

So the other day, I was working on some pictures for our website, and if you haven't noticed, it's a little dark in here. So whenever we take a picture or something, it's, you got to clean it up a little bit so you can see what's going on. And so I was using an app, and, you know, truly just trying to make it a little cleaner, clearer, lit up. But one of the tools in this app is to kind of reimagine yourself, and this is really kind of like the AI version of glamour shots. Do you remember?

Maybe you have some tucked away someplace? So if you know somebody and have their pictures, I might pay good money to see them. But no, you kind of get to have a little fun with this, and I've seen some of you do this on social media with other things. And so I decided I'm going to have some fun with this. And so I pulled up a couple of mine, threw them in there, and I got to be rock star Mariah, english lady Mariah, and then 50s Casablanca Mariah as well on there, and it was just great fun.

Like, yeah, it looks a little like me, but it's kind of like me on steroids in a way, and it's not real. I get this, but it looks real. It could be me. Well, except for Elf Mariah. Elf Princess Mariah?

Yes. I don't know what my elfin name would be. Mariah's kind of exotic enough. I think I could get away with that. And again, it's not me, but it resembles me.

It's not real life Mariah, though. And sometimes I think it's easy to want to be these other mariahs. They look glamorous. They look like they've had a full night's rest. They look like they haven't yelled at their kids even before the sun is fully up.

And I know that it's not me, but what if that was all I showed to the world? Those know rock star Mariah, english lady Mariah, riding my horse around my palatial estate. And I get I'm not any of those things, but I do try to sometimes show, put together Mariah, the mariah who doesn't make mistakes, the mariah who knows all the answers, the mariah who holds down the ship. But is that fully who I am? Is that who I am in my entirety?

Or is it sometimes who I think everyone needs me to be, who I need to be for the world? And it really comes down to a question of identity. Who am I? Who am I without all the fun AI filters, Snapchat, all that stuff. Who am I?

What's my purpose? Where do I belong? And often we think of those questions in relationship to younger folk, right? They're the ones who are always trying on new identities, trying to figure out who they are. But those questions can come to us in our 40s, our 50s, our sixty s and beyond, because those questions come back around to us when life changes.

Kids leaving the nest. Who are you? Now that you're not running them around to every practice, that you're not going to every activity for them and you're not preparing them, what are you to do? Who are you? Sometimes a loss of a

relationship, whether that is through divorce, a breakup, death, retirement, can be a huge change for people.

Suddenly, what do I do with my time? Who am I if I don't get up and go to work? I mean, it sounds really appealing right now when we're slogging away, but then suddenly it's like, who am I? And think about it. Sometimes even the death of our parents can really shake our own identity.

Who am I if I'm not Barb's daughter? Who am I if I'm not this person's son? New jobs, new places. Who are we now? All these things can affect how we see ourselves.

Who are we in the midst of this? And it's easy sometimes in the midst of all these other expectations to wonder, who am I? Unsure of who we really are. Especially when things change, things that we have relied on to tell us who we are, right? And this is the problem.

When we are grounded in something that is external from us, we're in danger. And much like using those filters on our photos to enhance our appearance before sharing them online, not just to brighten it up or to make the picture look a little clearer, it's to actually change ourselves a little bit, that these literal lenses become figurative lenses for how we see the world or allow the world to see us. And it can be really know, like those fun house mirrors if you've ever encountered one, or the big bean in Chicago. When you look at its mirrored surface, it distorts things. It can distort reality and make things really kind of unrealistic and even create unrealistic standards of beauty or even accomplishment or expertise.

And we can feel really inadequate and insecure because all of this stuff then becomes dependent on something that can change. And society will often change quickly. And we don't know how to respond, especially when its standards of identity we've embraced, when we've said, this is how we're going to conform to the world. This is the mold. I fit in.

But what happens when the mold changes? We no longer fit. So we have to change again. And we are constantly being hit with images and noise and messages on how we should look, act, think, in order to fit in, in order to be accepted, to know that we belong, right. To have that affirmed for us externally again.

And the thing is, just like those filters, the ones I used on myself or sometimes the ones we use on social media, they can be really misleading. They can make something look like it's not. And it can obscure who we really are, who we are in our core, what is our identity, what is our worth? And sometimes we even have not just these messages of who we should be, but then also what we lack, right? Those places where we feel inadequate, where we have a lot of self doubt because we don't measure up.

And we have this altered self that we present to the world. And I think this is why it's so critical for us to anchor ourselves in something that is not external, to

anchor ourselves in someone who does not change. This is what we talk about when you talk about what it is to have identity in Christ, to know the truth of what God sees in us. No filter, no lens, just us. And a lot of us really struggle to see ourselves positively.

And we could never imagine that God would see anything good in us. And a lot of times, others have shaped that image of us. They've given us hurtful words that become our identity and feedback that impacts our self esteem. And we live in a culture, let's admit it, we live in a culture that loves to feed the trolls and the bullies, right? They get the most attention.

They get the most clicks. Even if you don't like it, you pay attention to it, don't you? Oh, did you see what they said about her? Did you see what they said about him? It feeds this unhealthy need that is so powerful for gossip, for just information about somebody that can tear them down.

And we see that. We see that criticism, we see that unfairness. And that's sometimes the ocean we're swimming in. And we know it's not totally accurate, but there's got to be some truth to it, right? Every stereotype has a little bit of rooted truth, right?

And then we see the flip of it where we see all the accolades, all the positive feedback that we know isn't all true. Everybody competed, thus everybody must have a trophy, right? So it feels false. Like you said, everyone did a great job. How could everyone do a great job?

Is that even possible? And so we stop trusting even positive feedback because we see so much false feedback, and we know all the images that are presented to us aren't real. So it becomes hard to trust the ones that are. And we feel like this pressure of all these standards coming at us, many of them unrealistic. And it really does take a toll on how we see ourselves if we are grounded in things that are external to us.

And no wonder we start to seek that validation with likes and comments and followers and just theatta boys at work. If you're not getting positive feedback anywhere else, work feels really good, doesn't it? Work feels great because at least they recognize it. They throw me a bone, I got a 50 cent raise, I'm doing a good job. And we feed into those places where we get the positive reinforcement, don't we?

Trapped in this cycle of discontent. No wonder our world is broken. No wonder we have an epidemic of loneliness going on, because we are not who we say we are to the world. We live in a world where we are free to sometimes say the nastiest, most hurtful things and suffer no consequences for them. We don't even have to look at the person that we hurt in the face when we do it.

And this leads to more anxiety, depression, loneliness, struggles with all these unrealistic expectations, all these overwhelming pressures and standards, and

looking at all these external sources to validate us, right? To value us when they all change and they have no true value themselves, that temporary affirmation needs constant renewal, needs a constant fix, right? Because eventually the attention dies down. So you got to generate more. And that positions ourselves for so much harm and so many dangers in this world, because we are so vulnerable to it that when our value, our own sense of value is contingent on others opinions, when their opinion changes, we feel the need to change.

It really leads us into this place where there is no authenticity, there's no real you, because you is going to change, right? Because everybody's opinions, everybody's style, everybody, this is going to change again and again. This is what happens when we live in a world where we are dependent on external value, external value to validate us. And so thinking about this and what this means for us as people who follow Christ, do we live in this world? Maybe not fully, but I think there are aspects of our lives that we have oriented around this.

And so today we're going to dig into a story from the Old Testament to a man named Gideon, who was also facing somewhat of an identity crisis. And it comes to us from the Book of Judges. And we're going to be focused in on chapter six, verses eleven through 16, and the Book of Judges. If you've never read through it, it's a violent story. It's troubling.

And this is where after Moses has passed away and Joshua has led the people into the promised land. So you think about our stories from Egypt that we visited a few weeks ago, that Moses has led them into the wilderness, and that then Joshua is entrusted to lead them into the promised land. And they are there now, living. Joshua. Sorry, I probably said Joshua there, didn't I?

Joshua. All these Jay's names, they really get to me sometimes. Joshua has now passed on, and the people are living in the promised land, and they are living in this time. That is pretty lawless in a lot of ways. And they are told we need to be faithful to the covenant that God has made, the one that we have made with God.

So we're to follow the commands of the Torah, the law. And doing this will allow the nation of Israel, all these tribes, actually, to show people what God is like, and they'll be drawn to God. And judges, again begins with the death of Joshua. So this key leader is gone. And basically, the story of judges is Israel's total failure to be faithful to God.

Just setting it up right there. Spoiler alert, big time. Israel fails to be faithful to God. And the book's name comes from the type of leaders Israel has at this time, who are not courtroom judges, as we would think, but more like regional political leaders, military leaders, almost like a tribal chieftain. And again, it is a violent story.

It is violent stories throughout. And it tells this really tragic tale of Israel's moral kind of corruption. And there are some good leadership in here, as well as a whole

lot of bad. And as we dig into this passage from judges, we're going to be looking at a man named Gideon. So let me read a few verses here for us.

The angel of the Lord came and sat down under the oak in ora that belonged to Joash, the Abbasite, where his son Gideon was threshing wheat in a wine press to keep it from the Midianites when the angel of the Lord appeared. So this is a messenger from God appears to Gideon. He said, the Lord is with you, mighty warrior. Okay, let's think about some of those. You know, the Midianites are oppressing the Israelites.

So they are under someone else's kind of oppression. They are coming in, and they are harming them. They are engaged in this conflict with them almost constantly. And so Gideon is in what is called a wine press, which would have been a deep hollow in the ground, but he's not working grapes and wine. He's threshing wheat.

He's hiding what he's doing because he doesn't want the Midianites to take the harvest, which is what they have been doing. They have been raiding them, taking from them what is theirs. He's hiding while he's doing yard work, in a way. And you think about this, okay? Seems unusual.

Kind of want to hide. Yeah, I want to preserve my food source. But think about what God has just called this man mighty warrior. He's a mighty warrior. Dude's doing farm work right now, hiding out.

I don't think that's a mighty warrior, do you? Is God blind, or does God see below the surface? Does God look at the heart of a person as opposed to the external? See, Ephesians in our New Testament reminds us that we are God's masterpiece. We are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

God has already laid the groundwork for Gideon. God sees and has knit together who Gideon is. So, yes, he can call him a mighty warrior, even if he's hiding, know, getting some wheat, ready for some bread. This conflict that we see here between how Gideon imagines himself and how God truly sees him, I think illustrates for us so often our own internal conflict, the conflict of how we see ourselves, how we imagine ourselves, and how God really sees us. We were created for a purpose beyond ourselves.

So let's dig into a little bit more from our judges passage. So Gideon hears this. I'm a mighty warrior. This is his response. I kind of love it.

Pardon me, my lord. Yes, that inflection's my own. Pardon me, my lord, Gideon replied, but if the Lord is with us, why has all this happened? To know if God's with us, why are we suffering? I don't know if you've ever asked that question, but Gideon's asking it.

Where are all his wonders that our ancestors told us about when they said, did not the Lord bring us up out of Egypt? So often? When they are discouraged, the elders are probably reminding them, no, God has done wonderful things for us. And they're like, yeah, but it sucks right now. This ain't so wonderful.

Where is this big, awesome God when I'm threshing wheat in a wine press, hiding from my enemies? But now, says Gideon, the Lord has abandoned us and give us into the hand of Midian. God, let this happen. How is this so good? How am I a mighty warrior?

This is God's response. The Lord turned him and said, go in the strength you have. Go in what you have and save Israel out of Midian's hand. Am I not sending you? Interesting.

Go in the strength you have and save Israel out of Midian's hand. Go with what you have. You don't need any special anything, because you got me, is what God is saying. But I love how Gideon responds with doubt and uncertainty. Because I think so often that is my response to God's nudges.

How can I save Israel? He says, how can I do this? I can't possibly do this. And he continues, pardon me, my lord. Just love the pardon me.

Gideon replied, but how can I save Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family. Once again, I don't have the stuff. God, why would you send me? How often do we respond the same way to opportunities to serve God?

Do we offer similar doubts and excuses like, I'm nothing? I couldn't possibly do that. I couldn't possibly teach Sunday school. I don't know enough. I couldn't go on a mission trip.

I couldn't go on a mission trip. I'm too old. I couldn't do that. I don't even know how to make coffee. Come on.

So often we focus on our lack. We focus on our inadequacies. We focus on how we're inadequate. We're unqualified. We're unworthy of the tasks that God has set before us.

Guys, if my worthiness determined my ability to stand up here, I wouldn't be standing up here. You know what qualifies me right here, speaking to you today? God's call. God's call is what qualifies me. Nothing else.

Really. Yes, I have some education. Yes, I have some experience. But what truly qualifies me is God's call on my life. God doesn't call the equipped.

He will equip you for the work he has for you. Because if you could do it in your own power, why would you need God? He doesn't often choose the strongest, the most talented, the most experienced. To do the work that he has for you. For us, he chooses those who are humble, those who are willing.

And in response to Gideon's doubt, this is God's assurance. I will be with you. And you will strike down all the midianites, leaving none alive. Now, we're not going to dig into it today, but I encourage you. Go and read what happens.

Gideon equips this entire army, and then God starts removing people. He says, no, you're not taking that many. No, you're not doing that. He sets it up so that they can only know that God has provided this. No one else.

I will be with you. The promise is not contingent on Gideon's strength or his abilities, but on God's faithfulness. God's faithfulness and power is what does the deal. Gideon was called to lead despite feeling inadequate, and in doing so, he showcases God's provision and power. When we read two, Peter, chapter one, verse three, his divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life.

Now read this clearly. We are given everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. We're not given everything like a maserati and a nice home. We are given everything we need for a godly life because we are given the very spirit of God. And that is all we need to live this life.

In God's power, we are equipped with everything we need in this way. And when God calls us, it's not about our abilities, but it is about his presence with us. So many people lean on this passage from Philippians, chapter four, verse 13. I can do all this through him who gives me strength. Sometimes it's translated, I can do all things through him who gives me strength.

It's important to know what God calls us to. God calls us to faithfulness. God calls us to live a life of righteousness, which means really to just be right with God and right with others. And what that looks like is loving God and loving others. So if you do things in capacity of love, you're living a righteous life.

Our identity needs to be grounded in the presence of God. Our identity is truly found in Christ alone. We are not defined by our past mistakes. We're not defined by societal standards or others opinions of us. I know that is hard to hear and hard to embrace.

But you are not defined by what others think about you. You are defined by the living God who calls you wonderfully and fearfully made. Who calls you beloved. You have been made, created by a loving God who sees you and I as cherished children. He delights in us.

Zephaniah tells us that he sings over us. I shared with you before that at night when I tuck my kids into bed, I sing over them. And it is just a process. My daughter went to bed before I got home the other night, and she yelled for me to come in and sing over her. This is what God does for us because he delights in us.

And this is the thing. I know that we doubt. I know that we are uncertain and doubts. God is big enough for our doubts. God is in the wilderness with us.

So when we are unsure of ourselves and we cannot trust the identity that God has given us in Jesus, trust in God's commitment to us. If you can't trust yourself, trust God first. Trust that God's very spirit is with you. God's spirit is with us. He is empowering us, energizing us for what comes, for what he has ordained to come towards us.

And as we are going to continue in this series and explore what it is to find our identity in Christ, to really, in many ways, uncover it, it's not something we're going to be creating, y'all. It's something we're going to actually be uncovering, revealing within ourselves, because it is there already, all right? It is not something that you achieve. It's not something you work on at the gym. It is not something that you just stumble into or work on in a twelve step program.

Your identity in Christ is already there because you are in relationship with God. So take comfort in that. When the doubt and the uncertainty comes, God promises to always be with us. And as we are in this season, heading towards Easter, heading towards this day, that we celebrate the hope of our faith, which is the resurrection, I want to give you a prayer maybe you can incorporate into your daily prayers in this season. Is.

It's really simple. Lord, show me how you see me. Lord, show me how you see me. Lord, help me remove all the filters, the masks, the posturing, the pretentiousness that I put on in this life to fit in. Help me take it off.

Help me be who I am. Who you created me to be. Lord, show me how you see me. Maybe you feel like Gideon a lot of times. Maybe you feel like Gideon, hiding out, doing everyday work, boring everyday stuff, hiding from the world.

And God sees in you a mighty warrior. God sees you as a mighty warrior. When you feel so very ordinary and commonplace, may we face challenges. We will face them. We will face challenges, obstacles, problems, uncertainties, doubts in this life, sometimes every day.

But I want you every day to trust that God will never leave nor forsake you. Be encouraged by God's promise. Gideon, who was hiding in that wine press, giving every excuse why he couldn't do the work that God had called him to will step out in faith. He will tear down altars built to other gods. He will rally an army.

I mean, think about it. This guy's like, I'm nothing. And he's rallying an army to fight the midianites. Despite his initial doubts and fears, he will embrace the identity that God has given him because he is empowered by the presence of God. So my prayer for us is likewise, that we embrace our identity in Christ.

We are called to step out into faith, trusting that God will guide and empower us every step of the way if we will lean into him. And this is going to require some work on our part to confront our fears, to recognize that societal standards and norms don't have to be ours, and that we have the opportunity every day to take a risk for the sake of the gospel, which calls us to love God and love others. What is



more radical than love? What is more radical than kindness and compassion? In today's world, I don't see much else.

And when we see ourselves as God sees us, those changing tides, those trends that come and go, will not affect us in the same ways, because our identity will be grounded not in our own abilities, our own achievements, whatever filter we've chosen to put on that day. But it will be found in Christ alone. And just as God called Gideon to be a mighty warrior, he is calling all of us to be ambassadors of his kingdom, to show the world a different way, to show the world what it is to love, to hope, and to be faithful. This is how God sees us. People worthy of the call, people worthy of his trust.

So, my mighty warriors, let us live as God sees us. Amen.