

Plastic Jesus sermon series  
Self: Check Me Out!  
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When I was in middle school, I had my favorite sweatshirt that I wore all the time. It was green and said “Slippery Rock University” on it. Now, I had no idea where that was. I didn’t even think it was a real school. But it was a cool name and a cool sweatshirt, so I wore it. One day when I had it on, somebody stopped me and said, “Hey, Slippery Rock! I graduated from there. Do you know someone who goes there?” No. “Do you want to go there?” No. “Do you know where it is?” No. “Then why are you wearing the sweatshirt?” Because it’s cool!

I was wearing it because I thought it looked cool, and by extension I thought wearing it made me look cool. That sweatshirt is long gone, but I have plenty of other things that I have around me in hopes that they make me look a lot cooler than I am, not the least of which is my wife. Is it working?

As we continue our sermon series today called “Plastic Jesus,” we’re going to look at another way we can combat the spirit-numbing existence we often find in spiritual suburbia. We’re going to continue and try to move deeper into our own spiritual lives, beyond the glossy façade that we are often encouraged to put up. To go deeper, we have to be willing to go below the surface of our faith, to be truly authentic. Author Brene Brown defines authenticity as “the daily practice of letting go of who we think we’re supposed to be and embracing who we are.”

Can we make ourselves appear to be who we think we’re supposed to be? I think we do that everyday, and it starts at an early age. Growing up I had a big collection of sports jerseys that I would wear almost all the time. On Monday I could be Boomer Esiason, on Tuesday I was Chris Mullin, on Wednesday I was Barry Larkin, on Thursday I was Dominique Wilkins. I had all kinds of shirts I could wear that I thought were an improvement upon plain old Kory Wilcoxson.

I don’t wear the jerseys anymore, but I still have my different shirts. There’s the husband shirt and the dad shirt and the pastor shirt (it’s actually a robe). I can put on clothes that make me look smarter or richer or hipper or funnier than I actually am. I have all kinds of things I can put on that I believe are an improvement on the original.

Now, you could argue that these aren’t disguises; they are simply symbolic of the roles we play every day. Spouse, parent, employee, coach, book club member. This is true, but sometimes we can get so caught up in our roles that we lose the sense of who we are at our essence, at our core. We spend so much time switching from role to role to role that we forget who we are. When that happens, we lose the “new self” that Paul talks about in Ephesians, we lose the anchor for our self-definition. We are no longer grounded in God’s reality, where, as Paul says, “we are created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.” Instead of claiming ourselves as who we are, we let other things like our roles define us, and that draws us into the subtle competitiveness that exists in spiritual suburbia.

Not only do we let our roles define us, we let other people define us. We tie our identity, our self-worth, to the ways other people judge and evaluate us, even people who

are paid to do this. I call it the curse of the report card. When we're in school, we make judgments about a kid's value and talent and future based on a letter grade.

I remember one year when I was teaching college, I sat down at the end of a long and frustrating day to grade a bunch of papers that I had collected in alphabetical order. Heather Adams got an A. John Bailey got an A. But the more I read, the grumpier I got and the less I wanted to be grading these papers. The next day, when I was handing out the grades, I realized that the grades got worse as you moved down the alphabet. It was much better to be an Anderson than a Thompson, and poor Steve Zimmerman didn't stand a chance. And yet, those grades I gave them had an impact on what they thought about themselves as students. What external factors impact your sense of self-worth?

When we were kids, it was our grades. What is it today? What image do we feel like we have to project in order to be considered worthy? I would say it's tied to the way we earn a living. What's one of the first questions we ask when we meet someone? "So, what do you do?" And doesn't the answer always steer the direction of the conversation? If you say you're in sales, they may ask about your product. If you say you're a teacher, they may ask about your classes. If you say you're a pastor, they may give you an offering. In spiritual suburbia, you are what you do.

We can also let what we own define us. Millard Fuller, the founder of Habitat for Humanity, held a workshop at a seminary with over 200 pastors in attendance. When asked why the church struggles to get the funding it needs, the two main reasons named were greed and selfishness. Fuller asked, "Raise your hand if you think it is possible for a person to build a house so large that it's sinful in the eyes of God." All the hands went in the air. "OK," said Fuller, "then can you tell me at exactly what size a house becomes sinful to occupy?" The pastors were silent. Finally, a voice in the back of the room said, "When it's bigger than mine."

This tendency toward comparison is even true – maybe most true – when it comes to our children and grandchildren. Now I admit right up front that I'm guilty of this. I have two bright, beautiful daughters, and while I'm not biased enough to believe they are the smartest, most beautiful girls in the entire universe, I know they are in the top one percent. And when anyone implies that they are less than the best – even if it's true – my ego jumps up to defend my wounded sense of self. There's a reason some said parenting is today's most competitive adult sport. How would you feel if someone told you your kid or grandkid was average. I'd be offended. Average isn't good enough in spiritual suburbia. But isn't average just a term of comparison? It really doesn't mean anything.

This all ties back to the Slippery Rock sweatshirt and the sports jerseys, because it's all a function of what David Goetz calls image management. We work hard to manage how people see us, because no one wants to be seen as just average, and I wonder if there isn't a fear inside all of us that who we are by itself isn't quite good enough. So, we always are trying to make ourselves look better, as if we can improve upon God's handiwork. We spend money on skin care and weight loss and Botox in an effort to maintain a certain image in the eyes of others.

The irony is this: We are homeowners who take pride in the size and appearance of our houses, but serve a Christ who had nowhere to lay his head. We are consumers who strive to drive the best cars, yet worship a Christ who walked everywhere. We are parents who want our kids to be first-stringers instead of benchwarmers, and yet we worship a Christ who welcomed all the children, not just those on the honor roll. We are

a culture that defines our value based on our performance and productivity, and yet we worship a Christ who died on a cross – not a very productive performance, at least on the surface. I don't know any successful businesses or sports teams whose mission statement is "The last shall be first." But that's what Jesus says.

When Christ calls us to deny ourselves, I believe he is talking about the false image of self we are constantly trying to manage. And that is much harder in a world where our image is so much more accessible through technology. When we go online, we can be anyone we want, and so much of the activity on social networking sites is about managing an image. Whether we prefer Facebook or face-to-face interactions, too much of our time is spent trying to stand out above the crowd when Christ calls us to be one with the community. Spiritual suburbia tells us if we want to make a name for ourselves, we have to be so much more than what we truly are. Christ tells us that if we want to make a name for ourselves, we just have to be ourselves, to be authentic, and leave it to God to make us more than ourselves. God's love and acceptance of us is not based on performance; it's based on relationship. We are loved because of who we are, not what we do.

Come to think of it, when we talk about how we see ourselves, maybe we should be all about image management. Our image should be very important to us. Because the first chapter of Genesis tells us that we are made in the image of God and Paul tells us our new self was created according to the likeness of God. That's the only image that matters. You are not defined by what you do or what you own. The world will try to tell you differently. Wear this, buy this, drive this. Doesn't matter whether you went to University of Kentucky or Slippery Rock University or the School of Hard Knocks. You are defined by who you are and Whose you are. You are enough. Thanks be to God.