

Wk 4 | The Devil's Identity Tests

INTRO | Are any of you familiar with that advertisement? It was an Eftpos advertisement which aired several years ago.

The advertisement articulates a dominate voice in our society – the voice which says “I am the King of my own life. I make the rules. I call the shots. I hold the reigns of my future and direct it in whatever direction I want” – they are statements of a desire for total autonomy – being the boss of your own life.

This mantra is repeated over and over again throughout the media, TV soaps, newspaper, movies – a New York Times columnist, David Brooks, says “people should follow their passion, trust their feelings, reflect and find their purpose in life. When it comes to questions of personal identity nothing is more important in our day than personal autonomy. Identity is a do-it-yourself project.”

Both of today's passages revolve around the issue of identity.

Interestingly, over the last two months, our screens and papers have been filled with stories discussing the momentous decision made by a certain couple. The couple is known all around the world, by presidents, kings, ambassadors and sheiks and sultans. Due to their family identity they enjoy prestige treatment wherever they travel, sit only in the VIP places, stay at only best hotels, are chauffer driven and surrounded by security guards. Their status gives them a direct line of access to one of the most powerful authorities in the world.

But at the beginning of this year they decided to turn away from all those privileges – in an effort to gain greater freedom, and find shelter from the ravage wolves of the paparazzi.

SLIDE 2 | Of course, I am talking about Prince Harry and Princess Meagan's decision to step down from their royal responsibilities and identity, to carve out an independent life where they alone make their own decisions, free from the authority of The Crown.

Their decision to reject their royal identity came with a harsh consequence -

No longer are they permitted to use their titles “their royal highness”, nor can the word ‘royal’ be used in any of their branding. And a hefty \$3.1 million debt remains to be paid.

All the harsh reality of making a decision to gain greater freedom and autonomy.

SLIDE 3 | Both of today’s passages the decision over identity is the central issue:

- In the OT passage the serpent forces the first humans to make a decision – about their identity as God’s children, and what it meant to be a human made in the image of God.
- In the Gospel passage the old serpent again confronts Jesus, and we find once again, the primary issue at stake was also one of identity

The Apostle Paul, calls our attention to the first human, Adam, and then, contrasts him with our Lord and Saviour Jesus, so as to highlight their significant difference

- One was disobedient, the other obedient
- One denied God’s word, the other affirmed God’s Word
- One tried to seize their own autonomy, the other submitted to God’s authority.

Indeed it is the dramatic difference in the consequence of their decisions during their time of testing, which demands our attention.

SLIDE 4 | Let’s begin at the beginning. God had told the humans they could eat from any tree in the Garden – except one. The fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil was harmful to them, if they ate from it, they would die.

One day, a mysterious creature enters the idyllic paradise. We learn the creature is “cunning and shrewd” – and true to his character – he handles God’s word of truth in a sneaky and manipulative way:

(1) First, he DISTORTS God’s words

- “did God really say you must not eat from ANY of the trees in the garden?”

(2) Then, he DENIES God's judgement

- "you will not die."

(3) But, even more deceptive he DEFAMES God's motives and character

- "For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

We learn much about the nature of temptation when we look at what the devil did with God's word.

The devil claimed:

- You will not die; instead,
- Your eyes will be opened, and
- You will be like God.

Each statement contained an element of truth – yet a **tragic irony**.

The devil's lies were designed to undermine the first human's confidence in God and to tempt them to find their identity independently of him.

We read, "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."

Focus on the phrase "desirable for gaining wisdom". The woman (and her husband who was there beside her) decided to trust in their own ability to determine what is good and evil, rather than trusting in God's definition of good and evil.

They did indeed die that day – not physically, but spiritually they were cut off from the life-giving presence and power of God – one day the seed of sin and death would run its course.

Their eyes were indeed opened – they now knew of their nakedness – and with it came a consciousness of guilt – which drove them to hide in shame and fear.

Although they had desired wisdom and the ability to be like God – in rejecting God's authority, and his role as was ??????

SLIDE 5 | Again, I am reminded of Harry and Meagan – they wanted total autonomy – to call the shots –

When they first announced their intentions in January, it is clear **they** wanted to dictate the degree to which they would serve the Monarchy. **They** wanted to be the ones who decided how, when, and where they did their royal duties – because they wanted the freedom to pursue their own interests. The media immediately identified this ‘wanting to have their cake and eat it too.’¹

BUT – just as a decision to reject one’s royal identity has drastic consequences, the decision to reject one’s God-given identity also had drastic consequences.

For Harry and Meagan, they have lost their titles, their home, their security - and now they lie as open fodder to the ravenous hungry mouths of the media – with no protection from The Crown.

The first humans also quickly learned their decision had left them in a disastrous situation – they were now responsible for allowing sin to enter into the world, and they were on their own in a broken, perishing and polluted world.

And the seed of sin – the desire for total autonomy - spread to their children, and all over the world.

Sum up point 1 | The devil’s first temptation sought to convince the humans to reject their identity in God, and instead find it in themselves.

TRANSITION | It is remarkable when we turn to the New Testament and read about the efforts the devil took to tempt Jesus - once again, his direct line of attack is Jesus identity as God’s Son.

SLIDE 6 | We read after Jesus had been fasting for forty days “*The devil came to him and said, 'If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread'.*”

Again, in verse 5 the devil takes Jesus to the highest point of the temple and says “*If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down.*”

The first two of Satan’s tests are prefaced with “if you are the Son of God,” – they are designed to see whether or not Jesus will remain God’s faithful and obedient Son.

¹ <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/10702444/harry-meghan-having-cake-eating-it/>

When the devil's third temptation attempt revolves around identity "If you will bow down and worship me, I will give you all the kingdoms of the world." Jesus had to decide – will he find his identity in his Father, or attempt to carve out a new life for himself as ruler of this earthly kingdom, independent of God?

Unlike the first humans, Jesus did not succumb to the devil's manipulations of God's word. On every account Jesus recalls God's Word, human identity is found in "worshipping and serving God alone."

Autonomy and identity is not found within yourself, it is not found in trusting in your own wisdom ... identity and true freedom is found in submitting to God's authority and pattern.

SUM UP POINT 2 | We could sum up what we have learned by understanding that both instances set the pattern for two different versions of what it means to be a human being:

- One way is to follow Adam and Eve's example, attempting to seize autonomy and find one's identity in yourself – only leads to death
- Jesus shows us the other way – worship God alone and find your identity in him – it is in fact a new kind of humanity – one which draws on God's life – the fruit of which leads to life.

In what could have only arisen in the mind of God – Jesus demonstrated that true life can only be found in giving up one's life for another – and that is what Jesus did for the whole world, through his atoning, sacrificial death.

TRANSITION | The Apostle Paul obviously had all these things in mind when he wrote the section we read today, of his letter to the believers in Rome.

SLIDE 7 | He wrote, "because one person disobeyed God, many became sinners because everyone sinned in the same way."

Although we may be tempted to look despairingly at Adam and Eve and say "how could you be so foolish? Inwardly we know that we too often try to seize autonomy, and try to find our identity in ourselves. We often try to be our own king or queen.

But, Paul writes,

"Yet Jesus obedience and sacrificial life paved the way for God to show wonderful grace to us. Through the death of His Son, God offers to all his gift of forgiveness."

APPLICATION |

So, this leaves us with a decision – In the coming days and weeks the Spirit of God is leading each of us into the wilderness for a time of testing.

During this wilderness experience, no doubt, the devil will tempt us in the area of our identity:

- Are you willing to lay down your search for identity that is independent from God, choosing rather to look to Jesus for who you are?
- Are you willing to lay down your wants, desires and dreams to submit to the will and timing of your Lord?
- Are you willing to turn away from the distractions of busy life, bustling crowds and noisy neighbours to enter the stillness of the wilderness?
- Are you willing to be lost in the wilderness, relinquishing your control, knowing that God will find you as you trust in His quiet whispers to guide you deeper into him?

Let us go into the wilderness knowing that Jesus is with us. He has gone before us and has shown us how to withstand the devil's temptations by worshipping God alone and standing firm on God's Word.