

Series: Our Christian Identity

Sermon 1 (1/31/2016)

### Introducing Our Christian Identity

For the next few months, we will be in a series on a topic that has been on my heart. I trust that God is guiding us as we look into these things, and we'll be looking at a themed study, not working through a book of the Bible but tracing a theme through the Bible: a variety of passages about our Christian identity. This morning, we're introducing it. I don't have a text to give you; we'll be looking at quite a few passages in the second part of the sermon just to get us acquainted with some of the big ideas that we'll look at more closely later.

But before we do that, I'd like to ask the question: Why are we giving attention to the theme of our identity as God's people? Some answers would probably come to your mind, but we are not aware through most of our lives how significant our concept of "who we are" really is. It is foundational to have a right, Biblical view of our identity. Here are a few reasons why:

1. My identity determines my sense of security and significance. I don't want to get too psychological, but we would probably all recognize the truth of that statement. Your own perception of *who you are* feeds into your sense of security, satisfaction, significance, and safety. At one time, the emphasis on self-esteem in psychology was so prominent and so contrary to Biblical teaching about sin and the gospel that God's people needed to react against it and show its dangers. The suggestion was that our own feelings, passions, happiness, and self-centeredness were of the highest priority. However, you may conclude that the solution to this view of self-esteem is self-loathing. The Biblical solution is not to hate yourself and put yourself down; that is an overreaction. Because our identity is the source of our security and satisfaction, we need to define it correctly.
2. My identity shapes my aspirations and goals. Last night, I heard a basketball star saying, "I want to be the best version of myself as possible." That sound strange and maybe arrogant, but that is actually what we are all thinking! "What are my strengths; what am I cut out for? How can I do that as well as I possibly can?" Our sense of *who we are* drives us and determines what the goals are that we sacrifice in order to achieve.
3. The world regularly bombards me with wrong ideas about my identity. There *is* a lot wrong with the modern self-esteem concept, and radio, television, and even sporting events communicate wrong messages about human identity, either directly or by implication. Next week is the Super Bowl (not during our service times!), and in recent years, the game's commercials have become a cultural phenomenon. Just think about all the appeals those commercials make, from toothpaste to soft drinks to cars. What is the nature of those appeals? Subtly or not, they promise you something to fulfill you and help you achieve actualization of *who you are*. "You deserve this;" "You have a goal and this product is the key to getting there;" "This will fit the life you were made for." Marketing is built on appealing to people's aspirations, which are rooted in their identities. That philosophy affects us whether or not we realize it and shapes our expectations of life.
4. I tend to base my identity on the wrong things. It may be the world trying to shape me, the people I am surrounded by, or my own flesh, but there are any number of wrong things that form my core identity in my mind. Those things include:

- My work and achievements. When you introduce yourself to someone for the first time, immediately after finding out their name, you probably ask something like “What do you do?” We don’t want to minimize our callings—in fact, later we will see that our callings *are* part of our Christian identity, as we pursue them to the best of our abilities and for the glory of God. But our calling is not part of *defining* who we are before the Lord.

If we derive our identity from our vocation, we could have problems if we are not particularly successful in that vocation. If we feel disillusioned, dissatisfied, and stuck in our job, what does that do for our sense of security and significance? For those of us who are vocationally involved in ministry, there is an extra problem. We are serving God in a direct way, and we tend to define ourselves by the perceived success of our ministry. That’s not really how we should think of ourselves in the presence of God.

- My financial status and possessions. This is one of the great appeals of marketing! If you achieve a certain position and buy certain things, you will feel that you are all you are meant to be. That’s the wrong path, and one that will leave you frustrated.
- My friends and other relationships. Again, this is one part of the picture, which the Bible addresses, but not the core. The people with whom I am related do not define me. What if I don’t have many friends, or my friends betray me or let me down? What if, in the plan of God, I never marry? Do I have to become a miserable, dissatisfied person? If I have to have good friendships and other relationships in order to be happy, I am doomed to be miserable.
- What other people think of me. Scripture says “The fear of man brings a snare.” In many relationships, we are driven not by love but by the desire to feed our own ego. If I’m not pleasing others and I sense that they’re not accepting me, and that throws me off, that is what the Bible calls the fear of man. This fear is dangerous because it can cause me to do things solely for man’s approval and the feeling I get from it, apart from what God says.
- Physical characteristics. I may or may not like the body, face, and other physical characteristics that God has given me. Some people respond to the question “Who are you?” in terms of their national or ethnic background. But is that really the essence of what you are? There must be something more fundamental to our identity. When we start to focus too much on these characteristics, that is the first step toward racism and other forms of prejudice, as we consider some to have lower levels of worth based on their physical characteristics or ethnicities.
- Past experiences, especially bad and painful ones. Suffering, mistreatment, or abuse in the past may so dominate my thinking that I state my identity as “I am a victim.” Someone has hurt me, and I have nurtured that so much and allowed it to be so prominent in my estimation of myself that this is “who I am” in my own eyes. I effectively blind myself to all kinds of gospel truth and other Biblical teaching that could produce health in my mind and responses.
- My sin and past failures. When I think about myself, I have a sense of worthlessness because I know I have failed God miserably. “I am a sinner.” We are sinners, and that is part of Biblical teaching, but we should remember that sin is *secondary* to human existence. It is not at the core of what God created. It is a parasite, a part of the curse that all of us be born with a sin nature after the fall. It does not get at the essence of who we are either as creatures in general or as Christians. Allowing myself to be defined by my past failures is a recipe for discouragement, frustration, and a defeated mindset.

5. I tend to forget/minimize my identity in Christ. How often the items in the previous list are shouting at us, while the Biblical, more significant truths are just whispering to us. It's not until someone preaches them at us that we are jarred a bit and it begins to sink in. For some reason, our minds are bent toward wrong perceptions of our identity, and we have a hard time recalling, concentrating on, and living in light of the fundamental things that the Bible reveals. It's like we have amnesia. People with amnesia can be in their normal setting, surrounded by the people they've always been with, but their mind just isn't there. They aren't aware of who they are and who others are. Often, that happens spiritually to us.

That's the "why." Now, on to the "what." The whole series will unfold these things, but I have a number of components of Christian identity from Scripture for us to develop. I'm sure this is not an exhaustive list, but these are some that have stood out to me as foundational. Now we're going to glide quickly over a number of passages and then come back to them later in the series.

Naturally, the first comes from the first chapter of the Bible. Turn to Genesis 1:26-28 for the foundational words that God speaks when He creates Adam and Eve. When we ask, "Who am I," that is the most basic answer, true about every human being whether or not they are saved. It gives people inherent worth. They are not only special creations of God, but created with a unique capacity to reflect God's glory and even represent Him over the rest of creation.

One of the big issues in identity today is "gender identity." Many people are confused about who they are in terms of gender, as though their physical construction by God does not sufficiently answer that question. In God's foundational statement, He created them "male and female." The gender that God has given to any individual, inseparably connected to their identity, is a beautiful thing—not something to be rejected, ashamed of, or thrown away. There are things about males and about females that uniquely reflect God's glory and are to be embraced. I am **a creature made in God's image**.

We know, of course, that sin has terribly corrupted our condition and the image of God has been marred because of our rebellion against Him. In the New Testament, our salvation and redemption are about a lot more than just writing our name in a book, more than just being delivered from eternal destruction, more than having a conscience that no longer condemns me. Go to I Corinthians 1:30 to see that I am **united with Jesus Christ**. We have been legally and spiritually joined to Christ so that His achievements as a human being are now ours, whether we need to be declared righteous instead of condemned, enabled to make progress in holiness, redeemed from all traces of sin in the future to enjoy being a part of God's family—all of that is guaranteed us. Not because of our work, friends, or physical condition but because of what really defines us: we have been joined to Jesus Christ. Everything to follow flows out of that.

Go back to I Corinthians 1:2 to see another component of our identity: I am **a saint**. Sainthood is not limited to a few "super spiritual old people"! It is the status of every believer. What does that mean? We'll come back to that, but just ponder it. You are a saint!

Romans 8:14-17 gives another component of our identity: I am a **child of God**. Why should I go through life burdened down by the failures of my human father (without minimizing the difficulties of situations we may be in) when my relationship to him does not define me? I am fundamentally a child of God.

I Peter 2:9-11 takes this in a little different direction, emphasizing our responsibilities: I am **a pilgrim**. That's not a second or third level; it is part of the definition of what it means to be in Christ. In

relationship to God, I have these lofty positions to consider, but in relationship to the world outside of Christ around me, I do *not belong*. My citizenship is elsewhere; I am one of God's people. Is that how I view myself; do I see myself as living for another kingdom, one yet to come?

Relating to my life in the world, there are plenty of things that God has given me to do, vocationally, in my family, in reaching the world—all of those dimensions are addressed generally in Ephesians 2:8-10. Works are not at the foundation of my identity; that would lead to boasting and failure. Salvation is a gift, but works are a post-conversion part of my identity. What am I here to do; why has God left me here? For good works that God has predetermined for me to do. I am **called and equipped for service**. That service can take many forms. As you go on into Ephesians 4, you read about spiritual gifts and the ministries that we engage in toward the body of Christ, which are a big part of our service. Whatever I do in those areas, God has selected and enabled me to do it. Whatever level of success I see visibly is also part of God's will. Whatever skill I have (or don't have), whatever I pursue because something else didn't work out—it is all what God created me to do.

Go back to Romans 12:5 for another part of our identity: I am a member of the church. That includes the universal and the local church. I am connected with other people. God did not create me to simply pursue my personal dreams and achieve my own potential. He created and enabled me to connect with others. Not so they can make me feel loved, but so that I can contribute to their growth. This is such an intimate connection, in fact, that Paul says we are "members" of each other. The analogy of the body is how we should view ourselves. I am part of a body; I can't really pursue my mission and experience who I was created to be without that vital connection to other people.

A few weeks ago, I was talking with a couple who was visiting here at church. They were anticipating moving to our area and were "checking out" our church. They said they were not going to move to a certain area until they were sure there was a church there that they could join and be a part of. This couple was already familiar with our church's preaching through the sermons we have online, but they wanted to find out if our church was going to encourage them to be the Christians they needed to be. I wish every couple thought that way! That life isn't just about our career. One of the biggest decisions we make is finding a church that we can support wholeheartedly, that will hold us accountable, and that we can link up with in this vital, intimate way. It's not some extra thing! I am **communal**.

Notice that none of those things are particular to me as an individual. The first is true of all human beings, and the others are true of all Christians. This approach to identity is actually moving me away from an individualistic view of my identity. That's how we tend to think of our identity: what makes me stand apart from other people? That's not how the Bible views identity. It is theological, theocentric: man's identity as he relates to God.

This truth runs through all the others: Whether we realize it or not, we are **worshippers**. All of these different aspects are, in some way, tied to God, enjoyed in connection with Him, directed to Him. Our identity is wrapped up in drawing attention to and praising something outside ourselves. When we define identity in terms of what makes *me* special, we take this capacity for worship, which is wired into us, and we turn it back on ourselves. You will let yourself down that way! You are not going to be happy with who you are; you're not going to reach all your goals. If your sense of identity is self-oriented, you will only be frustrated. The Bible calls that idolatry. We have an innate passion for greatness, and we are turning that passion in on ourselves instead of on the Lord. We seek satisfaction and significance within instead of without. In the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6:21), Jesus said that where your treasure is,

there will your heart be also. If my treasure is “I really want to feel like I’m great and special,” that is where my heart, my decisions, and my emotions will be. I will be very unpredictable and “up and down.” But if my treasure is God, my Father, who saved me through Jesus Christ, united me with Him, and ministers assurance to me of my sonship through His Holy Spirit, that is where my heart will be. That is where I will find the significance and satisfaction that I crave. I pray that as we go through this series and talk about these elements, the Lord will drill down into our hearts these realities, that we might understand them and live out our Christian identity.