospel, Luke shows us that Jesus is a second David, the true king of Israel. He is a second Adam, "son of Adam son of God." He is a second Israel, embodying the people of God in the wilderness where he is tempted for 40 days and succeeds where Israel fails at every temptation. Later, a 2<sup>nd</sup> Moses, the true exodus rescuer of Israel. Second David, Adam, Israel, Moses! He is fulfillment of Jewish hope, the long-awaited messiah king who represents, not just Israel but all humanity as he enters our

world to lead us into his kingdom through his redemptive rescue! Jesus is the fulfillment of the OT Story. But it doesn't stop there. Jesus is the fulfillment of Jewish hope *and* the foundation of Christian faith. In Acts, Luke arranges the stories of Stephen, Peter, and Paul to show how they imitate Jesus—they are filled with the Spirit, proclaim the gospel, suffer, die and rise again. The OT looks forward to Jesus and the NT looks backward to Jesus. He is the fulfillment of the Jewish hope and the foundation of Christian faith, the center of the biblical story. He accomplishes all of this through his life, death, and resurrection.

### *Personal Story*

See, the name "Jesus Christ" comes with a story attached to it. It instantly triggers a whole narrative about a 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish man who fulfilled Jewish hope and founded Christian faith, a god-man who lived, died, and rose from the dead to change absolutely everything. The Gospel is Christ-centered; Christ is not Gospel-centered. The gospel is a story about the person of Jesus, not the doctrine of Jesus, the person of Jesus. The gospel is not information to be mastered, a worldview to be argued into. It is a radically person-centered story. As remarkable and stunning as this story is, it is also incredibly humbling. The idea that we are so bad, broken, so bent that someone else has to suffer for us (whipped and beaten), has to die for us (serve our death sentence) should be incredibly humbling. But it's not. Why? Because we refuse to relive the gospel story every day, to remind ourselves that Jesus is the center not us. Why would we refuse to relive such a remarkable story? We refuse because the Gospel doesn't make us the center of the story (it humbles us and continually draws attention away from us). We refuse the gospel story, because we prefer other stories. We prefer to ground our identity in alternate, competing stories that tell us we are the main character, that we take center stage. See, the Gospel isn't man-centered, a place to discover your manliness; it is Christ-centered a place to discover Christ. If the first way we can recover our identity is to relearn the Gospel story, as a personal, Jesus-centered Story, then the second way is Repent from belief in competing stories, false gospel stories that provide us with surrogate identities, that make us central.

### **Repent of the False Gospel Stories**

One of the primary stories we look to for identity is the vocational story. The vocational story goes something like this: "What you make makes what you are/You are what you make." If we are live in the Gospel story, we must die to the Vocational story. The vocational story has a weak and strong version. This is especially powerful identity-shaping story right now. Many men are out of work, without a job, while their wives bring home the bacon. In fact, the post-recession economy is more female-friendly than male friendly. What do we do in the absence of work, especially when it is where we find our identity? In Arthur Miller's play, *The Death of a Salesman*, the main character, Willie Loman, is a salesman who gets laid off, but instead of telling his family, he continues to get dressed for work, take his briefcase, and be gone from 9 to 5. He spins a story about being a successful salesman, known throughout New England, when he really has no job and is living off of loans from a friend. One evening Willy is confronted by his son, Biff. Biff calls his father out on living a lie. Willy replies: "*One day you will see how successful I am. When I die, there will be thousands at my funeral.*" The next day Willy commits suicide. Only five people showed up to his funeral. Building your worth on your work or lack of work is spiritual suicide. If you measure your worth by your work, it will be the end of you. The Vocational story tells

us the lie that we must *for* our *significance* but the Gospel tells us that we work *from* our significance, from our acceptance, worth, and value *in Christ*. When we lose work, we lose confidence. Gaining a job, we regain confidence? The real reason we lack confidence as men is because we lack confidence in the gospel. We are fully prepared to immerse ourselves in work but not into the Gospel story, in Jesus, who gives us worth. Why? Because the Vocational story make us central, even if we are weak and out of work, we are still the central, delusional, suicidal character. Believe the lie that your worth comes from your work and it will be the end of you, the death of your identity in Christ. Don't let a job define you. Your identity is not salesman; it is Son of God. Your identity is not pastor; it is disciple of Jesus. God fills your life with dignity, worth, and value by making you a son. When we immerse ourselves in the story of Jesus, we recover our identity as sons and as worshippers, as disciples. We need to repent of hoping in the lies of the Vocational Story, and turn to believe The Gospel story. Of course, this insists that Christ be central in our stories, that he gain all the attention, that get all the praise. This brings us to the Strong, Successful version of the VS. Many of us find our significance in our success. We treat our work, not only as labor but as Master. If we perform well, we think highly of ourselves. If we perform below standard, we think lowly of ourselves. Up and down, up and down. Its no surprise that our identity is jacked up, our sense of worth changes as quickly as a dramatic drop on a roller coaster. We screw something up, someone criticizes us, and we're undone! Work is a bad master. What happens when we fail Master Work, when we fall down? Master work kicks us when we are down; he doesn't help us up. What about Master Jesus? What does he do when we fail him? Does he kick us when we are down? No, he dies for us! He forgives us. He loves and accepts us. His story of grace is a much better story. We must abandon the self-centered story to gain from the Christ-centered story. But we want the attention. We're like the guy in the Bruce Willis movie, The Fifth Element, who steps into his cyber-chamber to activate his own cyber reality. Some choose holograms of half naked women, great comfort and wealth, but he chooses an entourage that surrounds him with pats on the back, flatteries, and praises telling him how wonderful he is. We are not central; we are not ultimate. God is ultimate, God is central. Until we abandon center stage in the Vocational Story, as weak and out of work, suicidal woe is me OR as strong and successful, clap for me, we will not enjoy the grace of the Gospel Story. Weak & Strong Pride. Approval vs. Applause.

### **Relive the Gospel Story**

So we're relearning the Gospel Story. Hopefully, we're repenting of the False Gospel Stories, the Vocational story. So now, how do we relive the Gospel story in such a way that it becomes more than a doctrine, more than information to be mastered, but a person who is our Great Master, a story that is so big it envelops us with grace? In the final chapter of his Gospel (24), Luke tells us that followers of Jesus were gathered in a room and all of a sudden Jesus appeared among them. They were startled and frightened. They did not expect a resurrected messiah, much less a dead one. He goes to great lengths to prove to them that he is not a ghost, eating food and allowing them to touch him. He explains that he is the fulfillment of the Scriptures, which all point to him. Still they can't believe their eyes. They can't believe the story. The text tells us that they "[disbelieved for joy](#)." A puzzling phrase. They were so happy they couldn't believe their eyes. Their hearts burned with joy so strongly they distrusted their eyes. We might say that they thought it was too good to be

true. That Jesus before them, resurrected, was fiction. We don't believe the Gospel story is fiction, we just live like it is. We believe another gospel, we take center stage in another story. The true meaning of the Gospel is lost on us. How do we regain it?

Read the Story: Read the Bible as a story, the Gospels, which make up 70% of the Bible and look longingly for Jesus. Read the story with imagination. There's a difference between reading a book and reading imaginatively. We can read a book relatively unmoved by the story, but when we turn our imagination on, when we enter the story and we are changed. When you read, ask: "What does it say about Jesus? Not What Would Jesus Do but Who is Jesus? We climb into the story hearing, seeing, smelling. We smell the salt in the air in the Sea of Galilee, we see Jesus robes getting dirty as he walks across the beach to stinky, low-class fishermen. Fish are flipping everywhere and Jesus says: "Come follow me." We miss Jesus in the story, the humble God man that gets dirty, stinky, muddy so that we can follow him. "Too often we walk away from the Word of God coldhearted because we fail to warm our souls at the fires of meditation." - Thomas Watson.

Jesus Must Open our Eyes: The meaning of the story of Jesus was lost on them and will be lost on us, unless Jesus **opens** our eyes. Three times were told that Jesus had to "open" the meaning of his Story to his followers. He opens their eyes (24:31); he opens the meaning of the Scriptures (42), and he opens their minds (45). And Luke wants us to have our eyes opened also to the majesty, grace, and glory of Jesus. We have to be desperate enough to plead with him to open our eyes, to turn our gaze away from ourselves, our significance by work, and say to him each morning, Ps 119:18: "Open my eyes that I may behold wondrous things in your Word (cf. Acts 28:19; John 9). Men, will be cry out to God to open our eyes to see Jesus, high and lifted up, center stage, full of glory and grace towards those who are in Him? He is a better Master, a better Father, a better Savior!

### Believe the Story for Joy

Many of us still don't believe. It's too good to be true. We disbelieve for joy...but we will believe the lie of the Vocational Story. Brothers, don't disbelieve for false joy; believe for joy! In his presence there is fullness of Joy and at his right hand pleasures forever more (Ps 16:11). Don't disbelieve for joy, believe for joy. Don't disbelieve for significance; believe for significance. The Story of Jesus is Not so good it can't be true. It is so true it has to be good! The Gospel is not a doctrine to be mastered; it is a story to live, a story that is so Jesus-centered, Jesus-exalting, that it pulls us into the power and grace of great man and changes absolutely everything. It is the good and true story that Jesus has defeated our sin, our death, and our evil through his own death and resurrection and is making all things new, even us. Jesus is the fulgent of Jewish hope and the foundation of Christian faith. Will he be the foundation of our faith, our masculinity, our identity? I hope so. Jesus is better.