

Luke 14:16-24

“A man once gave a great banquet, and invited many; and at the time for the banquet he sent his servant to say to those who had been invited, 'Come; for all is now ready.' But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, 'I have bought a field, and I must go out and see it; I pray you, have me excused.' And another said, 'I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to examine them; I pray you, have me excused.' And another said, 'I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come.' So the servant came and reported this to his master. Then the householder in anger said to his servant, 'Go out quickly to the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in the poor and maimed and blind and lame.' And the servant said, 'Sir, what you commanded has been done, and still there is room.' And the master said to the servant, 'Go out to the highways and hedges, and compel people to come in, that my house may be filled. For I tell you, none of those men who were invited shall taste my banquet.’”

Last week we started our series about the three words most people want to hear but can't seem to get right, and they are "I Love You." But before we can fully understand the whole statement, "I Love You," we have to first understand "I." Most of us believe we already have a complete understanding of, this the ninth letter of the alphabet, the pronoun "I," but do we? In **Genesis 11** we can read a story about a people who believed they could do what they wanted, mainly because they believed more in themselves than their maker. So they built themselves a tower to reach heaven itself.

If we look at this pronoun "I" we notice it kind of looks like the tower of Babel which appeared in the land of Shinar, which was later named Babel, and what happened there? The people were scattered and then they were given different languages so as not to understand each other. They stopped building and were separated from each other, why; because they believed themselves the most important, even above God.

Think about that! Who on earth would actually consider themselves more important than God? Who would dare to put themselves ahead of God? What would bring someone to the point of seeking what they want ahead of God's desire? Some would call this pride, and Scripture speaks about that.

In **Proverbs 11:2** we read, “*Pride comes before a fall,*” but I say Pride is the Fall! As Paul said in **1 Timothy 1:15**, “*I am the foremost of sinners,*” I too follow suit. Each day it is a struggle to keep from saying **I ... I ... I** and putting me first. Looking around this world one can see I’m not alone in this. People today constantly put themselves before God and until we get “**I**” right we will never get “I Love You” right.

I, this pronoun is the most glorified word in the English language. It was said the late actor Marlon Brando’s two favorite words were Marlon and Brando. The same can be said for you and me. Just simply change out Marlon Brando’s name for ours. I read about an author who following the release of his newest book was at a party. He went on and on about all the great reviews his new book had received. Then realizing what he was doing he stopped and said, “Well enough about me. Let’s talk about you. What did you think of my book?”

If you were to go today to any Christian book store or into any Christian community you would find writers writing about themselves or how an individual can achieve what it is they want. Best selling author John Maxwell’s released a book about 5 years ago entitled, “Put Your Dream to

the Test.” Whose dreams, **MY** dreams. The number one type of books selling today is self-help books. Books about “**I**” about fixing “**ME**” and achieving what “**I**” want.

There is a commercial on television today advertising for Staples, the office supply store. People in offices that have a problem, and who shop at Staples can just push the “Easy” button and everything is fixed. Everyone in today’s society has an “Easy” button like the one at Staples, except it’s a “What’s in it for me” button. People seem to be pushing this button every waking minute of every day. Agree or disagree?

If you were given a choice and you could create something amazing which would last forever, but only anonymously; or you could have your name live on in legend, but anything you created would be totally forgotten. Which would you pick: anonymous creation or a legendary famous name?ⁱ

This morning’s passage is about three different people in three different situations all looking out for the same person. They all gave their excuses as to why and everyone began the same way “**I**”.

All three people here were thinking of themselves first and foremost, and then they thought of the one giving the banquet, God. God was an afterthought and came only after they did what they wanted.

We do the same thing today, all of us. Compare the amount of time we spend asking God to help us and/or give to us with the time we spend in His presence truly worshipping Him, seeking how we can pursue His purpose and His will, rather than ours? We put ourselves first here in church and have the nerve to call it prayer:

- Lord, help **Me** today ...
- Lord, **I** need ...
- Lord, give **Me** ...
- Lord, strengthen **Me** ...

Correct me if I'm wrong, but even in our prayers we are asking for something we want. It's **Me ... Me ... Me** all the time! Shouldn't prayer be less about the glory of self and more about the glory of God?

It has been called the Miracle on West 65th Street, according to the Houston Chronicle. It happened at the New York Lincoln Center, during a violin concerto.ⁱⁱ The concert hall was full to capacity, yet no one knew what they were about to witness. Miracles often come without any warning or fanfare, and this night was no exception. There was no hint that those present would be witness to a moment they would celebrate for decades.

The audience was eager for the concert to begin, ready to listen and savor the talents of Itzhak Perlman, arguably the world's greatest violinist. Perlman is usually the last person to come on stage and take his place. His fingers were staggeringly nimble, but his legs were not. As a child Perlman was struck with polio, and now he struggled to cross the stage aided by crutches and braces.

As he sat down, he removed both braces, and placed his violin beneath his chin. Perlman's brilliance with the violin was no fluke. He practiced nine hours daily, and forty-five every minutes before every concert, in his dressing room, with two security guards standing at the locked door. They have explicit instructions to let no one in under any circumstances. Mr. Perlman has now finished practicing. Now he is praying, and no one was to disturb him for any reason.

He needed prayer this night, because the concerto he was to play was one of the most difficult works for a violin. The demands on a soloist to play Braham's *Violin Concerto in D Major* were extremely demanding. One other violin virtuoso once said, "It is simply unplayable." Perlman was now set to play this piece which would last over six minutes.

A few seconds into his solo, the sound of a string breaking on his violin echoed throughout the concert hall. The orchestra stopped playing immediately. The crowd gasped. Protocol permits a musician to call a pause, allowing time for them to hurry off stage and replace the string. After all, it is hard enough to play this piece by itself, impossible with one string missing. Impossible? With a wave he signaled the orchestra to continue, and then the unthinkable happened!

Instantaneously transporting the music written for four strings to three, Perlman delivered the piece flawlessly; his fingers produced sounds of unprecedented passion and purity. Just over six minutes later, exhausted and soaked in sweat, Perlman lowered his violin. The crowd was stunned in silence for about eight to ten seconds, and then in unison they rose to their feet in a wall of wild cheering and thunderous applause.

The orchestra, also stunned by what they were just a part of, also joined in the applause, banging their instruments in homage and shouting themselves hoarse.

Perlman then called for the microphone, he motioned for silence, and then this man, with two legs crippled from childhood, and a violin with one string missing spoke, he said: “All my life, it has been my mission to make music from that which remains.” And tonight He expressed Himself through something that is broken. The shattered string, which could have stopped the music, only served to accentuate this miracle. Greater glory came because this melody-maker used a temporarily useless instrument.

We are all broken instruments, yet we refuse to play on until we have things our way. We refuse to do until we are the focal point, we make everything about us. Look at worship. I want these hymns sung, I don't like those. I want service done this way, not that way. You clap for someone singing or playing, but heaven forbid you clap for God. When asked why, you say, I don't think that should be done in the service, I don't do that. In service to God the big one is I don't have time. How many would have tuned out of this morning's service or worse walked out if a big screen was set up

overhead or if drums and electric guitars were set up or we sang to a CD?

Why, because **I** don't like that. When we come to worship it's not about us it's about God.

We make everything about us and then have the nerve to say "We worshipped today." Worship from start to finish is about God, problem is we make it about the big **I**. We don't know that hymn and I'm not singing; **I'm** not getting out of my seat to bring anything to the altar; **I'm** not going to church it's raining; **I'm** not calling anyone or sending cards that's not my job if worshipping and/or serving is not your job then what is?

Regardless of what is being sung, regardless what being played, regardless how worship is conducted, it's about God, but we insist on making it about us. Now, you can sit there and say, "Well I don't do that, **I** worship" but God knows and you do as well, if we're honest about things. We will come to worship as long as it's about **Me!**

We have all heard the parable of the Prodigal Son, which one are we?

We are both of them, we're the son who wants what he feels he has coming to him right now, and we're the son who refuses to accept things because it not the way he wants it.

Again, until we can get "I" right we can never get "I Love You" right.

We have lost our identities, we have allowed the devil to come and steal who we are. Today people are having their identities stolen and being used by others. We are spending hundreds of thousands of dollars trying to keep our worldly identities intact, but are doing very little, if anything, to save our spiritual identities.

We come to church on Sunday only when it fits into our schedules and only if something we like better isn't going on, but as far as who we are, as a whole, we have lost our Christian identity. Come Monday morning will people know we are separate from the world or will we blend in? Will we do and act in a way so as not to draw attention to ourselves and our faith? Every time we fail to lift God up first and foremost, in our thoughts, our speech, and our actions we're putting God second and us first. God is to be first in everything we do, each and every day of our lives.

I firmly believe, God allows things to happen to us and around us to see how we will respond. Will we lift Him up by how we respond, or will we lift up ourselves? There is no room for God and I being first it must be God first and foremost. Not until we put God first in all areas of our lives will we ever get our true identities back. Again, we can lie to ourselves and say we truly worship God, but until we come prepared to do nothing but give God the glory regardless of what we sing, how we sing it, which order we do the service, what is hanging in the sanctuary, or who is sitting in the sanctuary will we ever get “**I**” right. As the hymn goes, “To God be the Glory,” not “To **Me! Me! Me!** be the glory to!” Give God the glory and worship Him with all your mind, body, and strength. Put God first then and only then will we get **I** right.

ⁱ Miguel de Unamuno, Poet, novelist, and playwright Miguel de Unamuno was born on September 29, 1864, in the Basque city of Bilbao. Throughout his life he would publish essays on metaphysics, politics, religion, and travel; he also published over ten novels and a number of plays.

ⁱⁱ Also quoted in Chick Hill, *Others*, (Milton Keynes: Authentic Media, 2007), pp76. Also quoted in Jeff Lucas, *Creating a Prodigal Friendly Church*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), pp.11-13.