

# Identity and Desire

by John Piper

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*This sermon emphasizes the deep connection between identity and desire, highlighting that human beings are designed by God to consciously display His greatness, beauty, and worth. The speaker delves into the biblical understanding of human identity as creatures meant to image God and find ultimate satisfaction in Him. The message explores how pursuing joy in God leads to glorifying Him and loving others, ultimately reflecting God's design for humanity.*

**Scripture:** Psalms 37:4, 2 Corinthians 12:4, John 6:35, Jeremiah 2:13, Deuteronomy 28:47, Mark 8:34, Matthew 13:44, Matthew 5:11, Psalms 16:11

**Topics:** "Identity in Christ", "Pursuing Joy in God"

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## Description

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## Transcript

Let's pray together. Father in heaven, I ask now that you would make plain the deep and wonderful connections between identity and desire. I pray that you would awaken desires where they are missing and where they're misdirected, would you put them back on yourself.

And I pray that Christ would be exalted and that we would all be strengthened, that our ministries would be purified and refined, that the mission of our lives would be advanced as we gather in more and more people into the joy that we have in you. Make plain, O God, the connection between your glory and our joy in it. I ask this in Jesus' name, amen.

The biblical answer to the question of human identity that has had the greatest impact on me and has had the greatest influence on my ministry is the one that goes like this. A human being, John Piper, put your name in there. This is the way I'm thinking about myself right now, the way I'm thinking about you.

There are other answers that are true. This is a true one. I believe a human being is a creature of God with a nature designed by God to consciously display God's greatness and His beauty and His worth.

That's what I think our fundamental identity is. We are creatures of God with a nature designed by God for conscious – I put in conscious to distinguish us from spiders and beavers who most definitely glorify God – conscious displays of God's greatness and His beauty and His worth. This was our essential nature in our first creation in Adam.

This is our essential nature in our second creation in Christ. What we lost is being restored, but it's the same nature with the same design to make much of God. That's fundamentally who we are.

In other words, my fundamental identity is that I'm designed by God to display God's identity. My fundamental nature is that I was created and recreated to display God's nature. That's who I am.

That's who you are. A creature with a heart or nature designed to make much of God and display His nature. Genesis 127.

Let's put some Bible under it. God created man in His own image. In the image of God, He created him.

Male and female, He created them. Now, you know as well as I that the church has argued about whether this nature, this image, your being in the image of God is your rationality or your morality or your relationality. We argue and we argue.

What is plain, I think, and what is most relevant for me is that images are designed to image. So, if you put up an image of Napoleon in Paris, what you mean to do is to draw attention to Napoleon. Right? That's what they're for.

So, the question would be, why did God create and erect seven billion images of Himself on the planet? Why did He do that? And surely the answer, simple answer, would be to get attention, to draw attention to Himself. You don't put an image of somebody up and hope nobody notices it, hope nobody makes any connections between the image and the reality. You are in the image of God in order to image God, to display God, to show God.

That's what you're about. That's your meaning. That's your identity.

You have a nature designed to image. Why did He do that? It seems to me that He is passionately, passionately devoted to filling the earth with Himself, filling the earth with pointers to Himself. In every people and tongue and tribe and nation there are these statues called human beings created in His image in order to image God.

That's why we exist. That's who we are. Or, put another text under it.

That was Genesis 127. This is Isaiah 43-7. Bring my sons from afar, my daughters from the ends of the earth, everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory.

We are created with a nature fitting us to bring Him glory. And it doesn't mean improve upon His glory. Right? It doesn't mean add to a defective glory.

It means put Him on display, show what He's like. That's why you were made. That's what Isaiah 43-7 says.

So, our first creation in Adam means that we have an identity as a nature, we have a nature, unique, wonderful, awesome nature designed by God in order to point or display or image God's greatness and

God's beauty and God's worth. That's my identity by virtue of my first creation. Now, we all know what happened.

We fell. Meaning, we said, and we've been saying it ever since. You have said it.

I have said it. We said to God, no, no. I don't see it.

I don't enjoy it. I don't want it as my identity. I will savor and show my greatness.

And I will savor, and I will show and display and image forth my beauty and my worth. That's what I'm going to do, and that's what the whole world does until something happens. Namely, God never fails.

Never fails. We just heard that at the end of the recitation. He does what He says, and He put us on the planet.

He will get glory. So, Jesus Christ is sent into the world as the Son of God, right? And He dies to bear the penalty for our treason, and He rises for our justification, and He pours out His Holy Spirit into our lives and begins a recreation process. In the video, she said, her most precious verse, 2 Corinthians 5, 17, I'm a new creature in Christ.

The old has passed away. Well, what is this new creature? We were created a certain way. Are we created for something different in Christ? Here's Colossians 3.10. You have put on the new self, which is being renewed after the image of its creator.

It seems to me that's really clear. In Jesus Christ, owing to His death, owing to His resurrection, united to Him by faith, the Holy Spirit is making us new. How does it say it? Renewed after the image of its creator, which means we're getting this back.

We are getting back our identity as having a nature with a design to display God's greatness and beauty and worth. Human beings all over the world may embrace the suicidal practice of ripping our arms off and ripping our legs off and defacing the image like Dagon falling down in front of the covenant of the Lord, but God will have His people. God will have a people from every tribe and tongue and people and nation, and they will be remade so that they are who they first created to be, namely, imagers of God, people with a nature designed to display the greatness and the beauty and the worth of God.

He will be displayed. That's why He created the world. And the suicidal impulse of humanity to destroy the image of God, namely ourselves, will fail.

And God-exalting church will be created from every tribe and tongue and people and nation. Now, what's the New Testament evidence for that? That our nature as new creatures in Christ is the same nature as in the first creation, namely, to image forth God. Well, He adopted us, according to Ephesians 1-6, to the praise of the glory of His grace.

So you have been brought into a transformed family that you might praise the glory, and especially now in Christ, the glory of grace. Or, 1 Peter 2-9, He made us a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for His own possession, that we may proclaim His excellencies, the one who called us out of darkness into light. We are who we are with a design to proclaim His excellencies.

That's our meaning. That's our identity. We exist to display the excellencies of God.

Or, 1 Corinthians 10-31, He has given you food and drink. Why? He has given you tongues to taste. Why? So that whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, you would do it to the glory of God.

That's who you are. That's your nature. That's your identity.

Your identity is to live to display His identity as glorious. Or, 1 Peter 4-11, why do all of you serve? I assume most of you are servants of the living God. Why do you do that? You do it for this reason, 1 Peter 4-11, we serve in the strength that God supplies, that in everything, God may get the glory through Jesus Christ to who belongs glory forever.

We are servants for the glory of God. So, wherever you turn in the New Testament, you're hearing this message, yes, you are new. Yes, you are being conformed to the one who created you.

And why did He create you? He created you to have a nature, to have an identity which is to make much of God, His beauty, His worth, His greatness. So, conclusion, my identity lies fundamentally in the fact that I'm a creature of God with a nature that has a design given by God, and that design is to display or image forth His greatness and His beauty and His worth. And that is the biblical understanding of identity that has shaped all my life and all my ministry for the last 40 years, except for this problem.

That wasn't released. It couldn't be released. It couldn't work until a massive obstacle had to be overcome.

And in digging under the obstacle, I went deeper with identity. And that's where I want to go next. What's the obstacle? What's the deeper thing about identity? I thought you just told us the identity issue as you've used it, understood it, proclaimed it.

No, not yet. The obstacle is this. The more clearly I saw that God designed my identity for His glory, and the more clearly I saw that He made me in His image to image Him, and the more clearly I saw that I was remade in Christ, recreated in Christ to proclaim His excellencies and make known His power, the more obvious became the obstacle of God's apparent megalomania.

Right? This is the obstacle that you run into everywhere you proclaim a God-centered God, which is what I've been doing for the last 20 minutes or whatever. That's the obstacle. And to dig under it to the biblical triumph over that obstacle, that brought me to my deepest understanding of identity and its relationship to desire.

Here's the solution. Here's the digging under the obstacle and coming out on the other side, and then I'll try to put some Bible under it. Deeper down into my identity, I asked, if my very nature as a human is designed to image forth God, how does it do that? And when I say how does it do that, I don't mean the endless possibilities of behavior or the endless possibilities of thinking and feeling.

I mean, what's the one heart act which turns every other act into a God-glorifying act? And the answer to that was by enjoying God above all things or by treasuring Him above all rivals. I found from the Bible that my basic identity is that I have a nature designed by God to glorify God by enjoying God. That's the deeper thing.

Not just you have been created to have an identity by virtue of a nature designed to make much of God, but to make much of God by this heart's craving for God, longing for God, aching for God, and finding supreme satisfaction in God. That's who I am designed to be most deeply. That had to be found under the obstacle of, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa.

Wait a minute. If God does all of that, if He erects seven billion self-exalting images of Himself, how's that not megalomania? Or to ask it another way, this is more experiential maybe, did He create me to use me or love me? And the only answer I want from that is the Bible answer. If God is most glorified in me, when I'm most satisfied in Him, which is what the answer I found is, then I was stunned by an implication, namely, that I should then pursue my satisfaction in Him all the time with all my energy and above everything else.

And I should be on a mission to help as many people do that as I can. To have as many people find their way into this satisfaction with me in God at whose right hand are pleasures forevermore. If God created me for His glory, and if His glory shines most brightly through my being fully satisfied in Him, then His creating me for His glory is not abuse, but love.

Because He's on a crusade to bring my happiness to its fullest possible expression in Him, which at the same time shows how precious, how valuable, how great, and how beautiful He is. And where that delight in Him is missing, He isn't shown to be beautiful. What we delight in more is shown to be more beautiful.

This is massively effective in ministry. This changes everything about the way you go about helping people change, seeking to bring people into worship. If you really believe God is not glorified where people are not satisfied in Him, all your energy goes into so displaying Him that they can't help but be satisfied in Him.

That's what ministry is. Now, the question is, is that in the Bible? This conclusion that I drew that the remedy for the obstacle of megalomania is that God is most glorified in me when I'm most satisfied in Him. Is that in the Bible? That's clever.

Rhymes. But is it God's Word, which is all I care about? My ideas, your ideas mean nothing to me. God's ideas mean everything to me.

So I must know, is that you talking or me? And you probably can't see your Bible, and maybe you don't even have one, so just listen to two verses. These have been massive. This is where it leaped off the page to me.

This is where the remedy of the obstacle of megalomania leaped off the page to me and screamed to me, I'm loving you, John, in creating you for my glory. It goes like this, Philippians 1, 20 and 21. Now, you listen carefully because we can do this.

We can do this together. My eager expectation and hope now as always is that I might not at all be ashamed, but that Christ might be magnified in my body, whether by life or by death. Now, stop right there.

That's verse 20 of Philippians 1, and you hear Paul's passion. I want Christ to look great in my life. I want Christ to look great in my dying.

That's my life. I was made for that. That's my identity.

I want to magnify my king in my body, living and dying, and then the question is, okay, me too, me too. How? And the next verse gives a ground clause, starts with the word for and explains how. It goes like this, for to me to live is Christ and to die is gain.

The logic of the movement from verse 20 to 21 changed everything in my life, and it goes like this. Let's just walk through and take one of those halves, namely the death half. I want Christ to be magnified in my

body when I die.

For to me, to die is gain. Do you hear it? Do you hear how his mind is working? How is Christ shown to be magnificent in dying? When dying is gain, why would dying be gain? Verse 23, two verses down. To depart is to be with Christ and far away better.

So now you can hear it. Paul, you say your passion is that Christ be magnified in your body as you die, and you tell us that the way that happens is that as you face death, in that moment of death, you look at everything you are losing in this life, and what you gain on the other side of death, namely Jesus, you look at that and you say, gain! Everything taken away but Jesus. Everything taken away but Jesus.

Gain! And the point is, he said, that's how I will magnify him in my dying. And here's my paraphrase. Christ is magnified in my dying when in my dying I am supremely satisfied in Christ.

That's what it says. That's the way it works, and therefore my solution isn't my solution. It's God's solution to the problem of megalomania.

What that text says is, every time in this book called the Bible, I talk about my exalting myself in you. I don't mean to abuse you or use you. I'm not.

I mean, I am going to satisfy you in me so that your being satisfied and my being glorified happen at the same time because that's what Paul said happens. When I am most satisfied in God, God is most glorified in me. Therefore, God's pursuit of his exaltation is a pursuit of my jubilation in him.

Therefore, I must devote all my life to pursuing my joy in God, and I must maximize my experience of joy in God by getting as many people into it as I can because mine expands when you are in it. That's the way it works. It is more blessed to give than to receive.

If I say, just me, God, Buddha-like, cross my legs, sit under a tree till Jesus comes, I don't care if you go to hell. I'm happy in Jesus. I'm going to die.

I'm not going to be happy. God has designed happiness in God to grow as other people's happiness in God are included in my happiness in God, which is why love grows out of your pursuit of joy in God. Now, I've got 12 minutes, and I want to just blaze through arguments, okay? And here are the arguments.

I just said pretty much what I want to say, but what happens is that if you can see this, if you can see this echoed in the Bible, God may be pleased to let his word root it in you and transform you, maybe the way it did me or maybe way better. And so here we go. I've got as many as I can fit into these minutes of evidences in the Bible that we're on the right track.

When I say, wow, the implication of what he just said is 24-7, everywhere, with everybody, in everything, my agenda is to be satisfied in God. Is that true? So these are biblical pointers to that's true. We'll pack in as many as we can.

Number one, the Bible commands you to delight in God. It's a command. Psalm 37.4, delight yourself in the Lord.

Not an option. Number two, the Bible teaches that pastors should work for the joy of their people in God. Second Corinthians 12.4, not that we lord it over your face, but we work with you for your joy.

Is that your self-conscious identity, pastor? I am a worker with my people for their joy in God. I've got to kill their destructive love affair with the world. I've got to awaken as God enables me through the preaching of the word and the loving of my people.

I've got to awaken a supreme desire for God over stuff. That's Second Corinthians 124, pastors are to be workers for the joy of their people. Number three, the Bible shows that the nature of saving faith is the pursuit of your joy in God.

Boy, I wish we had an hour on that. I'll give you one verse. John 6.35, Jesus says, I am the bread of life.

He who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst. Now, you know how parallels work, right? He who comes to me will never hunger. He who believes in me, he's parallel, believes in me, will never thirst.

So if they're parallel, then probably this word believe and this word come are interpreting each other. So what is believing? What is believing? Believing is a coming to Jesus. Why? For the soul hunger and soul thirst to be satisfied.

That's faith. Believing is that. That's what believing is.

When you're trying to win people to Jesus, you're not merely trying to get them to sign a statement. You're trying to have a new creation come into being, and the new creation is a lover of Jesus who is more satisfied in Jesus than in all the stuff that was satisfying them before. So the nature of faith is that faith is a coming to Christ for satisfaction of our souls in him.

Number four, the nature of evil shows that we should pursue our joy in God all the time. The nature of evil. So one text, Jeremiah chapter 2 verse 13 goes like this.

Be appalled, O heavens, be shocked, be utterly desolate, for my people have committed two great evils. They have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and have carved out for themselves cisterns, broken cisterns that can hold no water. So what would be your definition of evil on the basis of that? My people have committed two great evils.

One, they tasted me. The fountain of everlasting satisfaction water, and they spit it out. And then they went to the desert, and they took a shovel, and they just spent scraping all their lives and sucking on that sand to try to get some water.

That's evil. That's the nature of evil. The supreme evil of the world is to forsake God's fountain and try to make our own.

So we should stop doing that and run to the fountain. That's called evangelism. And when you get there, it's called worship.

You fall down, you drink, and you say, ah, that ah, that's hallelujah. Number five, the nature of conversion shows that we should pursue our joy in God all the time. I have one text in mind, Matthew 1344.

The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up, and then in his joy, he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. That's a picture of conversion. Man's walking along, he loves the world, doesn't love God, doesn't give a rip for God.

God is boring, God's mythological, and he stumbles on something in the field. He opens it, it's full of diamonds and gold and silver, emeralds and rubies. That's God.

That's the kingdom of God. And he quickly thinks, I need to own this field, because then it will be mine when I tell people I found it. So he sells everything.

So get the point? Nothing is more valuable than that. That's the king, that's God. That's God, my king, inviting me into his fellowship, and therefore I will sell my car and my apple computer, and I will sell my grandfather's clock and my wedding ring.

Yes, I will sell my wedding ring, not my wife, because God doesn't ask that. But I might have to view her differently. That's another sermon.

The nature of conversion means you just found the treasure that is all satisfying. Do whatever you have to do to have that treasure. Enjoy that treasure.

Maximize your life in that treasure, and it may mean selling everything you have. Number six, the Bible threatens terrible things if we will not be happy. Deuteronomy 28, 47, because you did not serve the Lord your God with joy and a glad heart, therefore you will serve your enemies.

God gets very angry when we're not happy in God. Number seven, the doctrine of self-denial teaches us to pursue our joy. Sounds paradoxical? Listen to Jesus very carefully.

Mark 8, 34, if anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake in the gospels will save it. Now how's he arguing? You don't want to lose your life.

That's the premise. You want to save your life. That's the premise, and he agrees with that.

So if you don't want to lose your life and you want to save your life, you're going to have to lose your life. That's the argument, and you have to reflect for a few minutes on the nature of the losing and the nature of the gaining, but it's clear that the argument is you will be called upon to take some losses in this life precisely to maximize your joy forever. Number eight, I got two more.

We'll do them in four minutes. Love for others flows from the pursuit of your joy in God. Jesus said, blessed are you when men persecute you and revile you and say all kinds of evil against you falsely.

Rejoice in that day and be glad, for great is your reward in heaven. Now how do you get straight to love your enemies? How do you keep from being embittered and angry and vengeful when you're mistreated? Jesus says when that happens, rejoice. Rejoice.

How? You've got to treasure me. At my right hand are pleasures forevermore. In my presence is fullness of joy.

Rejoice, and from that joy flows power to love your enemy. So don't think that I'm calling you to a self-centered lifestyle in telling you you've got to go after your joy in God, because what happens when you are thrilled with God is that you can lay down your life for others to include them in it. One more and I'll be done.

Matt Chandler has his rose story. I got my rose story, and I love his rose story. If you get Matt Chandler's rose story, you get Matt Chandler.

If you get my rose story, you get John Piper. His rose story is true. I wouldn't tell you my rose story if it weren't true.

I made it up. It's not true in that it happened, although I acted out one time with my wife and we took it on film, but I made this up. So fiction communicating truth.

The question here is, what should motivate you to bring flowers to your wife on your anniversary? I've been married 45 years this December. This is going to be a big bundle of daisies, roses, daisies. Noelle likes daisies.

Daisies have a kind of thing with us, but anyway, it's our anniversary. I've got this bundle behind my back. Let's just call them roses, and I ring the doorbell, which I never do, and she comes to the door with a quizzical look on her face, and she looks at me funny, and I whip out and say, happy anniversary, Noelle, and she says, oh, God, you're beautiful.

Why did you? And I say, it's my duty. I've read the book on being a good husband, and that's what good husbands do, and I have done my duty. Now, I've told that story a hundred times, and every time people laugh at duty.

Well, you're laughing at duty. What is wrong with duty? Duty is glorious. Battles are won because soldiers do their duty.

You're laughing at it, and you should. It's a good sign in an audience if they laugh at that motivation. That's the wrong answer, buddy.

So, let's rerun the film. Ding dong. Happy anniversary, Noelle.

Oh, Johnny, they're beautiful. Why did you? I couldn't help myself. Buying flowers for you makes me happy.

In fact, I've got a babysitter, and we're going out tonight because there's nothing I don't have to do than spend the evening with you. Never in a thousand years would she say, nothing ever makes you happier. All you ever think about is yourself.

You're just an old hedonist. You're going around trying to make people into hedonists, because nothing would make you happier than to be with me. What about me? Me, me, me.

What about me? All you think about is you. Now, why wouldn't she say that? Why wouldn't she say that? If you get that, you get this message. She wouldn't say that for this simple reason.

When I say the words to her, there's nothing I would rather do than to be with you. There's nothing that would make me happier than to be with you. She is honored, and so is God on Sunday morning.

Which is why I don't say to our people, you ought to be coming here to give, give, give, give, give. I say, come to get God. God is so honored when you ring His doorbell and say, there's nothing I would rather have than you.

If there's a bouquet for you on Sunday morning, it's not because you need bouquets, it's because I am so ravished by the kind of God you are. So I close with this concluding word. You show me the path of life.

In your presence is fullness of joy. At your right hand are pleasures forevermore. Your identity and my identity is that we are creatures of God with a nature, a nature designed to image God, to declare or display His greatness and His beauty and His worth.

And now we have seen He has designed us to do that in all we do by finding most pleasure in Him and most satisfaction in Him. So concluding exhortation. You know you will have become who you are designed to be if you find so much satisfaction in God that as you try to bring other people into it, you die and say, give.

Let's pray. Father in heaven, I pray earnestly now that miracles would happen in these hearts and that in those who came in here with little delight in you, and little desire for you, and little longing and yearning and love and satisfaction in you, that it would awaken and they would spend the rest of their lives maximizing their joy in you by drawing as many people with them into that joy as they possibly can. In Jesus' name, amen.

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