



How aware is a fish of the water in which it swims? Not very. Similarly, we swim in cultural water everyday, often without realization or examination.

To complicate the matter, we live in a very polarizing time. American culture demands that we adhere to certain cultural dogmas, but it takes great thoughtfulness and courage to stop and consider whether or not these dogmas have Biblical basis or truth.

In this eight-week series, we will examine eight prevalent messages our culture preaches that, for better or worse, create the “water in which we swim” everyday. We will discuss the benefits and drawbacks of each when considered in light of the gospel.

*NOTE: There may be slight changes to what follows, primarily in the main passage(s) used. However, the ones shared below will be a great start and very applicable for the sermons.*

## The Identity Narrative

### A Brief Explanation:



*"Ancient cultures (and some traditional cultures today) believed that strong individual feelings and self-interest should be suppressed in favor of fulfilling one's duty to family and tribe. In these cultures your self-worth came from the honor bestowed on you by the community when you sublimated your desires for its welfare. Christianity put much more value on the emotions and intuitions and did not give the family and society such absolute control over individuals. It taught that our feelings should be examined and our highest love and allegiance directed toward God. Western secularism, however, has reversed the ancient approach. Our identity now is discovered not outside (in our duties or roles in society) but only inside, in our desires and dreams. In this view our self-worth comes from the dignity we bestow on ourselves as we express and fulfill our desires, regardless of what our community might say. We must "be ourselves" regardless of social expectations. Our society's main heroic narrative is that of the individual standing up and being true to him- or herself over society's opposition"*

-Tim Keller<sup>1</sup>



Discuss the quote above

### An Example from Culture



Let it Go – Disney's Frozen: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L0MK7qz13bU>

? What positive messages can be drawn from this?

? What potentially harmful messages can be drawn from this?

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<sup>1</sup> Keller, Timothy. Preaching: Communicating Faith in an Age of Skepticism (p. 132). Penguin Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.



“The new late-modern narrative, however, goes beyond merely understanding and directing our own passions to enthroning them. Its essence is captured by the words of the song “Let It Go” in the Disney movie Frozen. The song is sung by a character determined no longer to “be the good girl” that her family and society had wanted her to be. Instead she would “let go” and express what she had been holding back inside. There is “no right or wrong, no rules” for her.

...Identity is not realized, as in traditional societies, by sublimating our individual desires for the good of our family and people. Instead we become ourselves only by asserting our individual desires against society, by expressing our feelings and fulfilling our dreams regardless of what anyone says.

There are many severe problems with the sovereign self as a philosophy of life. To begin with, it assumes that we know what we want—that our inner desires are coherent and harmonious. Modernity tells you to discover your deepest desires and fulfill them, but our deepest desires often contradict one another. A desire for a stellar career will often be in conflict with the desire for a particular relationship. And our feelings constantly shift. So an identity based on our feelings will be unstable and incoherent.

An even more serious problem is that an identity based on expressing ourselves—without listening to outside dictates—is actually an illusion.”

-Tim Keller<sup>2</sup>

? Where do you see our culture’s identity narrative play out in your daily life? How does it influence you and the different people around you?

## Bible



### Genesis 3:1-7 (NIV)

Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden’?”

<sup>2</sup>The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden,<sup>3</sup> but God did say, ‘You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.’”

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<sup>2</sup> Keller, Timothy. Preaching: Communicating Faith in an Age of Skepticism (pp. 133-140). Penguin Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

<sup>4</sup> “You will not certainly die,” the serpent said to the woman. <sup>5</sup> “For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

<sup>6</sup> When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. <sup>7</sup> Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.



Discuss the passage above.



#### **Galatians 2:20-21 (NIV)**

<sup>20</sup> I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. <sup>21</sup> I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!”



Discuss the passage above.



What other passages come to mind when you think about the topic of identity?

? How does the identity narrative our culture preaches line up with teaching from God’s Word? Where do they “agree”? Where do they “disagree”?

? Biblically speaking, where does our identity actually come from and what is that identity?

? How are we to view this cultural narrative in light of gospel?

## **Application & Accountability**

- ? What difference does it make to us all to make sure that the Cultural Dogma of “Identity” is replaced with a Gospel Identity?
- ? What is one way you need to lay aside what culture is telling you about your identity?  
How can your small group come along side you in that process?

## For Further Thought

### From more reading on this topic:

Huffington Post Article – A great example of how this narrative plays out in our culture:

[https://www.huffingtonpost.com/michael-feeley/what-does-it-mean-to-be-t\\_1\\_b\\_8033654.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/michael-feeley/what-does-it-mean-to-be-t_1_b_8033654.html)

Tim Keller rebuffing the idea that Identity actually lies in me and pushes the idea that identity actually comes from outside of us: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/tim-keller-our-identity-the-christian-alternative-to-late-modernitys-story/>

### A Thought Experiment:

Imagine an Anglo-Saxon warrior in Britain in AD 800. He has two very strong inner impulses and feelings. One is aggression. He loves to smash and kill people when they show him disrespect. Living in a shame-and-honor culture with its warrior ethic, he will identify with that feeling. He will say to himself, That's me! That's who I am! I will express that. The other feeling he senses is same-sex attraction. To that he will say, That's not me. I will control and suppress that impulse. Now imagine a young man walking around Manhattan today. He has the same two inward impulses, both equally strong, both difficult to control. What will he say? He will look at the aggression and think, This is not who I want to be, and will seek deliverance in therapy and anger-management programs. He will look at his sexual desire, however, and conclude, That is who I am.

What does this thought experiment show us? Primarily it reveals that we do not get our identity simply from within. Rather, we receive some interpretive moral grid, lay it down over our various feelings and impulses, and sift them through it. This grid helps us decide which feelings are “me” and should be expressed—and which are not and should not be. So this grid of interpretive beliefs—not an innate, unadulterated expression of our feelings—is what shapes our identity.

Despite protests to the contrary, we instinctively know our inner depths are insufficient to guide us. We need some standard or rule from outside of us to help us sort out the warring impulses of our interior life.

And where do our Anglo-Saxon warrior and our modern Manhattan man get their grids? From their cultures, their communities, their heroic stories. They are actually not simply “choosing to be themselves”—they are filtering their feelings, jettisoning some and embracing others. They are choosing to be the selves their cultures tell them they may be. In the end, an identity based independently on your own inner feelings is impossible.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Keller, Timothy. *Preaching: Communicating Faith in an Age of Skepticism* (pp. 133-140). Penguin Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.