

Living as a Royal Priesthood
1 Peter 2:4-10

The pastor of an inner-city church in Chicago was asked why their church was thriving and doing great things for God. His response gets at the heart of what I'd like to communicate this morning. He said:

Simple, I just tell people who they are: chosen by God, his children, his priests. I don't shame them for what they are not; I tell them who they are.

(cited by Bruce Larson, *Mastering Pastoral Care*. 1990)

There are two fundamentally different ways to address the deficiencies found in any local church. Every church has deficiencies and blind spots. One approach is to shame people by engaging in graceless criticism and critique. But shame never inspires or motivates a person or a church to great things; shame doesn't produce lasting spiritual fruit. At best, shame only makes us want to "not mess up" too badly.

The other option (as described by the inner-city pastor) is to focus on "who we are," what is actually true about us in Christ. When we see our true identity in Christ, our deficiencies become obvious, **and** we can see our way forward to live differently. Instead of being ashamed and demoralized, we come alive and see what we should be.

In conjunction with our Making Room effort, we are studying some of the main images the NT uses to describe the church. These images reveal our identity in Christ; these images explain the type of people we need to be. As we've been discussing the last three weeks, the spaces that we are designing and renovating are meant to facilitate this identity.

We're not a building-centered church; most of our gatherings happen outside the church building. Almost 300 of you gather in life groups in your homes each week, not to mention campus groups and other Bible studies. At the same time, some gatherings happen best at the church building. Some of you aren't able to be part of life groups during the week, so we've reintroduced groups/classes on Sunday mornings. Our recovery groups work best in this building. And of course our children and youth ministries need spaces that facilitate hearing God's Word and relationships.

Two weeks ago we discussed our identity as "the family of God"; the emphasis there was upon our commitment to each other. Last week we looked at our identity as "the body of Christ." The emphasis there was our interdependence: we are members one of another in Christ.

Today we are going to look at an aspect of our identity that stresses our exalted status before God: we are a **royal priesthood**. This term may or may not mean anything to you now, but when we understand who we are as a royal priesthood, we'll see that the details of our lives hold amazing potential to bring pleasure to the heart of God. If we understand that we're a royal priesthood, we'll think less in terms of "not messing up," and more in terms of blessing God.

Listen to 1 Peter 2:4-10. After mentioning how we as believers have "tasted the kindness of the Lord," Peter writes this:

4 And coming to Him as to a living stone which has been rejected by men, but is choice and precious in the sight of God, 5 you also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. 6 For *this* is contained in Scripture: "BEHOLD, I LAY IN ZION A CHOICE STONE, A PRECIOUS CORNER *stone*, AND HE WHO BELIEVES IN HIM WILL NOT BE DISAPPOINTED." 7 This precious value, then, is for you who believe; but for those who disbelieve, "THE STONE WHICH THE BUILDERS REJECTED, THIS BECAME THE VERY CORNER *stone*," 8 and, "A STONE OF STUMBLING AND A ROCK OF OFFENSE"; for they stumble because they are disobedient to the word, and to this *doom* they were also appointed. 9 But you are A CHOSEN RACE, A royal PRIESTHOOD, A HOLY NATION, A PEOPLE FOR *God's* OWN POSSESSION, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; 10 for you once were NOT A PEOPLE, but now you are THE PEOPLE OF GOD; you had NOT RECEIVED MERCY, but now you have RECEIVED MERCY.

The Significance of Being "a Royal Priesthood": Exalted spiritual status and free access to God. (1 Peter 2:4-5, 9) In verses 4 and 5 Peter paints the portrait of the church as both a spiritual temple and as a holy priesthood (changing imagery in mid-stream). The Old Covenant stipulated the building of a temple made of "dead stones." Stone was piled upon stone to make a magnificent building in which people brought animal and grain sacrifices, in which the priests represented the people, and in which God manifested His glory.

But the New Covenant involves the building of a temple (a spiritual house) made of "living stones." Jesus Himself is the first and most important living stone. Down in verse 7 Peter makes allusion to Psalm 118 which is applied to the Messiah; Jesus is depicted as a stone which was rejected by the builders (the leaders of Israel), but whom God makes the very corner stone of the entire building.

When we come to Jesus as the precious, chosen, living cornerstone, we too become living stones in the temple God is building. The Church – founded on Jesus Christ – is the temple in which God manifests His presence ***and*** the place where sacrifices are brought. What kind of temple would it be if there were no sacrifices? Peter says:

5 you also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

In the spiritual temple God is building, ***all believers are priests***. The most fundamental idea here is that we have full access to come into the very presence of God. The fact that we have full access to God can become "old hat" to those of us

who've been believers for a while. But remember how this truth would have struck Jews in the first century. In the realm of the spiritual, **priests had the highest status possible**. Only a select number of males in Israel could be priests in the temple of God. Only one, the high priest, could pass into the inner sanctuary, the holy of holies that contained the Ark of the Covenant. And he could only enter once a year.

By calling believers "a holy priesthood" Peter is saying that **we now have the highest spiritual status possible in this world because we have free access to the Sovereign God of the universe**. Peter was telling the simple farmers and slaves of the first century that their spiritual status is not a matter of their position in this world; it is a matter of your position in Christ. Since He has been exalted to the place of power and authority at the right hand of God, and since believers are now "in Christ," we too have free access to God. As a **holy** priesthood, we reflect the holiness of our Father (1 Peter 1:15), our great High Priest (Hebrews 7:26), and the Holy Spirit (John 14:26).

Down in verse 9 Peter adds another adjective that heightens our status even more (if possible).

9 But you are A CHOSEN RACE, A **royal** PRIESTHOOD, A HOLY NATION, A PEOPLE FOR God's OWN POSSESSION, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light;

We are not only a *holy* priesthood; we are a *royal* priesthood (a phrase suggested in Exodus 19:6; Israel was called "a kingdom of priests"; the church has now become what God desired Israel to become). The thing about royalty – in Israel, at least – was that it was inherited. There was nothing you could do to **become** royalty; you had to be born into it. The idea of *becoming* royalty would have been too fantastic to consider.

And yet Peter tells us that as believers we are a **royal** priesthood. We are now part of God's "ruling class." We have this mind-boggling status as believers in Jesus Christ. Even though in this world we are often confused and sinful and needy, we are royalty. And we bring that royalty to our priesthood, our free access to God.

The Application of Being "a Royal Priesthood": "Offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." (1 Peter 2:5) What do we do with this status as a royal priesthood? We do what all priests did: we offer up sacrifices:

5 you also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, ***to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.***

There's no more need for animal sacrifices and grain sacrifices. We offer up "spiritual sacrifices" – offerings that bear the mark of the Holy Spirit. Because of our God-given, exalted status as a royal priesthood, we have the capacity to offer up spiritual sacrifices

that are "acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." God loves such sacrifices. He delights in them! They bring Him great pleasure!

This is an identity that we should take every bit as seriously as the priests in the old covenant were supposed to. Of course, they often ***didn't*** take their identity seriously. The priests in Malachi's day, for example, were only going through the motions. The sacrifices had become boring and tiresome to them, so they brought God their leftovers (lame and blind and sick animals) instead of their very best. The sobering thing about their situation is that they didn't even realize their sacrifices were worthless to God. We fall into the same trap if we don't realize that God is evaluating the quality of ***our spiritual sacrifices***. We'll bring God our leftovers instead of our firstfruits --- and we won't think a thing about it.

But when we do embrace our identity as a royal priesthood, we'll see a multitude of opportunities of offer up quality sacrifices that genuinely bring pleasure to the heart of God. Sometimes our spiritual ambitions are far too modest in light of our identity as a royal priesthood. We feel like we're doing pretty well if our sins aren't out of control and if we're not messing up too badly. But that's no ambition for a royal priesthood in the temple of the living God. Our ambition should be to bring the very best spiritual sacrifices that we possibly can! This should be true in all the ministries of Faith, those that happen outside and inside of these walls.

We aren't told specifically what these "spiritual sacrifices" are. The lack of definition suggests that any element of our lives can be a spiritual sacrifice offered up to God. To stimulate our thinking, however, I'd like to mention three types of spiritual sacrifices that are mentioned in Scripture.

Speech. (v. 9) Our speech – the conversations we have – can be a spiritual sacrifice to God.

9 But you are A CHOSEN RACE, A royal PRIESTHOOD, A HOLY NATION, A PEOPLE FOR *God's* OWN POSSESSION, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light

The term "proclaim" or "declare" simply means to tell or to speak. Peter explains that the reason we have been given such an exalted status is so that the excellencies of God might fill our speech. This would include our speech to one another as well as our speech to those who haven't yet entered into a relationship with God. Those who have experienced the "excellencies of God" (mercy, grace, compassion, holiness) really cannot keep quiet about it. If a relationship with God is really the best thing we've ever experienced, we'll talk about it with each other and with others.

Think with me about the implications for the various classes that we offer here at Faith. We want our teachers to think, "As a member of a royal priesthood, I want my words to be a spiritual sacrifice, acceptable to God. I want to proclaim how excellent God is (the God who has called me out of darkness into His marvelous light). I want God to delight in what I say and how I say it." This is true for those of us who preach, those who teach

our children, middle schoolers, and high schoolers, and those who teach adults. We want our teachers to experience the excellence of God to the point where it shows up in what they say and how they say it. Teachers, if we are going to be a royal priesthood that proclaims the excellencies of God, we have to experience God ourselves.

Of course we want those participating to do the same thing: experience and talk about the excellencies of God. Children, youth, and adults should all be experiencing the mercy and kindness of God to such a degree that it shows up in our speech, both in our groups and in our everyday conversation.

Ponder these questions: If people listened to you this past week or month, what would they conclude about God? Would they conclude that you are enamored with God and His excellencies? Or would they conclude that you're pretty lukewarm about your heavenly Father?

Those questions are challenging, especially if you're going through a tough time and if your life is hard. But I was challenged and amazed a couple of weeks ago when I read Job 1. After Job had lost his wealth and his children, Job cried out, "The Lord gives and the Lord takes away; blessed be the name of the Lord." The writer adds, "In all this Job did not sin nor did he blame God." Wow. If Job could proclaim the excellencies of God in the middle of his pain, so should I. I suspect that such spiritual sacrifices in the midst of our pain are especially precious to God.

Let's turn to Hebrews 13:15-16 for a couple more examples of spiritual sacrifices. ***Praise/worship. (Hebrews 13:15)*** Notice what the author of Hebrews writes in 13:15.

15 Through Him then, let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name.

Again, this sacrifice of praise is offered "to God through Him [Jesus Christ]." Worship is not merely something that happens once a week when we gather together. Since we're a royal priesthood all week long, we should offer up the sacrifice of praise all week long.

At the same time, we have the opportunity ***corporately*** to offer God the sacrifice of praise when we gather together. If we are mindful of our identity, it will make a huge difference in the way we approach worship. For starters, we'll be ***bring God our best***, realizing that He is observing us every bit as carefully as He observed the priests in the old covenant. As a royal priesthood, we won't come to worship passive and disinterested. We will sing from the heart because we are offering praises to the living God; we will give with joy because we love God and His kingdom; we will receive the Word with eagerness because we long to hear the voice of God.

What kind of sacrifice are you bringing to God today in worship? As a royal priesthood, we have the capacity to delight the heart of God when we bring Him our best.

Good Deeds and Sharing. (*Hebrews 13:16*) Lastly, let's notice the spiritual sacrifice mentioned in verse 16.

16 And do not neglect doing good and sharing, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.

This verse points out that simple acts – doing good and sharing – can be sacrifices that please God. We all have daily opportunities to "do good" and to "share" what we've got with others. So often we see these things as distractions from doing the important things in our lives (as defined by what we've put into our schedules), when in reality these are opportunities to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God.

I could give dozens of examples of how you “do good and share” outside the walls of the church, but since we’re thinking about our Making Room effort, I’ll mention a couple examples that take place here at the church building.

Our Recovery Ministries offer up the spiritual sacrifice of coming alongside others who are hurting; investing time and spiritual energy in their health and wholeness.

Several weeks ago our Middle Schoolers were presented with a need that exists among kids in the foster care system. When kids are removed from their homes, they are often handed trash bags and told to collect whatever belongings will fit inside them. An organization called Together We Rise is committed to improving the life of these kids. One of the things they do is provide duffle bags that kids can use instead of trash bags; these “Sweet Cases” also contain hygiene items, toys, blankets, etc. When our middle schoolers heard about this need, their hearts were moved to be part of this effort. They have decided to raise \$500 to provide 20 of these duffle bags for foster kids. They have decided to host a “childcare night” at the end of the month; donations will go to provide these Sweet Cases for foster kids. You’ll hear more about this in coming weeks. I think this is exactly the kind of thing that the author of Hebrews had in mind when he wrote, “Do not neglect doing good and sharing, for with such sacrifices God is well pleased.”

Consciously offer up daily sacrifices this week and see how God impresses upon your heart the beauty of our identity as a royal priesthood. As a royal priesthood, even the details of our lives hold amazing potential to bring pleasure to the heart of God.