

The Power of Identity

1 Peter 2:4-10

This morning I am first going to present you with three scenarios and then ask you a series of questions.

- Scenario #1. When you drive home today you pull into your driveway (or parking space) and begin wondering about your neighbors (the people who live around you). You realize that you know very little about them. You know some of their names, but you don't know their greatest joys or deepest fears; you don't know their stories and the events that have shaped their lives. The thought occurs to you that perhaps it's no coincidence that you are their neighbor; perhaps God has placed you in your neighborhood or apartment complex or dorm/fraternity/sorority for a purpose. You think and pray about all of these thoughts and you decide, "By God's grace I am going to be very intentional about loving my neighbors. I am going to try to be the best neighbor my neighbors have ever had."
- Scenario #2. Let's say that you're a husband. You find that you are often frustrated and discontent in your marriage. You find that you don't really understand your wife - why she does some things and doesn't do other things. When you think about it, you remember back to the days when you were getting to know each other. When you were dating, for example, you could have long, meandering conversations about all sorts of interesting things. You made new discoveries about each other all the time. But you realize that you stopped being interested in your wife somewhere along the line. And so you decide that you are going to be teachable again when it comes to your wife and to your marriage; you are going to become the foremost expert on your wife. For the next six months you are going to make it your ambition to understand your wife so that you can tailor-make your love for her.
- Scenario #3. You are a person who has always viewed "work" as a necessary evil, something you do because you've got to pay the bills. But you run into a friend who teaches elementary school who begins telling you how her work is as an expression of her love for God. She talks about her vision for her students in terms of the knowledge and skills she imparts and in terms of the relationships she develops with her students and their families. The thought occurs to you, "I wonder if I could cultivate that type of vision for **my** work. . . seeing the good I'm doing for others, paying attention to the effect I'm having on my coworkers, actually doing my work 'unto the Lord' instead of unto nobody. . ." You decide that since you spend the best hours of your week working that you are going to make workplace theology a matter of prayer, study, and practice. I mention these scenarios because they are possible applications of things that are taught later in 1 Peter.

Question: What type of person would actually make those changes? What type of person would sense a calling to love his/her neighbors in an intentional, sacrificial way? What type of husband would live with his wife in an understanding way, granting her honor at every turn? What type of person would see his/her work as an expression of devotion to Jesus Christ, mindful of the influence and impact of that work on others?

The answer given in 1 Peter is **believers in Jesus who understand their identity - that they are a royal priesthood and the people of God**. Today's passage is 1 Peter 2:4-10 in which Peter explains this identity we have as believers. If we understand the significance of this identity, we will enter into our core relationships and responsibilities in the family, in the workplace, and in our neighborhoods with a sense of purpose and intentionality. Even though we live as exiles in this world, we will be animated with a vision for being used by God in deep and substantive ways.

If you are a believer in Jesus, **You are a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, and the people of God**. (1 Peter 2:4-8)

Notice the dominant image in verses 4 and 5.

4 As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, 5 you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

In Jesus' day there were two different "builders" who were building two very different houses and who therefore evaluated their building materials very differently.

On the one hand, there were human "builders" in Jesus' day. In Acts 4 we read that when Peter was speaking to the Jewish rulers, elders, and scribes, he made reference to Psalm 118:22. He said that Jesus "is the stone which was rejected by you, the builders, but which became the chief corner stone" (Acts 4:11). They evaluated Jesus and decided that He should be discarded; His life and teaching were incompatible with the "house" they were building. They had no use for a Messiah like Jesus, especially a crucified Messiah.

On the other hand, God was building a spiritual house, a house that is indwelt by the Holy Spirit. Elsewhere this building is called the church (Matthew 16:18). This spiritual house is built with "living stones," stones that are alive. Having been raised from the dead, Jesus was the preeminent **living** stone; down in verse 6 Peter will refer to Him as the "chosen, honored cornerstone." He rejected by men but "chosen and precious" in the sight of God.

If you believe in Jesus and are therefore alive in Christ, **you are a living stone** in the house God is building. The emphasis is upon our corporate identity. Much like the entire church is the body of Christ (one body with many different members), together we are being built into a spiritual house (or household).

Peter changes imagery when he gives the purpose of being built into a spiritual house: "to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." In the old covenant priests were a select few individuals who could enter into the very presence of God. They represented the people before God, bringing sacrifices and prayers.

If you are a believer in Jesus (having been born again to a living hope), you are part of this holy priesthood. In Christ you are among those who can come into the very presence of 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).

Of course there's no need to bring sacrifices for sin; Jesus is the once-for-all sacrifice for sin. We offer up "spiritual sacrifices" (offerings that bear the mark of the Holy Spirit) that are "acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." Individually and corporately we have the capacity to bring spiritual sacrifices to God that bring Him great joy/delight. This is our privilege and responsibility.

This identity as a holy priesthood is part of the impetus behind the "prayer night" this coming Tuesday. We aren't gathering to pray because we're "supposed to"; we are gathering to pray because we have the privilege in Christ to come boldly before the throne of grace to receive mercy and grace to help in time of need! We can bring our petitions to God on behalf of one another, our city, our nation, and our world. One way we live out our identity as a holy priesthood is praying in faith in Jesus' name. Come Tuesday night to pray for others; come to have others pray for you - physical healing, strained relationships, circumstances in which you need God to work, family and friends who need Christ, etc.

Of course we can offer spiritual sacrifices in every area of our lives. The three scenarios I mentioned at the beginning of this message were examples of bringing spiritual sacrifices: loving our neighbors, honoring God in our marriages, doing our work as an expression of our devotion to Christ. Our ambition should be to bring the very best spiritual sacrifices that we possibly can!

In verses 6 through 8 Peter makes reference to three OT Scriptures which make clear that God knew that some would accept Christ and that others would reject Him. He first quotes from Isaiah 28:16 in verse 6.

6 For it stands in Scripture: "Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame."

Jesus was the "chosen and precious cornerstone" for God's spiritual house. In His earthly existence, Jesus suffered but was eventually vindicated. The same will be true of those who believe in Him: whoever believes in Him will not be put to shame. Peter next quotes from Psalm 118:22 and Isaiah 8:14 to speak about those who rejected Jesus.

7 So the honor is for you who believe, but for those who do not believe, "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone," 8 and "A stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense." They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do.

Some understand Peter to be saying that God destined some to disobey the word (i.e. not believe the gospel). I understand Peter is saying that by God's design, those who

disobey the word by not believing the gospel are destined to stumble and fall; they do not experience salvation and honor. This doesn't mean that those who don't believe have no chance to be saved; to the contrary, Peter is challenging believers to live the type of lives that convince people of the truth of the gospel.

In verses 9 and 10 Peter again addresses his readers as those who HAVE believed and who therefore will not be put to shame. In contrast to those who "disobey the word," Peter says:

9 But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. 10 Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

What Peter does in these verses is very profound. He describes the church using phrases that were originally used in the Old Testament to refer to Israel, especially in the context of God rescuing His people from slavery in Egypt and from exile in Babylon. I'll make only a few brief comments on each of these phrases.

A chosen race. The OT emphasized that the descendants of Abraham were a race chosen by God simply because He set His love upon them, not because they were superior to other races. God told Israel that she was a chosen race to assure her that He would rescue her from exile in Babylon (e.g., Isaiah 43:20).

There are at least a couple of implications for the church being called "a chosen race." First, we can rest assured that God will rescue **us** from our exile. Peter has us fix our hope completely on the grace to be brought to us at the return of Christ (1 Peter 1:13). Second, as "a chosen race," the church has a unique ability to address the issue of racism. The term "race" normally referred to one ethnic group. But we are a race that isn't defined by ethnicity or geography or political borders. We can demonstrate the alternative to racism because we are a chosen race comprised of those from "every tribe, tongue, people, and nation" (Revelation 5:9).

A royal priesthood. As 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, informing how we approach God and how we represent Him to others.

A holy nation and **a people for his own possession.** This means that we are set apart for God and His purposes. We don't live for ourselves; we don't do what we want. We live with the knowledge that we have been bought with a price, the very blood of Jesus.

Peter writes that you have this identity "that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light." In other words, our experience of being delivered from darkness prompts us to proclaim/declare how excellent God is. We do this through words and actions. Let's be honest, if you aren't very impressed with

God and what He has done in your life, you probably won't broadcast how excellent He is; and if you do, you won't be very convincing. But if you are experiencing your identity, living in "his marvelous light," declaring God's excellence will be rather natural.

Verse 10 is a reminder that our identity as the people of God isn't a right; our identity is purely a function of God's mercy.

10 Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

If we "get" that our identity as God's people is purely a function of God's mercy, we will live in humble dependence upon Him. A proud Christian is a contradiction in terms. Our claim to fame is that we were so sinful that Another had to die for us, so lost that Jesus left His home in heaven to seek and find us, and so dead that God had to make us alive again in Christ. In chapter 5 Peter will write, "All of you clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, for God is opposed to the proud but gives grace to the humble." If we understand our identity humility will make perfect sense. We will think, "How can I wear a cloak of superiority when everything good about me is a function of God's mercy?!?"

We've seen throughout this passage that ***how we live flows from who we are***. Our identity is meant to be the dominant, most powerful influence in our behavior. ***You are a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, and the people of God.***

Experiencing Our Identity during Lent. In your bulletin this morning we included an insert with a brief description of of Lent, which begins this Wednesday. Lent is a season of preparation and repentance in anticipation of Good Friday and Easter. As the insert describes, we strongly encourage you to be intentional in seeking God during the forty days of Lent. In one sense the forty days of Lent are no different from any other days; but if we (individually and corporately) purpose in our hearts to seek God in an intentional way, we can experience God in fresh and powerful ways.

One option is to make our identity as a spiritual house, as a royal priesthood, and as the people of God the focus of your seeking this Lenten season. Of course you're free to focus on whatever God impresses upon you, but perhaps something you've heard this morning has captured your imagination. If so, you might purpose in your heart, "God, between now and Easter I want You to teach me how to think, speak, and act as a member of a royal priesthood. Change the deep structures of my mind so that I see Your commands as a natural and obvious implication of my identity in Christ."

As you'll see on the insert, as a way of focusing on God you might consider "giving up" something and "taking up" something during Lent. What you give up might be something good that has gained too much influence in your life (e.g. social media). But you might purpose to give up some habit that is at odds with your identity in Christ, something that dulls your spiritual senses and takes your eyes off of Jesus. You might take up a simple practice that will keep our identity as a royal priesthood in focus. You could take the pattern of Psalm 55:17 and enter into prayer three times a day (evening,

morning, and noon). Three times a day you could take 10 minutes to talk with God about your calling as a member of a royal priesthood - how you've exercised your priesthood well, how you've missed opportunities to live out your calling, how you can do differently in the next conversation or circumstance.

Imagine entering into worship on Easter morning (6 weeks from today) with a deep and growing sense of our identity as a royal priesthood. Imagine the satisfaction we would have if we were able to pray, "God, You have been faithful to teach us to live as a royal priesthood. We are learning how to offer up spiritual sacrifices in our homes, in our neighborhood, in our places of work, and in the church. We find it so very satisfying to live out our calling. We are living stones in your household because Jesus is alive!"