

You Need an Identity

What's up fam. My name is Marcus and I'm one of the pastors here at City Church. If you have a bible, turn with me over to **Genesis, chapter 11**. If you are joining us for the first time this week, whether in person or online, first off welcome, we are in week 3 of a series all about work—and more specifically, how we think about and how we approach work. **Last week**, Jeff, one of our other pastors, talked a little about the idea of *calling*. And specifically, he talked about how it is possible for us to *put love into* our work—to see our work as a calling—even if we don't happen to *love* whatever it is that we do. That even for those of us who feel like we're working a dead-end job, or a job we don't want to be at—that *even still*, we can find purpose and significance in what we do.

Today, I want us to tackle **another common problem** many people have when it comes to work. And the best way I know of to help wrap our minds around the problem is to just describe **a few common work scenarios** for you. So first, imagine with me that there is a **young woman**, let's say she's in her mid 20s or so. She just got her **first job out of college**, and it's exactly what she always *envisioned* herself doing. It's a great job, in her field, with a really good company. She's six months into the job, and honestly, it's exhilarating. She's good at what she does. Matter fact, she does it well, she's already gotten praise from higher-ups in her company for doing her job passionately.

So as you can imagine, things are going great, and honestly it's *because* of that that **she can't stop working**. It's like she can't turn it off. She takes her laptop home every night and knocks out several things while she eats takeout for dinner. She works until she falls asleep working. And she wakes up each morning with her mind already solving the work problems of the day, going through each meeting in her head. She has a few sort of kind of friends in life, but no real deep *friendships*. And most of those *acquaintances* are just friends from work, because again, she's always working. She has no time for actual friendship, right. Ok, so that's scenario #1.

Alright, next. This time it's a **young man** in his mid-30s, and he's already had too many job and career changes for him to count. He stays at each job for a few months, and somehow none of those jobs end up being quite what he wants them to be. They all seem just a bit boring really, a bit unfulfilling—none of them make him *excited* to tell people what he does for a living. So because of that, he works at each job for a few months, maybe a year, and then either quits because he's over it or gets fired because he cares so little about doing his job that, mind you, he does it poorly. Every time he hears about a new opportunity, he doesn't even think twice about quitting his current job

to take the new one. Sometimes, he doesn't even wait for the next opportunity to present itself. He just jumps ship because he's tired of his current job, and works odd jobs while he waits for the next thing to happen for him.

Okay last scenario. This one's a little different. This time imagine a **young mom**, late 20s, early 30s. A couple of young children at home that she is responsible for, seemingly 24/7. If there was one word that summed up her default mood, it would be the word *anxiety*. She constantly feels like she is failing at being a "good mom"—whatever that means. And so her day-to-day mood just *rests* on a low-grade sense of inadequacy. She reads all the parenting books, she follows all the mommy blogs and Instagram accounts—but they all make it look and sound so much easier and honestly, so much *better* than it is. But the longer it goes on, the more the anxiety she feels about her *parenting*. She has begun to feel like her perceived failures as a mom means she has failed as a human being. She's not good at the one thing she feels like she's supposed to be good at. And it's affecting most, if not every, arena of her life.

So there we have three different people, **three different scenarios**, three different attitudes towards "work." But as different as they might seem, there is **one common thread** that runs through them all. There's a *belief* at work in all three of these people, and likely for many of us in this room. And here's how I would articulate that belief:

"Work is where I find my identity."

I think that is what each of those people, and likely some of *us*, believe about our work (at least at a functional level). That if we find the right job that we were made to do and are good enough at it, we will feel more whole and more complete as human beings. The reason the **young woman** at her dream job can't stop working is because her work is the thing fueling her identity: the more she works, the more full and at peace she is with her identity. The reason the **young man** jumps from job to job, career to career, is because none of them are quite giving him the identity he thinks they should provide—he thinks he was "meant for more," and he keeps thinking the next job, or the next job, or really that next job will finally achieve that. And the reason that the **stay-at-home mom** feels like a failure is because she feels like she isn't *good* at the thing that makes her, *her*. And in her mind, the "worse" she is at it, the less purpose she feels like she has as a human being. These are all just different outworkings of the faulty belief that *work is where we should find our identity*.

And **while that may seem like a very modern idea**, I want you to see that it's actually not new at all. It's as old as humanity fam. It goes all the way back, at least, to Genesis 11. So **for context**, in the overall biblical narrative, human beings have now been cast out of the garden of Eden, and humanity has had a pretty rough go of it so far. There's sin, there's corruption, there's murder, there's injustice. The struggle is real. And we're about to read about *one of those struggles* in Genesis 11.

Let's hit it up in **v. 1**:

*[1] Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. [2] And as people migrated from the east [in other words, away from the garden of Eden], they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. [3] And they said to one another, "Come, **let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly.**" And they had brick for stone, and bitumen [a form of asphalt or tar] for mortar.*

So a key **advancement in history** comes about, called the "brick." Maybe you've heard of it. In the story, this new technology enables humans to build things cheaper, faster, and bigger than they have ever done before. So here's what they plan to do with that newfound ability, continuing v. 4:

*[4] Then they said, "Come, let us **build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves** [if you like to underline things in your bible, you might want to underline that phrase right there, "make a name for ourselves", let's continue], lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth."*

So these people in Genesis 11 are going to **build a city**, which isn't necessarily a bad thing. People build cities all the time. In fact in case you were wondering, we are currently living in a city. And remember from week one of our series we said that God actually *intended* that you and I would cultivate, build and construct things. God intended that we would build cities and culture. So again, **the problem isn't necessarily in what they're doing—but it is in why they're doing it. It's in their motivations for building this city.** And the reason for why they're doing it, we find right smack there in the middle of verse 4: to "...make a name for who church family? [ourselves]." They want to make a *name* for themselves.

That right there, is **the language of identity**. In building this city, they're *not* wanting to fulfill God's purposes of "working the ground and keeping it" from earlier in Genesis.

They're not trying to follow God's mandate of creating societies and culture. No, no, no. **What *they're* trying to do is make *themselves* look good, right?** They want to be important, to be noticed, to be revered, and they think that building this tower will accomplish that for them. Now if you've ever built anything the sense of accomplishment that comes with it can be huge right. I remember building, correction: semi-building, a bird house not too long ago and man was I proud of it. Now can you imagine building a tower that reaches the heavens. What do you think they would feel? They want their *work* to give them *purpose* and *significance* that they feel they don't currently have. In other words, they want their work to give them an *identity*.

And if you know anything about the story up until this point in the bible, that phrase "let us make a name for ourselves," should cause all the red lights to go off in our head. Because from the beginning of the story, *God* has been giving humanity a purpose. *God* has been giving his people meaning and significance. *God* was the one, quite literally, who "gave them a *name*." But like we read, at this point, humanity decides that they don't want any of *that*. *Instead*, they want to make a name for *themselves*. They want to draw an identity from their work.

And this right here gets at **one of the most fundamental things we need to understand about ourselves: *when we reject our God-given identity, we will always try to create an identity for ourselves***. Always. That's just the way it works. When we effectively tell God that we don't want the identity *he* gives us as his image bearers, it creates a sort of *vacuum* in our lives. And what will happen is that we will instinctively, *frantically even*, try to fill that vacuum with any number of different things that we think will give us the identity that we are now missing. But don't just take my word for it, **Jeremiah 2** puts it like this:

[13] for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me [God], the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water.

So this verse echoes this **very same idea**: we as God's people reject *God* (the "fountain of living waters"). And *because* of that, we have begun to, as it says, "hew out cisterns for *ourselves*"—which is a symbolic way of depicting other sources of meaning and purpose and significance in our lives. In other words, **when we reject God's identity for us, we will instinctively look for it in other places**. And the picture the author of Jeremiah uses for *that* is that of "hewing out cisterns." Now cisterns back in the day were these large bowls, usually made out of stone, that would collect rainwater runoff; but they

would often *break*. So the picture is that when we reject God, the best source for *living* water, we settle for something far less effective—in this case, broken cisterns.

And if **human history has shown** us *anything*, it's that **there is no end to the types of "cisterns"** we'll try to create for ourselves. There's an infinite number of "identities" we will look towards to try and establish some sort of name for ourselves. *Sometimes it's in our appearance. Sometimes it's our possessions, our politics, our gender, our sexuality, our cultivated image on social media, and the list goes on.* There are all sorts of places that we look to find an identity. But **one favorite approach for a lot of people is to find their identity in their work: to look to our job, our career, the company we work for, the school we go to, the amount of impact we're making, or the quality of our work to tell us who we are.** To obtain some sort of meaning, purpose, and significance for ourselves. Or as Genesis 11 says, to "make a name for ourselves."

See, plenty of people, even those outside of the church, have noticed this tendency in humans. In an article for the *Atlantic* last year, writer **Derek Thompson**—who does not claim to be a follower of Jesus at all—described the problem like this, and I think he's spot on:

*The economists of the early 20th century did not foresee that work might **evolve from a means of material production to a means of identity production.** They failed to anticipate that, for the poor and middle class, work would remain a necessity; but for the college-educated elite, it would morph into a kind of religion, promising identity, transcendence, and community. Call it workism. The decline of traditional faith in America has coincided with an explosion of new atheisms. Some people worship beauty, some worship political identities, and others worship their children. But **everybody worships something.** And workism is among the most potent of the new religions competing for congregants. What is workism? It is **the belief that work is not only necessary to economic production, but also the centerpiece of one's identity and life's purpose...**¹*

So Derek **Thompson basically said** work has gone beyond a thing you do for a paycheck, and has **now become a means of establishing your identity and worth in the universe.** More and more people are looking to work to tell them *who they are*.

¹ You can read the entire article [here](#).

And **let's just be honest** about something: for *some* of us, that goes really *well* a lot of the time. Sometimes we successfully “build the tower.” Some of you, I know, are doing what you love and loving what you do. You’ve got a job that is right up your alley, it’s exactly what you’re passionate about, and you’re *really* good at it. So for you, work is actually pretty enjoyable most of the time. Maybe you even get recognized by your peers and your employers as being good at what you do. And there’s nothing wrong with any of that in itself—all of that is actually fantastic. But **if we aren’t careful, the good thing can become the ultimate thing, and can easily become our functional *identity*.** It can become where we go to find our purpose, our meaning, instead of finding all of that *first* in the person and work of Jesus.

Now **for the rest of us** what I just described sounds sort of like a fairy tale to you. Maybe you have never *once* thought to yourself “I love what I do for a living.” Maybe you’ve been working the same dead-end job for years, or jumping from job to job. And if we’re honest, you haven’t really enjoyed *any* of them for very long. For you, your job feels way more like that “broken cistern that will hold no water.” That’s what work feels like for you—like something you want to find meaning and purpose in, but it just won’t hold water long enough to drink from it.

But what I want you to see is that **in both scenarios**, believe it or not, the **core problem is actually the same**. **The issue is that we are looking to our work to give us something, instead of being able to give something to our work.** Work, in essence, has become a *self-oriented* pursuit. “I work because I need purpose, I need meaning, I need significance, and I believe that work will provide that for me. I work because I need to feel like I matter in the world.” But if you remember from the past two weeks, that’s actually very different from what the Scriptures teach about work. The Scriptures would say that work is actually primarily about serving, giving, about *offering something to* the society and world around us. It’s *not* primarily about serving ourselves. And **when we look to work to establish our identity, we are turning work into a means to serve ourselves.**

So here’s how that looks like for me. I am what you would call a lay pastor, which basically means, that my full time job is actually not this. I work at UT as a senior graphic designer. Now I’m not sure if there’s an age requirement for that role but apparently I fit the bill for a senior. I actually like to call myself a well seasoned graphic designer. Anywho, as a graphic designer, I create things for our campus and students to be able to receive information in an appealing way. And something that I know about myself is that it’s very easy to find my identity in my creations.

It's easy to find purpose and meaning in what I do. I mean I literally create things from thin air right. I create logos, I create swag for people. And I mean some people might say it's really good stuff...like my mom. But it really can be intoxicating. Like, I create things that people enjoy. See, if I'm not careful, it can be real easy for me to make a name for myself in the design world. Matter fact, I've tried for the longest to do that. To find identity in it.

And it wasn't until a sermon like this sort of helped me wrap my brain around this. That when I find my worth in design I become less about serving others and more about feeding this insatiableness that's inside me. **I become less about God's business of redeeming and shaping the world and more about my business.** I remember when I was younger and I would pull all nighters back to back, please don't try that at home, but I would do this all in the name of being great. I was building my tower to speak. And I was doing it because everyone else was doing it right. "Well so and so designer is doing this, I need to be about that too. I need to do it so I don't get passed by. I need to be out there hustling."

Now like I said, since that sermon and many LifeGroup guys speaking into this, the Lord has used those moments to expose in me how work can be my identity. He's helped me to both spot it and repent of it. I remember a year or so ago at UT when I was creeping back into this work identity and I was in my feelings about a critique. I mean, I was in my feelings. And I'm sure my coworkers and boss could tell. And guess who else could tell...the Holy Spirit. And he definitely kept pressing me on it. And after wrestling with it, I apologized to them for being in my feelings about their critique. And hear me say, if it were not for God's spirit I would still be trying to find my identity in my work.

So I share that for a couple reasons. One, to show you that it's ok to show your cards in this arena. To admit that this might be a thing for you. And also, to show you that **no matter how good the job is, and believe me I love my job, and even still all jobs are a poor replacement for the identity that comes from the God of the universe.** They don't even come close to who *God* says we are.

So in light of that, here's what I want us to do next. My guess is that there are at least *some* people listening in this room or online, that are like me, inclined to try and acquire their identity from their work. But sometimes it's difficult to spot that tendency in us. It's not always obvious when we're doing that. So we've put together some questions to help

discern whether or not we are finding our identity in our work. Let's work through these and see if the Spirit uses them to bring up anything in us that needs to be addressed:

Is your mood overly affected by your work?

If your identity is in your work, your mood will be disproportionately impacted by **what type of day you had** at work. Now, I realize that *all* of us are emotionally impacted on some level by our jobs, because our jobs are a big part of our lives—that's inevitable to some degree. *But, there is a difference between being emotionally affected by your work, and being emotionally ruled by your work.* If the *main thing* that dictates whether you are in a good mood or bad mood each day is how *work* went that day, that's usually a sign that it holds *too* central a place in your mind and heart.

So I'll hit yah with another personal. I remember when I would hit on all cylinders while doing freelance design, basically working for myself. When I would post my designs on on graphic design sites, think instagram but for designers, and everybody was loving what I was doing. Or when I would post to Insta and my friends were like, man let me buy that right now. Well, when I would hang around people, my spirits were off the charts right. Like I had all the energy in the world. I'd clean the house for my roommates. I'd cook dinner. I'd laugh and joke. Everything would be fantastic.

But if I had a day where things were just not clicking. When no one was commenting on my posts. When no one was hitting those hearts on insta. When my friends would want to hang out or my roommates wanted to hang out, guess who didn't want to hang out? My mind would be preoccupied with wanting to find the thing I was missing. I wanted to feel like I had purpose. My mood was based entirely on the type of day I would have. And all of that was happening because that's where I found my identity.

Does that make sense? So that's the first question I want us to ask: *am I emotionally ruled by the type of day I had at work?*

Do you compromise your ethics when your work performance is at stake?

Are there **things you're well aware you shouldn't do**, that you find yourself **justifying** when it gets you ahead in work? So think about it like this - you know you shouldn't gossip about people, but you *will* gossip about the person that everyone else gossips about if it helps you fit in, or if it makes you look like a better employee by contrast. You know you shouldn't lie, but if it helps you make a sale, you very instinctively lie in big or small ways. You know you shouldn't inflate the numbers, but if it

makes you look just a little better on paper than you are, you'll do it. You never thought you were the type of person to cheat on an exam or a paper, but when it comes down to it, if you really need to pass that one class to keep your four year plan on track, you're fine with it. Are there things that are actually pretty clear for you, ethically speaking—but you're willing to fudge on them a little bit or a lotta bit if it helps you look better at work? If so, that could be a sign that you're looking to work to establish an identity, to “make a name” for yourself. And you're willing to do anything it takes to get that name for yourself.

Do you find it hard to “turn work off”?

Do you find it **hard to be present** with people outside of work because your mind and attention are always on your work? Do you talk about work constantly, even when the people listening are very obviously not interested? Do you check work email constantly, even when you're not at work, and don't have to be checking it? Do you have all your work notifications turned on?

Now, **one clarification:** I'm aware that some of you may *have* to stay connected to work at times when you're not working. You have the type of job where you're officially or unofficially “on call” at certain times. So I'm not talking about that. I'm talking about when your mind is on work and it *doesn't have* to be—are you still preoccupied with it? That's another sign your identity might be in your work. Next one:

Do you make life decisions entirely based on work?

Right now, if all it would take is a little more money and a little better job to move all the way across the country without hardly any second thoughts about it, that could be a pointer to where your identity lies. If a better job is the *only* factor you consider—if there's no thoughts like “is that somewhere I want to live?” Or, “is there a healthy church there I can be a part of?” Or, “is that somewhere that me or my spouse or my family could thrive?” There may be times where taking the job and making the move might really be the best decision. But if it's automatic and no real questions get asked when there is a better job that pays more money, that's a good indicator that you are looking to your work for an identity. Last one...

Do you jump from job to job often, and become quickly dissatisfied?

If you have a hard time staying at one job for very long, even when it's a good job, that could also be a sign that you find your identity in your work. If you **quickly become dissatisfied and disillusioned** with every new job you take before long, that could be

because you're looking to those jobs to provide something they can't provide. Remember, one of the things that Jeremiah said about those "broken cisterns" is that they "hold no water." They can't offer what you're wanting them to offer, or at least not for long, because they were never meant to be the source of your identity.

So those are just a handful of questions to help spot whether or not you are looking to your work to "give you a name"—to provide you with a source of identity. To be sure, there are probably way more than that. But I have found those to be some of the more *common* signs.

So for those of us who answered "yes" to any or all of those questions, the question we then need to answer is *what should we do about it?* If we are finding our identity in our work (or anything other than Jesus, for that matter), how do we go about changing that?

Well, we actually saw the answer back in Jeremiah 2. It said that we, God's people, have committed two errors: that first, we rejected God, the fountain of living water. And second, that we have hewed out broken cisterns that hold *no* water. And the reality is that the first problem actually creates the second problem. When we forsake God, we try to chisel out identities for ourselves as a result. So how do we keep from hewing out cisterns for ourselves? We reverse engineer it: we don't forsake God in the *first* place. In other words, **we let God give us an identity, so we don't constantly, frantically look for it in places it can't be found.**

You know, in the story from Genesis 11, God responds in a very *interesting way* to humanity building this tower to the heavens. If you'll remember, humanity could do all of this because they were all in one place and they all spoke the same language. So when God sees them building this tower to "make a name for themselves," he chooses to spread them out and confuse their language.

Now maybe to some people that sounds petty or vindictive on God's part. But I think it's precisely the opposite. I think it's actually *love* that motivated God's actions there. I mean think about it: if God sees humanity pursuing something that will never accomplish what they want it to accomplish, if he sees them spending their time and effort and energy on something that will never provide them with the identity they're seeking, is it not his *grace* to stop them from doing that? And furthermore, if he knows that their pursuit of that "name for themselves" will ultimately cause heartache and misfortune and destruction and injustice, is it not his *love* that stops them from pursuing it?

So for you, **might it be** that the reason your work is perpetually dissatisfying, is because God is hoping you will eventually see that it can't provide what you want it to provide? Is it possible that the reason your work is exhausting you and wearing you out and running you into the ground, is so that you might see that work is a bad god to be serving? And is it not possible that God is using all of that so that maybe—just *maybe*—you would seek an identity from *him* instead? In the famous words of C.S. Lewis, if you find in yourself desires that nothing in this world can satisfy, the only logical explanation is that you were made for another world.

You were made for God himself. You were made to be *given* a name through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. You were made to have God proclaim over you, “*this is my beloved, cherished, son/daughter, in whom I am well pleased.*” And until you believe *that* about yourself, any other cistern you draw out will always feel a little empty, a little dry, a little stale.

But **once you understand** all that—once you hear those words spoken over you *by God through Jesus*—your perspective towards your work will change. You will see your work as an arena to live *out of* your identity, rather than desperately needing your work to *give you* an identity. And it will set you *free*. Maybe some of us in this room and online need to *drink* from the living water for the very first time.

And for **others of us**, maybe we **just need a reminder** of that reality. Maybe we need a hard restart on where our identity truly lies. Followers of Jesus in the room and online, can I talk to you for a second? I'm about to say something, and it's going to sound very obvious. Like so obvious that you're gonna potentially look at me funny. And yet, in my experience, it is the *very* thing many of us need to hear. Are you ready? **Living water is only helpful if you drink it.** Let me say that again so you can write it down, living water is only helpful if you drink it. In Jeremiah's day, if you lived by a stream of fresh, living water, and you don't drink from it, you are no better off than the person who lives nowhere near that stream. And the reason I say that is because I think some of us are trying desperately to live as if our identity is from Jesus, but we're not actually drinking from the living water that is right in front of us.

So many people who are putting their identity in their job, or in a relationship, or in their accomplishments, or any number of other things and don't know how to stop—when I ask “okay, well when's the last time you really just sat with Jesus? When's the last time you spent time in the Scriptures reminding yourself of who God says you are?” They usually

answer “Well honestly I can’t remember.” See, the reason you are thirsty is because you’re not drinking.

So can I plead with you this morning, as someone who has been wrestling through this as well, to just spend some time, *drinking* from the living water that is Jesus? Can I encourage you to just sit with God and let him, through the Scriptures, through his Spirit, through his people, remind you of *who you are*? Of your *rightful place* in his kingdom? Can I encourage you to do that sometime *today*? And then can I encourage you not to forsake that time every single day? If you need help knowing how to do that, we have a team of pastors and LifeGroup leaders here at City Church that would love nothing more than to teach you how to do that. But they can’t make you *want* to do that.

So can I encourage you to make **the most important thing** in your day, the highest priority in your daily rhythm to sit and let the Holy Spirit speak over you, “this is my beloved son—this is my beloved daughter—in whom I *am* well pleased.” Not “this is a human machine who can make themselves valuable to the world by what they do”—way too many of us believe *that*. Way too many of us in this room and online believe this. Instead God is saying, “Melanie, Brandon, Hunter, Eric, Eni, Hayden. Come to me. Let my words wash over you. You are loved not because of what you do. You are cherished not because of what you do, but because I said so. I’m already pleased by you. Don’t look for your worth from work. Don’t look for your value in what you do. Come to me. Be under my roof. Find your refuge in me. I will tell you daily who you are. I will speak it over you daily. “You are my *child*, and I’m well pleased with you.”

Let’s pray and ask God to help us hear that this morning? And this might seem weird to do but instead of just hearing me pray, I really want you guys to pray for yourselves. I want you to pray to our Father and ask him if you find your identity in your work. I want you to pray through those questions we asked earlier. So I’ll give you a minute or two to pray on your own and then I’ll close us out. Let’s pray.