If you have ever been to or heard an inspirational university commencement speech, chances are you have heard one of these three mottos, the top three slogans you are most likely to hear.

- The first is “never give up” ... the second is “expand your horizons”...
- But ranked third most popular among these speeches is the phrase: **Be yourself.** This is the mantra of modern society. After all, we live in the age of authenticity where the highest value is placed on being real, authentic to who we are.

But the glaring question is: **Who are we? And how do we know?**

- It’s the question of identity: Where do I get my value? Worth? Why?
- And it’s an important question to ask because Your sense of identity comes with a script... it shapes the decisions you make each day.

- Well, in many ways, this chapter before us is about Identity.
  - Where to find it... and where *not* to find it.

- The Book of Esther is the story of how the courage of one woman saved an entire people from genocide in ancient Persia. It is remarkable. But it is a story with twists and turns, throughout which we find lessons regarding how we are to live a life of faith in exile.

- And at the beginning, the author is showing us very clearly what Esther will be up against: An empire that is ruled by a king who holds absolute power. A world where the fate of people is not decided by love, law and justice, but by ego, selfishness, personal agendas and manipulation. Sound familiar? Will Esther be lost in the shadows or shine in the darkness? Well, it depends in part on where she finds her identity and how it shapes her choices.

- And for us, the world around us is a dark and broken world. Will we be lost in the shadows or shine in the darkness? Well, it depends in part on where we find our identity and how it shapes our choices.

- With fine detail, the author paints a portrait of the main characters that highlight a tale of two identities. These portraits not only help us better understand the story but to better understand ourselves. They reveal the *false self*, the *true self* and the *war between the two*
1. The False Self – An Identity apart from God
   a. Here we have a portrait of a man who, in one sense has it all, and yet lives out of an understanding of himself and the world that is completely opposed to the design and purpose of God.
   b. And several details at the beginning of this chapter not only bring this portrait to life but reveal some of the wrong ways to get a of self. I want to note three. First, the false self is:

c. Shaped by Wounds
   i. Several years have gone by since the wild party of chapter 1, and they weren’t great for the mighty King Xerxes.
   ii. History tells us that he lost a military campaign against the Greeks and their famous Spartan warriors.
   iii. This defeat was humiliating and depleted a vast amount of his treasury. It was a failure. No doubt his ego was wounded. To make it worse, it’s been several years after his extravagant party in chapter 1, a party which crescendo with his drunken demand to exploit his wife by showcasing her beauty to the drunken crowd.
   iv. But she refused. Her punishment was being removed as queen. Wounded again. He is not in a good place. (If he had a phone, I would imagine him scrolling Instagram)
   
V 1 Later when King Xerxes’ fury had subsided, he remembered Vashti and what she had done and what he had decreed about her.
   v. Here in verse 1, we are told that he remembered Vashti.
   vi. Was he lonely? Was he longing Vashti’s company? The long walks on the beach? The late-night chats over tea?
   vii. No: it says, He remembered what she had done.
   viii. He was wounded. And he nursed this wound. Oh, this reflects some of us in more ways than we would like to admit. For some of us, our identity is primarily shaped by the wounds we received.
   ix. The story in our minds, over and over again. Sometimes, the wounds we experience are the result of sin, wrong
and injustice. And the Bible tells us to be honest about this. It’s real. It’s true that these things happened. But they are not the truest thing about you.

x. On the other hand, maybe we are like Xerxes. Nobody actually sinned against us, but our ego was wounded.

xi. “THEY did this to me... I am a justified avenger.”

xii. But building our identity on woundedness is not how God made us. We were made to glory in God. If our concern is for our own glory, it leads to misery!

xiii. Rather than repent and turn to God for healing, he allows his wounds to wound others! But it goes further

d. Controlled by opinions

i. if you don’t stand for something, you will fall for anything.

ii. Instead of turning to God, he turns to the single guys

V 2-3 Then the king’s personal attendants proposed, “Let a search be made for beautiful young virgins for the king. Let the king appoint commissioners in every province of his realm to bring all these beautiful young women into the harem at the citadel of Susa. Let them be placed under the care of Hegai, the king’s eunuch, who is in charge of the women; and let beauty treatments be given to them.

iii. Xerxes appears to be the most powerful man in the world ... and yet he is easily swayed and influence.

iv. Their suggestion is well received by the king: round up all the young eligible women throughout the empire v 2-3

v. To be clear, this is not some optional beauty contest, these women were conscripted into the King’s Harem

vi. What He truly needed was God. They said he needed another woman. He defers. He is often defined by what other people thinks he needs. Is this true for us?

vii. But of course, the counsel knew about the King’s desires

e. Driven by appetite

i. History describes Xerxes life after his defeat as a life of indulgence. The counsel knew how to appeal to him
V 4 Then let the young woman who pleases the king be queen instead of Vashti.”
This advice appealed to the king, and he followed it.

ii. One woman after another. It's a performance-based relationship. He is not loving them but using them.

iii. For many people, being true to yourself means being defined by your desires. You are what you want.

iv. But there are so many problems with that.

v. First, we are full of conflicting desires. Be honest. Which one defines? How do you know?

vi. Second, our desires are shaped by culture more we admit

vii. The Bible is not so naïve. It is the most honest book. On the hand it celebrates the dignity of mankind! But it also shows us the result of sin, what happens when we turn away from God! Even our desires are corrupted!

f. So, are we defined by wounds, opinions or appetite?

g. By contrast, in the next character, we are given a hint of:

2. The True Self – An Identity found in God

a. Esther is introduced through Mordecai, which anticipates their joint role in the unfolding story of how the Jews will be saved!

b. And the WAY that both he and Esther are introduced is KEY.

c. Our Identity must start with God.

V 5 Now there was in the citadel of Susa a Jew of the tribe of Benjamin, named Mordecai son of Jair, the son of Shimei, the son of Kish

d. In Hebrew narratives, it is common for the controlling aspect of a character’s identity to be emphasised by placing it first.

e. By introducing him as a Jew of the tribe of Benjamin, the story is being rooted in the unfolding story of God’s plan in the Bible

f. Though God is hidden in this book, he is silhouetted. And with this sentence here we are reminded of the big picture!

4
h. Even if everything else changes, and your experiences are disorienting in a world of exile, the truest thing about you is what God says about you!

i. Whatever happens with Mordecai, what is of first importance, is his relation to God. What both he and Esther must remember is who they belong to, what bigger story they are a part of!

   i. To be a Jew was first to be called to God and set apart!

j. See, in the Bible what you read about is men and women who are called out by God to be a part of his redemptive plan!

k. And they are often given new names which represent their identity! That, whatever happens, the truest thing about them is what God says

l. And friends, the same is true for you! You are created by God; you are created for God. You are not your own handiwork; you are God’s handiwork!

m. You don’t need to convince people that you are important (or secretly fear you aren’t) Your identity and purpose is from him

n. But there is a problem. The name Mordecai is not a name that reflects the God of Israel. Mordecai was a pagan name taken from the Babylonian gods.

o. Here is a portrait of someone who is steeped in the culture around him! He has a pagan name; he is at the seat of power! Shouldn’t he be in Jerusalem? The people of Israel could have returned! Some did!

p. It seems that the source of his true identity is forgotten or perhaps intentionally suppressed. And that sets us up for the main character and my final point. In Xerxes we see the false self, gaining an identity apart from God. At the beginning of Mordecai’s introduction, we get a glimpse of the true self, understanding who we are in relation to God. And finally, in Esther we see:

3. The War Between the Two
a. Esther is introduced in relation to him, and she reflects the same tension! The text shows us by giving us her two names!

V 7 Mordecai had a cousin named Hadassah, whom he had brought up because she had neither father nor mother. This young woman, who was also known as Esther, had a lovely figure and was beautiful. Mordecai had taken her as his own daughter when her father and mother died.

b. Esther is the only person in the book with two names. Many believe that this is the author’s way of depicting a woman living between two worlds: the Jewish heritage and the Persian court.

c. Her Jewish name is Hadassah which means Righteous! Esther is taken after the goddess Ishtar.

d. By mentioning both her Persian name and Hebrew name, we are being shown two identities, a struggle which will be brought into sharp focus as the story goes on.

V 8-9 When the king’s order and edict had been proclaimed, many young women were brought to the citadel of Susa and put under the care of Hegai. Esther also was taken to the king’s palace and entrusted to Hegai, who had charge of the harem. She pleased him and won his favor. Immediately he provided her with her beauty treatments and special food. He assigned to her seven female attendants selected from the king’s palace and moved her and her attendants into the best place in the harem.

e. Here, young women are conscripted against their will into the King’s Harem. She is not responsible for the situation she is brought into. But what will she do, how will she respond?

f. In the Book of Daniel, about 100 years earlier, we read about the first Jews taken into captivity, into exile. And they protest, not taking the kings diet, maintaining their worship practices and declaring their Jewish identity. Daniel and his friends were careful to obey the law while in captivity, even at great risk.

i. In the book of Esther, however, there are more questions.

V 8–11 Esther had not revealed her nationality and family background, because Mordecai had forbidden her to do so. Every day he walked back and forth near the courtyard of the harem to find out how Esther was and what was happening to her.
g. Esther and Mordecai had no choice about the circumstance. But they did have choices to make within their circumstance. We wonder, why did Esther not protest the beauty regiment? Why did she not maintain the kosher diet? Why did Mordecai tell her not to reveal her identity? Why did they not maintain practices of sabbath and worship?

V 12-18 Before a young woman’s turn came to go in to King Xerxes, she had to complete twelve months of beauty treatments prescribed for the women, six months with oil of myrrh and six with perfumes and cosmetics. And this is how she would go to the king: Anything she wanted was given her to take with her from the harem to the king’s palace. In the evening she would go there and in the morning return to another part of the harem to the care of Shaashgaz, the king’s eunuch who was in charge of the concubines. She would not return to the king unless he was pleased with her and summoned her by name.

h. Some have tried to say that this was all planned from the beginning. That Mordecai told Esther to go into the Persian palace as a spy in the hopes of protecting the Jewish people.

i. See, the way some tell the story of Esther is that she is leading bible studies in the harem, and doesn't actually go to the king to spend the night, maybe they played scrabble.

j. There are several problems with that. First, we are not told that this was the case. Second, there was no threat against the Jews at this time. That comes later. At this point in the story, revealing her Jewish identity would certainly not cost her life. King Xerxes anger over his previous wife resulted in her being removed as Queen, not destroyed.

k. What is clear is that she did not rise to a place of prominence by living a distinct life, as is the case of other stories in the OT.

V 15-18 When the turn came for Esther (the young woman Mordecai had adopted, the daughter of his uncle Abihail) to go to the king, she asked for nothing other than what Hegai, the king’s eunuch who was in charge of the harem, suggested. And Esther won the favor of everyone who saw her. She was taken to King Xerxes in the royal residence in the tenth month, the month of Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign.
I. At this point in the story, we don’t see the conviction from Esther and Mordecai that will come later. Instead, we see a tension between identities, seeming to be carried along with the culture. 

Karen Jobes, NIV Application Commentary “The questionable character and spiritual fidelity of Esther and Mordecai were noticed even by the first translators of the book, who attempted to exonerate them by adding explanation. Certainly the temptation to compromise Jewish religious and ethical principles would have been an important issue for the Jews of the Diaspora (Exile). It is no less a temptation for Christians today, living in a society that is becoming increasingly hostile to biblical principles.

m. Of course, like Esther and Mordecai we all live with the temptation of being carried along without conviction.
   i. Maybe some of us are there?
   ii. There is the problem of what we might call “cultural believers” Christian Faith is sort of inherited but not central “I’m not an atheist, but not really following Jesus”
   iii. “I belong to the God of the Bible, but don’t tell anyone!”

n. All of this highlights the war between a false identity rooted in the world and a true identity rooted in God.

o. These identity portraits in Esther are like sign-posts to lessons in the New Testament! In particular, the Apostle Peter.

p. If you put your faith in Jesus who lived, died and rose again for you, you are a new creation! A new identity! But you’ll quickly find a war between the false self and the true self amid the pressures of the world! So, what do we need to do?

q. Acknowledge the war between the false and true self
   i. There is a struggle! A battle! Be honest, be aware!

1 Peter 2:11 Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul.
   ii. The passions of the flesh are any passions that destroys or diminishes your desire for God! Keeps you from him!
   iii. The passions of the flesh make created things look more glorious than the creator of all things!
iv. We are invited to **be honest** about the struggle!
   i. But... Allow the struggle to turn you to God!

r. **Embrace your identity in Christ**
   i. Once we become aware of this struggle, we turn to the truth of what God has created, called and redeemed us to be! We make choices based on our true identity as sinners who are forgiven and adopted!
   ii. AS we will see with Esther, she will experience renewed identity as the chapters unfold, she chooses to identify with her people, and thus with God’s purposes. And we must do the same. The war is real, but we win with the truth. And if your faith is in Christ, here is what is true about you!

   **1 Peter 2:9** “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

   iii. Our identity starts with God and is sustained by God!
   iv. We were not meant to conceal, but reveal who we are, for in doing so, we are reflecting what is most valuable!
   v. Where can we find hope to come out into the light in hope of victory? Well, it starts by embracing your new identity! And... why do we have this identity?

s. **Remember the grace of God**
   i. Esther and Mordecai might not be the heroes we expect at the beginning. But this is a story of transformation
   ii. Esther is portrayed differently at the *end* of the story, than she is at the *beginning*! As her true identity is embraced.
   iii. People want Bible characters to be heroes. But they are flawed. And this highlights the true hero of the story, and that is God. In his God grace he works, not always *because* of our choices but in *spite* of them! And through the process, God awakens us with conviction!
iv. Esther changes! Even when it didn't seem that she and Mordecai were walking near with God, God was at work. Why? Because He is gracious. And his grace changes us.

v. You know what? With Xerxes, he *never* changes!

vi. But with Esther, there is a change! She begins to live out of her identity as part of God’s people!

vii. Regardless of how she lived in the past, she is changed!

viii. See, the difference between a non-christian and a Christian is NOT that one has sin and the other doesn't! NO! we are all sinners. No, the difference is repentance!

ix. Our identity is not based on what we achieve for God, it’s based on what we receive from God!

1 Peter 2:10 *Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.*”

t. The favor we need is not from those who have power in this world, we need the favour of God! And it comes to us in Jesus!

u. Jesus, like Esther, came into the world and grew up in a broken and sinful world. And like Esther’s true name Hadassah, he lived truly righteous. And unlike Xerxes, he did not come to use people, but to save people! He does not *bring* you shame; he *takes* your shame! When he died on the cross for our sin!

v. He gives us a new name! *Righteous!* And enables us to live it!

w. God is the source of our identity and the true hero of our story!

x. *We do not live to find favour in the eyes of a sinful* king, we live because we already *have* the favor of a *savior* king!


z. When he came, he did not conceal his love for you, he revealed his love for you. And his love for us defines who we are.

aa. Jesus heals our wounds, breaks the power of opinion and renews our desires! Bring them to him this morning!