

## **Greeting**

Good afternoon...My name...If at any time you need the facilities...

Our structure will be: I'll teach for about 50 minutes, after that Mike Deaton will come and facilitate a Q& A that last 20–30 minutes. We'll wrap up at 6pm.

I'll start with a prayer.

## **Introduction**

If you have a Bible, please turn to **Acts c26**. Listen to **vv24–25**, *“And as he was saying these things in his defense, Festus said with a loud voice, ‘Paul, you are out of your mind; your great learning is driving you out of your mind.’ But Paul said, ‘I am not out of my mind, most excellent Festus, but I am speaking true and rational words.”*

In **Acts c26** when Paul preached the gospel, back in the first century, to the Roman imperial elites,

- he described his message as *“true and rational,”*
- but to the listeners he seemed *“out of”* his *“mind.”*

In our society today

- what Christians think is **true and rational** about sexuality
- strikes an increasing number of people as sheer madness.

We are in a similar position today as Paul was before Festus. We look to be out of our minds.

It hasn't always been this way here in America.

In fact, for over one thousand years in Western societies, Christian beliefs have been the **‘deep background’** of the ways we have thought about most issues, including sex and gender. However, since the mid-twentieth century this has begun to change. Large segments of the population have begun to embrace a different view of life. **A view that we call secular.** We now live in a secular age.

Over the last 50 years or so, America has gone through one of the most radical reordering of cultural values surrounding sexuality and, and homosexuality and gender in particular. And “these changes came with a speed and thoroughness in which our surrounding culture” shifted from “biblical sexual norms and began celebrating all things queer.”<sup>1</sup>

On top of this mainline denominations started ordaining people in active same-sex sexual relationships and performing gay weddings. [And] many evangelical churches stopped teaching about or providing discipline for sexual sin, whether heterosexual or homosexual.”<sup>2</sup>

“These have been seismic shifts all around us.”<sup>3</sup>

And look, there was certainly a lot of sexual activity outside of marriage between a man and a woman prior to the 60s and 70s, but it was generally not something people bragged about in mainstream culture, it was not something people tended to openly celebrate.

What happened? How do we account for this shift in perspective about right and wrong?

I have found that the work of Jonathan Haidt is very helpful to understand what’s going on.<sup>4</sup>

Haidt is a social psychologist who taught for 16 years at UVA. Now he’s at New York University’s Stern School of Business. He has this book called *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion*,<sup>5</sup> where he shows that

- typically, we **don’t logically reason our way** to our moral views,
- **so** we have a hard time **explaining exactly why** we see something as morally right or wrong.
- **We just know in our gut** what’s right and what’s wrong, what’s good and what’s bad.

So applying this insight into morality to sexuality and gender, what I’m saying is that

- for many “generations of Christians, the historic Christian vision of sexuality **struck** them as right,
- **not** because they **reasoned** their way to that conclusion,
- but because they **felt” in their gut** that it was right.
- It just made sense to them.
- They had an **intuitive** sense that something was wrong with, for example, two men having sex. It didn’t need to be explained; it just was wrong.

**And here’s the important point:**

- This view of same-sex-intimacy typically doesn’t come from reasoning your way up.
- Very few people have reasoned their way to a view of sexuality gender.

- Our views are typically based on moral **intuitions not reasons**.
- And these moral intuitions reside at a **deeper** level than our heads, our minds, our intellect...they reside in our hearts, in our guts, in our instincts.

So what forms our moral intuitions? How do we get them? If they don't come from reason, where do they come from?

Well primarily they come from **stories**.<sup>6</sup>

We typically absorb

- our **views** of right and wrong,
- our **feelings** about right and things,
- our **beliefs** about this stuff,

**we absorb it from the stories that fill our lives.** We are, you see, ““narrative animals”: we define who we are, and what we ought to do, on the basis of what story we see ourselves in.”<sup>7</sup>

And there are three stories that our society has told through songs, commercials, interviews, news channels, novels, movies, TV shows, facebook rants, snapchat, tiktok, discord, instagram, twitch, bereal, youtube...three plot lines that have shaped our views, all of us, Christians and non-Christians...three plot lines that have shaped our views most profoundly when it comes to sex, sexuality, and gender.

1. One of these plots has to do with **identity**.
2. One has to do with **freedom**.
3. And one has to do with **romance**.

Tonight we're going to look at the narratives of identity that fund our moral intuitions about sex and gender. Next week we'll deal with the stories of **freedom**, and the week after that we'll focus on the stories of **romantic** love.

**Transition:** Okay, so tonight is about identity. And there are going to be three parts to it.

1. First of all, what **particular stories** does our secular age tell about our identity?
2. Second, what's good and what's broken about our society's approach to identity.
3. And finally, what's the Christian approach to identity?

## **1. Identity in Our Secular Age**

So three parts tonight, and the first will be, by far the longest, and so when we're almost out of time and I have two more points to go, don't get too stressed out....

### ***(1. The Source of Identity in Our Secular Age)***

Alright, the first, and most important story that our society tells us about identity is that your **identity comes from within**. When it comes to the question, "Who am I?" Our society has this deep-rooted conviction that you find your self, your real self, by looking within.

### **The Real "You" is Discovered in Your Deepest Desires and Dreams.**

Think about how many times you've asked somebody, or somebody has asked you, "So what are you passionate about?"

Think about the musical, *The Sound of Music*.<sup>8</sup> There's this moment when the mother superior sings to Maria, played by Julie Andrews. She tells the young Maria that she must "Climb every mountain, search high and low, follow every by-way, every path you know. Climb every mountain, ford every stream, follow every rainbow, till **you** find **your** dream. A dream that will need all the love **you** can give. Every day of your life for as long as you live."<sup>9</sup>

This is the fundamental narrative arc of the modern hero. Whether it's a country western song, or Drake, Doja Cat, or a Christian romance novel, a Superbowl commercial, or a movie...

And we've been told this story so many times, we've cheered for it and sung it and cried over it and given awards for it so many times that we've absorbed it right into our blood stream, our root, our gut level intuition. And so this view of identity seems obviously right, and it's become an unquestioned piece of common-sense. We absorb this view of reality, we don't reason our way to it. First we feel it, then we argue for it.

And as a result, it appears to be the truth, just the way it is. **But** different societies tell different stories. There are alternative views about identity.

For example, the traditional non-Western approach to identity goes like this.

You're in a family, a people group. And that family, that people group assign you a role and a set of responsibilities and duties that go with your role. And your identity is wrapped up—your sense of self worth and significance, your sense of your self is wrapped up in that—in doing those duties, in fulfilling those roles, in discharging those responsibilities that have been assigned to you.

And so if you ask a person in a traditional culture outside of Western society, if you ask a person, **"Who are you?"** They'll most likely say something like, "I am a daughter or a father or a

member of a particular tribe and people.” I’ve got a role in the family, I’ve got a role in my people.

And the way this person has a sense of **worth comes** when the family bestows honor on them because they have sublimated their own individual interests for the good of the whole. And in that culture, that’s how you know who you are. That’s how you know you’re a good person.

Here’s an example. The way a person who’s Korean writes their name. They give their family name first and their personal name second. And that’s a very good expression of identity in non-western cultures and ancient cultures. **Your identity comes from your duties, your roles. It’s assigned to you.** And if you fulfill your duties and give up your individual desires for the good of the whole family and community, then your identity is secure as a person of honor.<sup>10</sup>

But in our society today, our approach to identity says that you are your dreams; you are your desires, your deepest desires. And particularly you are your choices—you are who you choose to be.<sup>11</sup>

And your deepest self-worth depends upon the dignity that you bestow on yourself, because you accomplish your dreams and desires. “To find yourself, look within yourself.”<sup>12</sup> And to have a really strong identity, it needs to push against conformity.<sup>13</sup> **This is a moral absolute in our culture today. Be true to yourself.**

**Transition:** Okay remember what we’re doing. We’re naming the stories our society tells about identity that shape our gut-level views of sexuality. And the first story is that the source of your identity is within your own self. You find the real you by looking within, and discovering your own deepest dreams and desires. That’s the first issue. The second is that sex is essential to your identity.

## ***(2. Sex is Central to Your Identity)***

The essayist and cultural journalist, Kristin Dombek, writing for the *New York Times* back in 2015 observed, “Sixty years (after Kinsey), many of us have come to regard sex—preferably passionate, hot, transformative sex—as central to our lives.”<sup>14</sup>

Mark Regnerus, a sociologist from the University of Texas at Austin, he put it this way “Great... sex is now a priority, a hallmark of the good life.”<sup>15</sup>

Over the last couple of centuries we’ve begun to believe that our **sexual desires reveal some fundamental truth** about who we are, and that we have an obligation to seek out that truth and express it. Finding our sexual orientation is a critical part of adolescence, a rite of passage. It’s a fundamental part of how we come to know ourselves and present ourselves to others. Our society places sexual expression and orientation right at the heart of a person’s identity.

And in fact, the dominant language regarding sex has shifted from “sexual **desires** to that of sexual **needs**.”<sup>16</sup>

“Quality sexual experiences are...perceived to be just as pivotal to human flourishing as clean air, potable water, edible food, ample shelter, and antibiotics.”<sup>17</sup>

And our “urge to have sex is both more irresistible and more fundamental to personal identity than other impulses and appetites.”<sup>18</sup>

**Transition:** Alright, so first, your identity comes from within. Second, sex is central to your identity. And #3, the primary path to happiness is self-fulfillment.

### ***(3. The Primary Path to Happiness is Self-Fulfillment)***

Here’s a great way to see what I’m talking about:

In traditional, **non-Western** cultures the stories about heroes center around **self-sacrifice**. You are your duties, and your worth depends on the honor that is bestowed upon you by your community for discharging” your duties at great personal, sacrificial costs.

Now just think about how this is the opposite view of the hero stories in our society today. For us, the hero story is not **self-sacrifice** it’s **self-assertion**. You don’t discover who you are by sublimating your needs to the community or the family. No, **“each person has a unique core feeling and intuition that must unfold and express”** itself.<sup>19</sup> You have to **look inside**, look at your deepest desires, discover your authentic self and then be that. And you mustn’t let your society, or your family in any way impose an identity on you. That would be horrible.

In fact, very, very rarely do we tell the story of someone sublimating their own individual desires for the good of their family or community. No, our most well told stories, are about becoming our true selves by “asserting [our]...desires against society, by expressing [our] feelings and fulfilling our dreams regardless of what anyone says.”<sup>20</sup>

“The worst thing we can do is to conform to some” expectation that “is imposed on us from outside—by society, our parents, the church, or whoever else. It is deemed to be self-evident that any such imposition would undermine our unique identity.”<sup>21</sup>

### **Summary**

So let’s put these three components of identity together.

The story our Secular Age tells us about identity goes like this: “Each one of us has an inner self, a ‘true self,’ and we have a moral obligation to discover that self and then express it to the world. This ‘true self’ includes an innate sexual identity. Being true to oneself, regardless or even in spite of societal or religious norms, is one of our highest virtues, and leads to” our greatest fulfillment and happiness.<sup>22</sup>

“Hypocrisy used to mean doing something inconsistent with your beliefs; now it means doing something inconsistent with your feelings.”<sup>23</sup>

**Transition:** So that’s my first point about identity tonight. That’s the view of identity we get in our Secular Age. Now for my second point, and this will be much quicker, let’s evaluate the way we think about identity today.

## **2. The Good and the Bad in Our Secular Approach to Identity**

And the first thing for us to see is that there’s a lot good going on with the whole issue of identity today.

After all, not too long ago, there was a “rigid, exploitative social stratification” and it definitely “stemmed from the traditional understanding of identity. You **were** your rung in the socially stratified culture; you related to the world not as an individual but through your family and class. Your mission in life was to ‘know your place’ and fulfill your assigned role. There was [virtually] **no way out**; there was [virtually] **no mobility** at all.” And so **we should give thanks** for the ways that the secular view of identity has helped so many people **escape** unfair circumstances and injustice.<sup>24</sup>

Think about how our secular age has embraced **equality**. And how this “has given the fight for equity a moral quality that has rarely existed in human history.”<sup>25</sup> Our secular age “is intensely moral in many ways. It is more committed to social justice, universal benevolence, and human rights than any civilization has ever been.”<sup>26</sup>

And this is because in the Enlightenment there was this tilt toward the individual, the sacredness of the individual. And this has given.....finally.....“a generation of women being subjected to psychological or physical abuse” we finally live in a moment, where our society is beginning to offer a way out “from under the vice-like grip of their husband’s control.”

In our secular age, we’ve finally been able to bring “women’s skills and gifts into the world of commerce and governance.” People who have been sexually abused and discriminated against by establishment elites are just beginning to be able “to stand up and fight for their rights. [And] wherever we come across the defeat of injustice and unfairness, Christians should be among the first to celebrate, because this reflects the heart of God himself.”<sup>27</sup>

In other words, the good ol’ days really weren’t all some people chalk them up to be. Our society, prior to the secular turn was not wonderful. There was slavery in

- it’s pre-civil war form of chattel slavery,
- and it’s post civil-war form of Jim Crow,
- and it’s post-civil rights form of mass incarceration.<sup>28</sup>



We must be thankful for our Secular Age elevating tolerance, and a compassion-driven morality, and freedom, and personal choice.<sup>29</sup> So much good ground has been gained.

There is a reason our Secular age has moved beyond the traditional, modern age. The “Golden Past” had it’s chance, and now our Secular Age **“represents the hopes and dreams of millions if not billions of people who see in it their best hope for” flourishing.**<sup>30</sup>

**Transition:** And yet, there are cracks developing in our secular age. Fissures. The way our secular society approaches identity has some incredible strengths, and some problems too. **Three in particular** for us to notice this evening: (1) a deceit, (2) a confusion, and (3) an insecurity.

***First of all, our society is not telling the whole truth about where identity comes from. We’ve been sold a deceit.***

And to show you this, I want to steal a story from Tim Keller, a pastor in New York City. This comes from several different books he’s written, and some speeches he’s done. It goes like this...

Imagine an Anglo-Saxon warrior in AD 800.<sup>31</sup> (So, 1,400 years ago.) He has **two very strong** inner impulses and feelings.

One is **aggression**. When people show him any disrespect, his natural response is to respond violently. He really likes fighting. He likes battle. He loves to smash and kill people when they show him disrespect.

Now remember, when this man, this Anglo-Saxon warrior looks into his heart, he sees two strong inner desires, impulses, feelings. The first one is aggression.

And in this thought experiment, let’s imagine that the other deep desire is **same-sex attraction**. And for as long he can remember, he has been drawn, even as a child, to other males in some vaguely confusing way. But then after puberty, he came to realize that he has “a steady, strong, unremitting, exclusive sexual attraction to” other men. And he really doesn’t have a sexual attraction to women.<sup>32</sup>

Okay, so we’re doing a thought experiment. And so this Anglo-Saxon warrior, he’s living, as we know, in a “shame-and-honor culture with a warrior ethic.” And so, from what we know of that culture, he would probably identify with the feelings of aggression. He would say to himself, ***That’s me! That’s who I am! I will express that.*** And he would have no shame or regret over his feelings of aggression or his violent, aggressive actions.

At the same time, from what we know of that culture, when it comes to his erotic desire for other men, he’ll feel shame. And he’ll say to himself, ***That’s not me. I will control and suppress that impulse.***

Okay, now let’s **shift the thought experiment**. Imagine a different man, a business man, walking around New York City today. And what if, when he looks into his heart, he also has



these same two deep impulses: violent aggression and erotic same-sex-attraction. And they're 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 he'll go to therapy or to some anger-management group therapy or program. But when it comes to his **sexual desire**, however, he'll conclude, *That is who I am*.

This illustration shows the deceit behind our reigning secular views of identity.

It shows us how it's an **illusion to think identity is simply an expression of inward desires** and feelings. You have many strong feelings, and in one sense they are all part of 'you,' but just because they are there doesn't mean you must express them all.

No one identifies with all of their deep desires. **All of us use some kind of filter**—a set of beliefs and values—to sift through our hearts and determine which emotions and sensibilities we will value and incorporate into our core identity and which we won't. **And it's this value-laden filter that shapes our identity**. It's not simply our feelings.

And here's a really crucial point: where does the filter come from?

We get it from the stories that our community, the group of people we trust, we get it from the stories they tell.<sup>33</sup>

So our community, a group of people we trust have particular values. We take this set of values into ourselves and we make sense of our insides. We prioritize some things we find inside of us and we reject others.

**It's misleading to the point of dishonesty to say, "I just have to be myself, no matter what anyone else says." Because your 'self' is always defined by what some group of people has to say.**

Our inner depths on their own are insufficient to guide us.

You see, the modern person is less free than she thinks. And yes, it is true that at least the modern person has a wider range of options. Yes that is true. But it's foolish to "ignore the force of today's cultural expectations about how [we]...should choose. The power of culture to shape attitudes and expectations is no less today; it is simply better at deceiving us into thinking we have more freedom."<sup>34</sup>

**Transition:** So that's the **first** problem with the secular approach to identity: it traps us in "the reinforcement loop of self-**deception**."<sup>35</sup>

***The second problem is that focusing on our deepest desires can be very confusing.***

What do you do when you “very much want a certain career, but then you fall in love with someone whom you also want very much. Because of the particular nature of both the career and the relationship, you realize you won’t be able to have both? What are you going to do? You might insist that one of these desires—for career or love—must be deeper and more ‘you,’ but that’s **naive**.”<sup>36</sup>

Our **deep desires are not arranged in an orderly, hierarchical way**. Our deep desires don’t harmonize, they are typically disorganized and discordant.<sup>37</sup> Or in the words of Sigmund Freud, our inner most being is filled with the “unsociable chaos” of desires for power, love, comfort, and control, which vie with one another and would trample on others to reach their goals, if they could.”<sup>38</sup>

Our inner desires change a lot. So an identity based on our dreams and desires will always be unstable. And so this can be really frustrating. You can never know if there are aspects of your self that have been left undeveloped or undiscovered.<sup>39</sup>

***A third problem with the contemporary approach to identity is that it can be crushing.***

“In traditional societies, if you were simply a good son or daughter, husband or wife, father or mother, you were doing all your society required. [And so, on the one hand, yeah, sure] that could be smothering and confining, but [on the other hand,] the bar for recognition was not impossibly high [for most people].”<sup>40</sup>

As the philosopher Alain de Botton, who is an atheist by the way, and so he’s not trying to make a Christian point. In his book *Status Anxiety*, he makes the strong point that the modern approach to identity, creates far more anxiety than the traditional approach.<sup>41</sup>

“The modern process of identity formation...tells you to go out and create a self from scratch... Identify your dreams, especially the most vivid ones, and fulfill them—or feel like a failure.”

“That prospect crushes those in many segments of our society where money, looks, power, success, sophistication, and romantic love all become not just good things but necessary identity factors.”<sup>42</sup>

Because of this pervasive insecurity, our society has become **drunk on affirmation**. And there’s a growing body of research to indicate that the recent “increase in self-harm and associated ‘borderline’ issues among young people is at least partly attributable to this modern fragility of the self.”<sup>43</sup>

**Transition:** Alright, almost done. We've identified the secular approach to identity. We've seen some of the good things about it, and some of the bad things about it. Now, let's turn to our third and final section of tonight's lecture: how does Scripture lead us to think about identity.

### **3. A Better Story: Christ Alone Leads You to Your True Self**

Well, let's start with the source of identity from a Christian perspective. Where does your identity come from?

#### ***(1. Identity Within from God)***

And let's be sure to recognize that there is some real overlap between the Christian view and the current view in our Secular age.

You see, the Bible does place a high priority on the inner life, on the heart, on our passion, our love.

But our secular age has gone further than this. It's taken the importance of our inner life—our passions, and desires—and enthroned them. It's made our selves "the centre of our world." So that we "relate everything to ourselves."<sup>44</sup>

Remember, when we look within, we always use a grid, a filter, to determine what inside of us is worth keeping and what is something we should resist. "The challenge is to take the 'self' you find within, and to choose wisely which impulses and desires to follow, and which to resist."<sup>45</sup>

A good way to see how the Bible handles identity is to look at the **heroic plot line in the Bible**.

Let's take the story of David and Goliath. "A young man takes on a military champion in single-handed combat against seemingly overwhelming odds."<sup>46</sup> "But does David 'look inside himself' for help and deliverance?" Yes, to some extent. But also No.

At the dramatic, climactic point of the story. Listen to what David says.

**1 Samuel c17v37, "And David said, 'The Lord who delivered me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine.'" And then again in v47, "All those gathered here will know that the Lord saves not with sword and spear. For the battle is the Lord's, and he will give you [talking about Goliath] into our hand."**

So compare this with *The Sound of Music*, or *Frozen*. Compare the logic of the climax.

In *Frozen*, or *Rocky*, or *Dreamgirls* the climactic moment that enables the conflict to be resolved is when the hero puts her trust in herself over against her nemesis.

But the **climactic moment of the David and Goliath** story makes the point that

- “we must look outside ourselves and connect to something else”
- if we are going to become our true self.<sup>47</sup>

David “puts his trust in another hero, one greater than himself.”<sup>48</sup>

- The plot doesn’t resolve through self-reliance.
- It resolves through opening himself up to God.

And learning that we are not, after all, “defined by whatever longings and aspirations come out of our hearts, despite the remarkable rhetoric of our times.” When you let your longings define you, that’s the road to a deep instability, and insecurity. Jesus was very clear in his view that the human heart is deceitful.

Jesus taught us to recognize that many of the things that come out of our hearts defile us. And that means they make us unable to function as genuine human beings, as the royal priests we were made to be.

And my point is that in the stories that fill our secular age, this story is not told enough, so we forget it. And we adopt the view of *Frozen*, or *Dreamgirls*, or *The Sound of Music*, or *The Greatest Showman*.<sup>49</sup>

**Transition:** Now what about this idea of sex as essential to our identity.

## ***(2. Sex is a Dynamic Part of Our Character)***

Well again, there’s so much truth in what our Secular Age is telling us.

And first, the Bible does recognize that our sexuality is massively important to who we are. “Our creation as male and female, as sexual beings, is part of the meaning of our humanity.”<sup>50</sup>

But in our Secular Age, “we tend to suppose that sexual fulfillment is of ultimate importance and that no life can be well lived without it.”<sup>51</sup> And again, **the problem is that we’ve enthroned sexuality at the center.**

“Rather than being a dynamic part of our character to be trained and shaped, sexuality has come to be viewed as part of our personality—something that **not only is freely expressed** as a reflection of our uniqueness but **also helps establish** that uniqueness.”

**What the Christian vision of sexuality rejects here is seeing “sexual expression as a virtue that lies at the heart of human identity. [And the idea that] we can...be fulfilled, happy, and mature [only] when our sexuality is set free.”<sup>52</sup>**

In other words, **yes our sexuality is powerful.**

“Almost nothing that human beings do in life is freighted with as many potential consequences as sexual relations: emotional consequences, physical consequences, and above all, the world-altering consequences of creating an entirely new human life.”<sup>53</sup>

And yet, the act of having **sex** is not **essential** to our identity.

And the best way to see this aspect of the Christian vision of God, sex, and human flourishing is to **look at Jesus.**

And when we do, one of the most important truths we should reflect on from Jesus’ earthly life is this: “No one was more fully human or sexually contented than Jesus, yet Jesus never engaged in a single sexual act.”<sup>54</sup>

Now, “in our hypersexualized contemporary culture, it is almost inconceivable that someone could be sexually chaste, even celibate, and experience the fullness of what it means to be human and the peace of sexual contentment.”

Our culture believes that sexual activity is the “most direct path to personal fulfillment and self-realization—to being truly human and fully alive.” **Our society has this deep-seated belief that “to deny yourself sexual experiences is to undermine your own humanity.”<sup>55</sup>**

“But Jesus’ life deconstructs this pervasive and powerful cultural myth...Sexual activity...[is not] essential to human flourishing or personal fulfillment. Jesus found contentment with his sexuality in the pursuit of chastity and celibacy. To be blunt, he didn’t need sex—not because sex is sinful or somehow beneath his dignity, but because sex...[is not] essential to being human.”<sup>56</sup>

“The Son of God, though biologically sexed, lived a sex-free, fully contented life. Not an easy, pain-free existence, but a whole and deeply and richly human life.” You and “I don’t need sex to be satisfied. Jesus didn’t, and yet he was supremely satisfied in God.”<sup>57</sup>

No one is ultimately defined by their sexual desires, or orientation, or inclination, or attractions. Sure “we may each have different sexual desires, impulses, and interests, but...the deepest answer to the question of who we are is found not in our sexual orientation or attractions but in our common human nature.”<sup>58</sup>

**Transition:** And finally what about this idea of happiness through self-fulfillment?

***(3. The path to happiness is in a relationship of love with God and others, and that does not have to include sex.)***

Does the Christian vision bring more satisfaction, security, freedom, and fulfillment than the vision on offer from our Secular Age? I believe it does. I believe the Christian approach to sexuality and identity offers a quality of love and intimacy that is more fulfilling than our Secular Age can offer, even at its very best moment.

The problem with the path to fulfillment currently on offer by our society is that we potentially become **so focused on our own inner life**, our own deep desires that we **end up curving in** on ourselves and missing the love and intimacy for which our soul craves, which is right in front of us.

The Christian view of identity and sexuality is built on

- the “belief that **humans are made for relationship**
- and that we find our deepest fulfillment
- not when seeking self-fulfillment
- but when living and engaging in the full constellation of healthy human relationships.”<sup>59</sup>

In other words, the problem with our Secular Age “is not with self-fulfillment per se but rather with the fact that it has come to be placed above all other priorities. This impulse needs to be rebalanced within...other prerogatives” such as, “obedience to Jesus, patience in suffering, and self-giving...love within the community of faith.”<sup>60</sup>

The Bible shows us a vision of humankind whereby we are “made for relationship and that we crave intimacy and love more than anything else.”<sup>61</sup> And so, to make this really practical, here are some examples of actions the Christian vision could press us into:

- What if we develop the habit of pausing before we make a decision and ask ourselves, “Will this decision strengthen or weaken my relational life?”
- Will working overtime be worth the relational cost?
- How can I present myself as a gift to someone else, as opposed to giving him or her some material object for a gift?
- How can I receive the gift of someone offering themselves to me?<sup>62</sup>

You see when you look at **the story the Bible tells about self-fulfillment**,

- you **do not see** someone spending their life searching for people to make them happy.
- Instead what you see are people cultivating the relationships they already have.

In Christianity we see a vision of life whereby “the **quality of one’s life is largely determined by the quality of one’s relationships.**”<sup>63</sup>

So in the Christian vision,

- the inner life does matter.
- Your unique identity does matter.

And it is important to go on that very difficult inward journey,

- but the movement inward must be accompanied by a simultaneous movement outward and upward—we must move toward others, and toward God.
- We find “ourselves, as it were, in the faces of others” and in the relationship of love with our Creator.<sup>64</sup>
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### **Conclusion**

Alright, that brings us to the end of the material for tonight. We’ve covered a lot of ground. So I’ll summarize.

When it comes to sexuality, and sex, and gender, and human flourishing in our society today, our views sit on top of what social psychology calls our “moral intuition.” We don’t reason our way to what we think is good or bad, or right or wrong when it comes to sex. We have gut level feelings about it. And our gut-level feelings about what is right and what is wrong come to us from the deep-stories our society tells regarding identity, freedom, and love.

Tonight we’ve looked at our story-shaped views regarding identity. And on this issue, the basic moral intuition of our Secular Age is that

- each one of us has an inner self, a ‘true self.’
- And this ‘true self’ includes an innate sexual identity.
- So to be a healthy and whole and fulfilled person, we must discover our deepest desires and longings and then do all we can to realize them, regardless of constraint or opposition.
- Being true to yourself, regardless or even in spite of societal or religious norms, is one of our highest virtues, and this is what leads to our greatest fulfillment and happiness.<sup>65</sup>

And it is that view, placed inside of really well told stories, and songs, and commercials, and architecture, and logos...we’ve absorbed that story into our bones, and it's become an unquestioned basic view of life. And in light of that story, the Bible's teaching about human sexuality don’t make sense. In fact, the historic Christian view appears to be offensive.



### **Recommendation from Tonight's Session**

Timothy Keller, *The Freedom of Self-Forgetfulness: The Path to True Christian Joy*, (10 Publishing, 2017)

#### ***A little deeper...***

Timothy Keller, *Making Sense of God: An Invitation to the Skeptical*, (Viking, 2016)

Nate Collins, *All But Invisible: Exploring Identity Questions at the Intersection of Faith, Gender, and Sexuality*, (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2017)

Carl R. Trueman, *Strange New World: How Thinkers and Activists Redefined Identity and Sparked the Sexual Revolution*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022)

#### ***All the way down...***

Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, (Harvard University Press, 1989)

Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, (Belknap/Harvard, 2007)

James K. A. Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (Eerdmans, 2014)

Carl R. Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020)

Robert Bellah, et. al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, with a New Preface (University of California, 1985/2007)

### **Further thought**

Insight from Andrew Delbanco, *The Real American Dream: A Meditation on Hope* where he writes:

“I will use the word *culture* to mean the stories and symbols by which we try to hold back the melancholy suspicion that we live in a world without meaning.”<sup>66</sup> Tim Keller summarizes his pertinent insight, “At the heart of every culture is its main ‘Hope,’ what it tells its members that life is all about. Delbanco traces three phases of American civilization by looking at the fundamental hope of each era, which he names in sequence ‘God, Nation, and Self.’ In the first era ‘hope was chiefly expressed through a Christian story that gave meaning to suffering and pleasure alike and promised deliverance from death.’ In the second phase, ‘the Enlightenment removed a personal God...and substituted...the idea of a deified nation.’<sup>67</sup> “This second phase, which Delbanco says only began to passageway during the 1960s, transferred older ideas of sacredness to America itself, so that it came to see itself as the ‘Redeemer nation’ whose system f government and way of life was the hope for the whole world. Today the need for transcendence and meaning has detached itself from anything more important than the individual self and its freedom to be what it chooses. Among younger people, the older flag-waving ‘America first’ mind-set is out. Now life is about creating a self through the maximization of individual freedom from the constraints of community.”<sup>68</sup> And it keeps going on the next page in Keller, *Counterfeit...*

<sup>1</sup> Greg Johnson, *Still Time to Care: What We Can Learn from The Church's Failed Attempt to Cure Homosexuality* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Reflective, 2021), 204.

<sup>2</sup> Johnson, *Still Time to Care*, 204.

<sup>3</sup> Johnson, *Still Time to Care*, 204.

<sup>4</sup> I am thankful to Todd Wilson for pointing out the connection between Haidt's work and the changing views of sexuality in Todd Wilson, *Mere Sexuality: Rediscovering the Christian Vision of Sexuality* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017), 29–30. Wilson, however, places the impact of media as secondary to relationships in the refashioning of moral intuitions. I am arguing for the reverse: that media, in the form of stories, is the primary factory in the refashioning of moral intuitions.

<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Vintage, 2013), 3–31.

<sup>6</sup> Some would argue that this is reductionistic, that in addition to the social construction argument I am making, there is the whole issue of technology. Mark Regnerus, *Cheap Sex: The Transformation of Men, Marriage, and Monogamy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), persuasively argues, for example, of the power of three distinctive technologies—contraception, pornography, online dating—in rescripting our sexual morals. However, in chapter 8 of that same book, Regnerus points to “The Power of Stories” as the more fundamental issue. See also, Christian Smith, *Moral, Believing Animals: Human Personhood and Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009). Overall, the view espoused by Jonathan Haidt is similar to what Charles Taylor calls “the social imaginary.” See his, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), and his *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 171–72. E.g., Carl Trueman's summary of Taylor's social imaginaries: “When Taylor directs us to the social imaginary, he is making the point that the way we think about the world is not primarily by way of rational arguments based on first principles. It is much more intuitive than that” (Carl Trueman, *Strange New World: How Thinkers and Activists Redefined Identity and Sparked the Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022), 28. See also the relevant section in Carl Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 36–39, etc..

<sup>7</sup> James K. A. Smith, *How (Not) to be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 25. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975); See Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative, Volume 1*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984); *Time and Narrative, Volume 2*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985); *Time and Narrative, Volume 3*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988); Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 204–25; Smith, *Moral, Believing Animals*; Douglas Ezzy, “Theorizing Narrative Identity,” *Sociological Quarterly* 39, no. 2 (1988): 239–52; Anthony Paul Kerby, *Narrative and the Self* (Blomington: Indiana University Press, 1991); Jerome Bruner, “Life as Narrative,” *Social Research* 54, no. 1 (1987): 11–32; Miller Mair, “Psychology as Storytelling,” *International Journal of Personal Construct Psychology* 1 (1988): 125–37.

<sup>8</sup> 1965. This is the 5th highest grossing film of all time, adjusted for inflation ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_highest-grossing\\_films](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_highest-grossing_films)).

<sup>9</sup> And remember, this is being sung to a woman who is being told to leave her community to find herself.

- <sup>10</sup> Timothy Keller, *Making Sense of God: An Invitation to the Skeptical* (New York: Viking, 2016), 119.
- <sup>11</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 478–81.
- <sup>12</sup> According to a survey by Barna OmniPoll in August 2015, 91% of Americans affirmed the following statement: “The best way to find yourself is by looking within yourself.” Cited in David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *Good Faith: Being a Christian When Society Thinks You’re Irrelevant and Extreme* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2016), 58.
- <sup>13</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 475–478.
- <sup>14</sup> Kirstin Dombek, “Date-Onomics,’ ‘The Sex Myth’ and ‘Modern Romance,’” *New York Times Sunday Book Review*, September 9, 2015, paragraph 1, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/13/books/review/date-onomics-the-sex-myth-and-modern-romance.html>. Quoted in Regnerus, *Cheap Sex*, 196.
- <sup>15</sup> Mark Regnerus, *Cheap Sex*, 196.
- <sup>16</sup> Regnerus, *Cheap Sex*, 196. Citing Alain Giami, “Sexual Health: The Emergence, Development, and Diversity of a Concept,” *Annual Review of Sex Research* 13 (2002): 1–35; Alain Giami, “Between DSM and ICD: Paraphilias and the Transformation of Sexual Norms,” *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 44 (2015): 1127–1138.
- <sup>17</sup> Regnerus, *Cheap Sex*, 196. Quoting Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Love* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2003), 59.
- <sup>18</sup> Ross Douthat, *Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics* (New York: Free Press, 2012), 238.
- <sup>19</sup> Robert Bellah, et. al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, Updated With a New Introduction (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1996 [1985]), 334.
- <sup>20</sup> Timothy Keller, *Preaching: Communicating Faith in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Penguin Books, 2015), 134.
- <sup>21</sup> Jonathan Grant, *Divine Sex: A Compelling Vision for Christian Relationships in a Hypersexualized Age* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2015),
- <sup>22</sup> Tommy Hinson, “Sex and the Gospel: Session 4: The Identity Myth.”
- <sup>23</sup> Hinson, “Sex and the Gospel: Session 4: The Identity Myth.”
- <sup>24</sup> Keller, *Making Sense of God*, 122.
- <sup>25</sup> Dale S. Kuehne, *Sex and the iWorld: Rethinking Relationship Beyond an Age of Individualism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 213.
- <sup>26</sup> Keller, *Preaching*, 129.
- <sup>27</sup> Glynn Harrison, *A Better Story: God, Sex & Human Flourishing* (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 2017), 10.
- <sup>28</sup> See, for example, the remarkable Netflix documentary, “13th: From Slave to Criminal with One Amendment,” directed by Ava DuVernay.

<sup>29</sup> Douthat, *Bad Religion*, 240.

<sup>30</sup> Kuehne, *Sex and the iWorld*, 103..

<sup>31</sup> Keller, *Preaching*, 135–36; Keller, *Making Sense of God*, 126–27.

<sup>32</sup> For this description of homosexual orientation, I have drawn from the opening paragraph of Wesley Hill's remarkable book, *Washed and Waiting: Reflections on Christian Faithfulness & Homosexuality*, updated & expanded ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, [2010] 2016), 21.

<sup>33</sup> In the field of psychology, narrative therapy shows us this. E.g., "Cultural stories determine the dimensions that organize...[our] experience. These [stories]...provide a backdrop against which experiences are interpreted. Cultural stories are not neutral....They lead to constructions of a normative view, generally reflecting the dominant culture's specifications, from which people know themselves and against which people compare themselves" (J. L. Zimmerman and V. C. Dickerson, "Using a Narrative Metaphor: Implications for Theory and Clinical Practice," *Family Process*, 33 (3) (1994), 235).

<sup>34</sup> Harrison, *A Better Story*, 117.

<sup>35</sup> Grant, *Divine Sex*, 198.

<sup>36</sup> Keller, *Making Sense of God*, 123.

<sup>37</sup> Francis Spufford, *Unapologetic: Why, Despite Everything, Christianity Can Still Make Surprising Emotional Sense* (London: Faber & Faber, 2012), 28. Quoted in Keller, *Making Sense of God*, 123.

<sup>38</sup> Keller, *Making Sense of God*, 123. In the quote of Keller, Keller is quoting Philip Rieff, *Freud: The Mind of the Moralizer* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1959), 35.

<sup>39</sup> Kuehne, *iWorld*, 209.

<sup>40</sup> Keller, *Preaching*, 137.

<sup>41</sup> Keller, *Preaching*, 284n 31. Referencing, Alain de Botton, *Status Anxiety* (New York: Vintage International, [2004] 2005).

<sup>42</sup> Keller, *Preaching*, 137.

<sup>43</sup> Glynn Harrison, "Who am I Today? The Modern Crisis of Identity," *Cambridge Papers*, vol 25:1, March 2016, p 3.

<sup>44</sup> Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 138. And so in this approach, we end up curving in on ourselves. We're enclosed on ourselves. What we need is to recognize the value of the person, and the person's inner life, and passions and desires. But we need a way of doing this that allows for healing to come when we open ourselves to our Creator, who is also our Redeemer. And he breaks open our selfishness. See especially, Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, especially chapter 6, "In Interiore Homine." One of the things that Christianity brought to the world was the insistence that emotions are "something not to be ignored or simply suppressed but instead to be examined and redirected toward God. Much of the modern understanding of the feelings and the self has grown from these Christian roots" (Keller, *Preaching*, 134. Referencing, Krister Stendahl, "The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West," *Harvard Theological Review* 56, no. 3 [July 1963]: 205).

<sup>45</sup> N. T. Wright, *The Early Christian Letters for Everyone: James, Peter, John, and Judah* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 8.

<sup>46</sup> Harrison, *A Better Story*, 52–53.

<sup>47</sup> Keller, *Making Sense of God*, 126.

<sup>48</sup> Harrison, *A Better Story*, 53.

<sup>49</sup> Now let's remember the story we tell about identity within the Church. It starts with baptism. "In baptism we are handed over to God and become members of the Body of Christ. That is language about a community; yet, perhaps paradoxically, the first thing to note about baptism is that it is a deeply individualizing act. If you're a part of a church that practices infant baptism, our parents hand us over... quite literally" to the priest or if we're older, our parents have relinquished us into the hands of sponsors who "carry us...to the font. Of if you're in a church that does not practice infant baptism, you hand yourself over to a pastor. But the point remains, "deeply bound as we are and always will be to our parents, we do not belong to them. In baptism God sets his hand upon us, calls us by name, and thereby establishes our uniquely individual identity and destiny." "We belong, to the whole extent of our being, only to God, whom we must learn to love even more than we love father or mother. What makes us true individuals therefore is that God calls us by name. Our individuality is not a personal achievement or power, and — most striking of all — it is established only in community with God. We are most ourselves not when we seek to direct and control our destiny but when we recognize and admit that our life is grounded in and sustained by God." And "if the first thing to say about baptism is that it establishes our individual identity, we must immediately add that it brings us into the community of the church — with all those whom God has called by name. It is utterly impossible to exist in relation to God apart from such a bond with all others who have been baptized into Christ's Body. We are called to bear their burdens as they are called to carry ours." Now we do need to be careful here. I'm not saying that Christianity rules out independent individuals. "Christians should recognize that, in a world deeply disturbed by sin, great evil can be done in the name of community...Because sin distorts every human relationship." And because one of the things sin does it that "it leads the powerful to abuse and diminish the weak and voiceless in the name of high ideals or the common good" and so "every individual's dignity must be protected." After all, "every person is made for God," so "no one is...simply a member of any human community." And yet, the main point at hand is that "if baptism is the sacrament of initiation into Christian life, it should inform our understanding of 'individualism.' We should not suppose that any individual's dignity can be satisfactorily described by language of autonomy alone — as if we were most fully human when we acted on our own, chose the course of our 'life plan,' or were capable and powerful enough to burden no one" (Gilbert Meilaender, *Bioethics: A Primer for Christians*, third ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, (1996) 2005], 2013), 2–3.

<sup>50</sup> Gilbert Meilaender, "The First Institutions," *Pro Ecclesia*, VI: 4, p450.

<sup>51</sup> Gilbert Meilaender, "The First Institutions," *Pro Ecclesia*, VI: 4, p450.

<sup>52</sup> Grant, *Divine Sex*, 137.

<sup>53</sup> Douthat, *Bad Religion*, 238.

<sup>54</sup> Wilson, *Mere Sexuality*, 49. Quoting Walter Moberly, "The Use of Scripture in Contemporary Debate about Homosexuality," *Theology* 103 (July–August 2000): 254, <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0040571X0010300403>.

<sup>55</sup> Wilson, *Mere Sexuality*, 49.

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<sup>56</sup> Wilson, *Mere Sexuality*, 50.

<sup>57</sup> Wilson, *Mere Sexuality*, 50.

<sup>58</sup> Kuehne, *Sex and the iWorld*, 205.

<sup>59</sup> Kuehne, *Sex and the iWorld*, 95.

<sup>60</sup> Grant, *Divine Sex*, 20–21.

<sup>61</sup> Kuehne, *Sex and the iWorld*, 150.

<sup>62</sup> Kuehne, *Sex and the iWorld*, 177.

<sup>63</sup> Kuehne, *Sex and the iWorld*, 180.

<sup>64</sup> Keller, *Making Sense of God*, 119.

<sup>65</sup> Tommy Hinson, “Sex and the Gospel: Session 4: The Identity Myth.”

<sup>66</sup> Andrew Delbanco, *The Real American Dream: A Meditation on Hope* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 3, 23.

<sup>67</sup> Delbanco, *The Real American Dream*, 5.

<sup>68</sup> Timothy Keller, *Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power, and the Only Hope that Matters* (New York: Viking, 2009), 129–30.