

Finding Your True Identity in Christ, Pt. 3
Hopelessly Fallen and Mortally Wounded

**First Presbyterian Church
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This past week, the nation has mourned the passing of Billy Graham. Around the country we have honored the man who came to be known as “America’s Pastor.” Literally millions came to Christ through his preaching in stadiums and auditoriums around the world. I want to tell you the story of what may be the only time Billy Graham preached *without* giving an invitation to receive Christ. I was there. In fact, I had gone precisely to get connected to Christ and was crushed when there was no invitation.

Let me back up. Billy Graham convicted me of sin. When one of Billy’s crusades was televised, our family would watch. I remember one night when I was watching on the couch with my parents. Billy talked about the ills of the nation and the wrongs that arise from the sinful human heart. He mentioned sexual sins. Now I was only 11, but I felt pretty sure that spin-the-bottle with Mary Ann Swanko put me in that category. I wasn’t right with God. That scared me. I wanted to be forgiven. I also had a deep spiritual yearning to know God more deeply. After Billy’s message, I asked my Mom how you knew if you had truly accepted Christ as savior. Very kindly, but unhelpfully, she assured me, “Oh, don’t worry about it. You’ll just know.” But I didn’t know. And thus began what would be a two and a half year quest to find someone who could lead me to Christ.

I went to confirmation class at my church. We had an interim pastor who seemed to be about 100 years old. He was kind but totally unhelpful in connecting me to Christ. The exam by the elders loomed as a scary moment. Each confirmation student had to talk privately with an elder. I faced that moment with fear and anticipation. Fear because they would ask me about my relationship with Christ and I would have to shame the family and admit I didn’t know. Anticipation because I expected that after the humiliation, an elder would help me get connected to Jesus. But all that happened was a kindly old man slapped me on the shoulder and said, “Son, it’s so good when young people are interested in church.” But I wasn’t interested in church! I wanted to have my sins forgiven. I wanted to know Christ.

The next year, when I was in 8th grade, I read that Billy Graham was coming to the Miami Marine Stadium to preach at the Easter Sunrise Service. I had to be there. My sweet Dad agreed to get up before dawn and drive us all the way over to Key Biscayne for the service. This would be the moment. Billy would preach. He'd give the invitation. I'd go forward and someone would show me how to connect to God. Well, Billy preached. He preached that Jesus is risen. I was ready. Call me to Christ right now. But then Billy sat down. No invitation. No coming forward. We sang a hymn and went home. What?! I couldn't believe it. Billy Graham and no invitation. That was historic. But not what I needed. It would be another 3 months before members of my youth group and a camp counsellor led me to receive Jesus as the Lord of my life and the Savior of my sins.

By standards of degree, what I thought as a 6th grader was a heinous sin was actually not so bad. In fact I'm not even sure I'd call it a transgression. But the guilt I had about kissing Mary Ann Swanko was a symptom of a deeper problem. We know in our bones that there's something the matter with us. We know that we have felt things, thought things, and done things that are not right. We are not who we appear to be. We are not right with God, with ourselves or with others.

This is an essential realization in Christian identity. We are brutally realistic about the human condition. It's true that I am created by a God who intended me and loves me. I am made in his image and designed to bring him glory by living in love for God and others. But I can't do it. I am off. I am fallen away from the original design. And on my own I can't make it better. I am hopelessly fallen. And as a result, I am mortally wounded. The death in the world is a result of sin, and I see deathliness arise from my own words and actions.



This week's painting is by Masaccio. It's called "Expulsion from the Garden of Eden." Painting in a style ahead of his time, Masaccio renders the emotion of the scene from Genesis 3 in which our first parents must leave the paradise of the Garden of Eden. With the sin of taking the forbidden fruit, humankind fell. Death entered the world. Disharmony erupted. Eden was lost. Intimacy with God was

sundered. We became estranged from one another. The pain on the faces of Adam and Eve in Masaccio's painting tells the whole story.

Have you ever seen those expressions before? I have. These are not the faces of loveable rogues who have been caught being naughty by a strict school master. These are the gestures of those pierced by the loss of something precious.

- I have seen this expression of Adam on the face of a man the moment it dawns on him how much wreckage he has caused in his family.
- I have seen this expression of Eve on the face of a young woman entering an abortion clinic.
- These are the parents of school children in Parkland, Florida after the forces of brokenness, sin and evil coalesced in a nightmare shooting.
- These are the hearts of children receiving the news of their parents' divorce.
- This is a family with hearts exploded by suicide.
- This is a Ponzi scheme coming to light. This is an affair discovered. This is the last dollar gambled and it's waking up in the drunk tank. It's being too late to say goodbye because pride, only pride, delayed you. It's knowing that now that you've done it, now that you've said it, nothing ever will be the same.

The face of sin is not the thrill of having fun being bad while constricted, legalistic good people live boring lives. The face of sin is heart wrenching loss. Something precious is gone, seemingly forever.

We can hear our first parents crying out even as they leave the garden, "No! Please! Have mercy! We were wrong. We are sorry, forever sorry. Forgive! Restore! Fix this because only you can!"

We heard David's cry of the soul in Psalm 51. The prophet Nathan had convicted him of the sin of taking another man's wife and then arranging for that man to die. In deep remorse, coming awake to the truth, David prayed,

Have mercy on me, O God.
According to your steadfast love.
According to your abundant mercy, blot out my transgressions....
Against you, you only, have I sinned,
and done what is evil in your sight...
Create in me a clean heart, O God,

and renew a right spirit within me.
Cast me not away from your presence,
and take not your Holy Spirit from me.
Restore unto me the joy of my salvation,
and renew a right spirit within me.

The searing pain of these wounds arise from the sin in the human heart. It's what we do to one another. It's what we do to ourselves. Our core identity includes the stark fact that we are fatally flawed and mortally wounded. We choose against God and therefore against life and love. And we cannot help but do it.

This is not the way it's supposed to be! But it is the way it is. We are pierced with the loss of something wonderful. Now we are *not* good. Still loved, but not right deep down. Nor are we capable of saving ourselves. Without aid, we cannot please God who made us and loves us. We cannot fix our predicament. We all live under the shadow of mortality, with loneliness in our souls, guilt on our hands, and frustration in our work and relationships. We cry out, "Have mercy!"

This grim but realistic fact of our identity is crucial to grasp. Without embracing the brutal reality of our sinfulness, *we will seek to build an identity based on delusion*. This is so important to understand. The deal is that there's something wrong with everything. We see the wreckage all around us. We know in our bones that we have something to do with that. There's something wrong with me. Deep down. But that's hard to admit. Because it means I am rejectable. I am so contemptible for what I have thought and said, let alone done, that if you knew me, surely you would scorn me. I don't want to face that. So I build an identity based on a story of my worth. I do things that make me seem acceptable. I show to you the good side of me. I make comparisons with others so that I can feel good about my personal narrative. There may be nothing at all wrong in all the achievements and all the acts of service and all the good words. But if I think those make me acceptable to God, then I am deluded. I have to spend enormous amounts of energy keeping it up. And keeping prying eyes away from the core of me. It's exhausting. It makes us live in contempt of others, projecting our flaws onto them. And it just doesn't work.

Owning the truth of our flawed core is the key to finding freedom from the power of sin. It is the first step in being liberated from the impossible burden of trying to make life work on our own.

Jesus once told a parable that arises straight from the truth of Psalm 51. And strikes directly at everything in me that doesn't want to admit my sin. Luke tells us that Jesus told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt. How wise is Jesus! When we try to build our identity on how right and great and fine we are, we cannot help but look at others with contempt. We depend on their being beneath us. So he told this story: Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. (You get the set up: one guy was good, religious, and devout. The other guy was a scoundrel, a despicable profiteering cheat. Both wanted to pray).

The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed 'God thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week. I give tithes of all that I get.'

But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner.' Jesus concluded, I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted (Luke 18: 9-14).

One man built his identity on the list of good things he had done. He built his faith on not being bad like others. He stood by himself, a man who does not keep company with dirty, ignorant, non-useful, socially unacceptable people. The other also stood far off. But not because he did not want to be near other people. He felt that he could not come close to God or others. "God, be merciful to me a sinner!" That was the heartcry that echoed the prayer of David. That is the essence of owning our identity as hopelessly fallen and mortally wounded by sin.

Once more, let's note the brilliance of Jesus. He told this story as something that happened in the past. He declared that the repentant, mercy-seeking tax collector went home justified, already made right with God. But that's not one and done. That's not easy believism: just trust Jesus once at Billy Graham and you're all set, you got the God thing done. Jesus concluded in the present. Owning our identity as sinners in need of mercy is a continuous activity. "The one who humbles himself—that's present, ongoing, and humble crying for mercy—that one will be exalted. Only the one who owns the identity of sinner every moment will discover the identity of being continually beloved and forgiven.

This week, our Lenten guide reminded us of an ancient prayer built on Psalm 51 and this parable from Luke. It's called the Jesus Prayer. *Lord Jesus*

Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner. So simple. We just say who Jesus is and we say who we are. We ask to be connected. Jesus, you are Lord and Christ. I am a sinner, have mercy on me. The Jesus Prayer opens a channel into our deep heart need for mercy. It bypasses the tedious story of all my good actions and fine achievements and takes me to the place of my need. Have mercy on me a sinner. And the Jesus Prayer opens a channel to the heart of God. It bypasses the lie that our God is merely a grumpy, angry rule enforcer. It takes me to the mercy seat. Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner.

I encouraged you to pray the Jesus Prayer at least ten times in a row, out loud. Some of you told me you did it. And that it had a powerful effect. I know, because I did it too. I have been saying it in the small hours of the night when I wake. I have said it in the rhythm of walking. It's straight from Scripture and creates identity in Christ. Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner.

Christian identity begins with a gloriously high view of human being: we are created, designed, and intended. Made to be in a living relationship with our creator and in flourishing relationships with one another. But then we immediately, courageously, own the truth. There is something wrong with everything, and that wrong begins in me. I will not build my life on an illusion of my own goodness and independence. I need mercy. I need a savior.

This week in our readings, we will see how Jesus saves us by doing an identity switch with us. He takes our sinful identity as his own. He gives us his faithful identity as the one man who loved God and neighbor. Don't miss this! Don't let anything distract you. Read the passages every day. Be here for church next Sunday. It's the most important thing I could ever tell you.

For now, let's close with an insight that brings our first two identity statements together.

The truth is that, at the very same time,
You are more sinful than you will ever know.
And more loved than you can ever imagine.

Own the truth, dear ones, of being hopelessly fallen so that you can know the joy of being lifted up by the merciful one who created you in love for glory.