

Series: Our Christian Identity

Sermon 5 (3/6/2016)

I Am a Child of God (Part 1)

As we continue our series on Christian identity, we'll start in an unusual place: Numbers 15:37-41, which describe one of the regulations that God set down for His people. This passage doesn't speak specifically about our union with Christ or our identity in Him, but it does give us a wonderful illustration that will help us appreciate the importance of our identity and what we are doing together through these messages. In our context, we understand the idea of somebody tying a string on their finger to remember something they're supposed to do. Maybe students have mnemonic devices to help them remember information for a test. Or maybe you have some other methods for helping you remember important things throughout the day. God knew the tendency of humans to forget very basic things, and so even in the dress of the people of Israel, He established this "uniform" that would have tassels with a cord of blue. That was a very practical method to help them *remember*. To remember God's commandments, but there are other themes mentioned as well: holiness (the distinctiveness of God's people) and the foundational reality that God had delivered them from Egypt because He desired to be their covenant God. The commandments and holiness were expressions of that. These tassels were designed as a reminder that they were God's special people. Out of all the nations of the world they had been selected for this unique relationship with God. He had stepped in and done miraculous things to bring them out of bondage, move them toward the promised land, and help them enjoy the fulness of what it meant to be the people of God. Understanding that status as His holy people positionally, they would then out of a heart of worship and gratitude obey the commandments and reflect holiness in their life choices.

It's not by mistake that the cord in the tassel is *blue*. That's a color that, down to our day as well as in ancient days, represents royalty. It represented nobility and dignity, and was a vivid reflection of this status as the people of God. God knew they would forget that and seek joy and purpose by following other gods, and He did something to keep before them visibly just how special they were and what the implications were for their everyday lives. Sometimes I wonder whether we should wear some visible reminder of who we are in Christ, because we also tend to forget our position. The New Testament doesn't command that for us, but I suppose that's why some people wear a cross—you can debate the appropriateness of that—or some other symbol to capture visually the point of the gospel and the blessings of being connected with Jesus Christ—what it entails practically for our daily lives. I'm not suggesting we start some weird trend, but whether or not we have something visible like that, this series on Christian identity has the same purpose: to help us understand better, dwell on, remember, glory in, and apply the truth that by God's grace through Christ, we really are special in His sight. We are unique; He has distinguished us.

Last time we focused on the Bible's description of us as saints, or holy ones. That means we have been set apart from the world for a unique relationship with a unique God. Today, for as wonderful as that truth was, we will be considering something even more sublime, amazing, and life-changing than our sainthood: our sonship. Our identity theme for today is this: I am a child of God.

When I was in college, one of the first "meaty" books on the Christian life that I read was a modern classic called *Knowing God* by J. I. Packer. It had a significant impact on my life in terms of understanding

the Lord and really being challenged to pursue a deep walk with Him. It helped me understand some of God's ways with us. I would not at all endorse some of the positions that Packer has taken over the years, but many of his writings are rich with Scripture and very helpful for life. It's strange how time goes by, you get older, and you forget certain things that God used in your life, and yet there are a few things you recall because of the impact they had. I distinctly remember reading this quote when I was a college student. He says: "What is a Christian? The question can be answered in many ways, but the richest answer I know is that the Christian is one who has God as Father. If you want to judge how well a person understands Christianity, find out how much he makes of the thought of being God's child and having God as his Father. If this is not the thought that prompts and controls his worship and prayers and his whole outlook on life, it means that he does not understand Christianity very well at all. For everything that Christ taught is summed up in the knowledge of the Fatherhood of God. Father is the Christian name for God."

Let me just ask you: As you think about Christianity, is the thought of the Fatherhood of God and you as His son the thought that prompts and controls your worship, prayers, and outlook on life? I hope that we will grow in that regard as we consider this wonderful truth. And as we explore what the Bible says about sonship, we find that there are two strands of truth, two doctrines that come into focus and that form the main building blocks of the idea of our sonship. Both of them are necessarily Scripturally for understanding how we become God's children, and both have far-reaching implications. I'm talking about *regeneration* first—what the Bible calls the new birth, by which we are born into the family of God—and second, *adoption*, which refers to our privileged status within the family of God, the blessings that flow from that. It's a double basis for sonship in God's family, and thus for security. It's as if the Lord has gone above and beyond what would be required to bring someone into His family: He has both brought us to birth and we have received adoption as well. Those two ideas form the doctrine of our sonship.

I thought about this and worked on it, and there was no way I could adequately get both ideas into one message! So this message will be part 1, on regeneration, and the other will be part 2, on adoption. First, I want to define regeneration and show Biblically what it means, and secondly (and primarily) get into its implications for us, why it is such a helpful and far-reaching truth.

Many of these passages will be familiar to you, and hopefully they will make clear to us this astounding reality that we have been *born* into the family of God. First, please turn to John 1:11-13. A couple of points can be made about regeneration from this passage. First, it happens through faith. This is not something that you are "born into" like you are physically. Rather, there is a moment in time when, by means of faith, you experience it as a spiritual matter. The bigger point is that it is a miracle of the grace of God. We don't understand all the inner workings; it's even hard to sort out the relationship of faith to regeneration. But it is clear that when someone is born, they did not bring themselves to birth! People don't make themselves born; it is something that happens to you through someone else, and the same thing is true with spiritual birth. Even though there is a human element of belief, you do not choose to be born again; you don't have the ability to give yourself a new nature. It's a miracle just like physical birth and resurrection are astounding acts of God. Here's how he puts it negatively: these people were not born "of blood," or of man's will. It is not physical or because of the family you were born into, or because someone else chose to do it to you. It is directly, supernaturally from God. The mysterious nature of it is illustrated in John 3 by Jesus when He is talking to Nicodemus. Jesus says it is like the wind; we don't know where it comes from, where it is going, or how it works. A scientist can explain the

mechanics, but at the end of the day they, too, scratch their heads over where this force comes from. It just happens; it's part of God's own working within the forces of creation. What we can tell is that there are effects of it. The leaves rustle, things are blown off the ground, etc. Recently we had a windstorm that knocked over our basketball goal for the second time, and yesterday I had to replace the rim because it got bent out of shape. The wind is powerful, but we can't really see it or explain it. We just know it happened because of its effects.

That is a major point about regeneration. How would I know that this happened to me? Well, what is going on in your life? Do you sense the effects of a supernatural working in your heart, to where you believe Jesus? As much as you fall and struggle and fail, you really hate your sins; you don't want them. When God brings them to your attention, you turn from them. You find that your conscience is cleansed. As you respond to the Spirit, you are able to grow in your obedience and resist sin more and more in your life. Where did that come from? Human beings don't just make themselves love Jesus. Human beings don't just make themselves want to do the sometimes very difficult things that the Bible says. That is an indication that God has singled you out! That you are the object of His special favor. Not only has He set you apart and made you a saint, but He has put of His own life within you and brought you to new birth.

Another passage to help us define this is in James 1:16-18. This passage is for all of us who are tempted to think that God is out to get us, is loading us up with bad things; that God's goal is just to make us miserable. We really should have this attitude toward the Lord in our own life, family, and church: if there's anything bad, *we* did it. If there's anything corrupted, painful in some way, it goes back to human sin. Maybe not something specific that you did, but all suffering and bad circumstances are the product of the curse. But—if there's anything good, *God* did it. You might say, "How has God been good to me? I don't have the money, intelligence, or relationships that I would like." Again, do you love Him, have the desire to honor Him and grow? Are you convicted about sin and working, by His grace, against it? Where did that come from? Of "His own will." Here's how God has been good to you: He brought you to new birth by His own will. A stunning display of God's goodness. If you can't see anything else good that God has done in your life, a stunning display is that He has brought you to new life in Christ.

He has done that through faith; here specifically we see the content of our faith—what we have believed in. It is the word; He has brought us forth by the word of truth. So, based on those two passages, regeneration is the **gift of God's life in the soul of man**. It comes by faith in God's truth. It is a miracle, a work of the Spirit, it shows that God has shown us His special favor, and it is another indication of how we are in a unique category. The Bible describes the average person out there as dead in their trespasses and sins, not caring about God, not desiring His influence in their lives, not loving Him. If you are alive, treasure that! It is a priceless gift and privilege. It is a key part of your identity that you have not just your name up there, recorded as righteous and accepted, but also that you have His own life here inside you. That's a part of understanding who you are in Christ. You are a recipient of the life of God in the soul. That is amazing. What are the implications?

First, we have *new desires*. In II Peter 1, God says that we have been made partakers of the divine nature; In I Peter 1:22-2:3; we see how that new nature operates. Once again, he refers to the word going out, God working in your heart; you embrace it by faith, God is bringing you to life through that experience, and having that life (which has new inclinations and capacities that are not normal to the human heart), he says, follow through on them. Nurture them, yield to them, build on them. Love the

brothers sincerely. In chapter 2, he moves from talking about love as the direction of this new life to add an emphasis on the word: if the word is what brought you to life, you will naturally want more of that word. It will be the thing that feeds your inner man, so you get more of it, it strengthens you, and there is this whole process of life that was put into you by the word in the first place.

But there are things that can diminish our desire for the word. This is so helpful when we lack the desire and are weak spiritually. What happened, what's going on? Here is one of the answers: First, you have to *put away* slander and those other things, and then you are ready to take in the word, to long for and grow in it. The point is, there are certain things that diminish the influence of God's life in our soul. When we are giving ourselves over to those other inclinations, which are still there because of the flesh, we find that they can have an overpowering influence on us internally. It's the same reason your mother told you not to spoil your appetite before dinner! If you spend the afternoon eating junk food, you won't be hungry when suppertime comes. Peter says if you feed yourself all this junk food—malice, slander, carnality—you shouldn't wonder why you don't seem to have a desire for God that much. These things take the place of the desires of the new life; before we can really grow and nurture those desires, these other things have to be repented of, taken out of the way. Even in the case of something not inherently wrong, it needs to be put in its place, a secondary role. The attention needs to be on nurturing the desires of our new nature. Here's the main point: I need to understand that part of my identity is my experience of spiritual affections. Who am I in Christ? One of the answers is that I am a person that, because of the new life, has affections for God. Those are huge, and yet they can be neglected, ignored, pushed out of the way by other desires, and I have to nurture them.

We often struggle with our feelings, and sometimes our choices have to come first, while our feelings follow later. Let me just point out that feelings are not exactly the same thing as our affections. They are closely related, and often when our affections are nurtured, our feelings follow. Feelings are superficial; they are variable and are affected by our bodies, circumstances, heat, amount of sleep...that's not really what we are talking about: just a superficial response to circumstances. Any number of things can stimulate feelings from outside our body. Rather, we're talking about something deeper. Jonathan Edwards called the affections "the deeper inclinations of the soul." That is, the more spiritual powerful effects of regeneration in our hearts. Our fundamental loves, our basic values, what we consider important, worthwhile, and worth pursuing. Those are the affections. Sometimes, our feelings go along with our affections and sometimes they don't. My identity is not about my feelings, but it is about the affections I have, put there by the regenerating power of God. If I am going to realize who I am in Christ and it is going to shape my life, I need to know what is happening in my heart and deal with myself on that level. I need to repent when I give in to wrong desire. I need to use the means of grace that God has given to nurture those affections. My identity and my affections are inseparable. It's not just about my objective status before God, but also about my heart; God has favored me with new life and given me these new desires, and part of my new identity is to cultivate those affections.

If the affections are there, then this will follow: the new nature leads to *imitating God* in my actions. We think about the idea of birth, children, parents—children, generally speaking, tend to look like their parents because they share the same genes. There are physical qualities and characteristics that are passed on, and there are similarities. Personality traits and likes/dislikes are also transmitted either by nature itself, the conditioning of the home, etc. We understand the concept that children tend to mirror their parents. Sometimes that's good, and sometimes it's not so good! But that is also the point with regeneration. There is something of family likeness that is going on with this identity issue. God not only

filled me with these desires, but in Scripture He maps out the family likeness toward which I am to be growing by His grace.

To see that, let's go to the Sermon on the Mount: Matthew 5:43-45. I thought salvation was by grace! Now He's telling me, "love your enemies so that you may be sons"? Jesus is not talking about how you get saved; He's talking about this family likeness idea. If you are a son by grace through faith in the work of Christ, the way to show it is to have the same attitude God shows toward His enemies. When there is beautiful, warm sunlight, it doesn't stop at the edge of your property. When a rain shower is needed, it doesn't just hit the homes of the members of our church. This is indiscriminate; God showers rain on everyone whether they are His people or not. Even though He will one day judge His enemies, the reality is that He gives them opportunity, common grace, the truth; extending Himself even toward His enemies. "Be perfect, even as our heavenly Father is perfect." Specifically, in showing this indiscriminate love to people and not hating my enemy. Why would Jesus say that? It sounds impossible; such a high standard.

But why else would God give you His life in your soul? Why else would He take up residence in my body, but to begin reproducing His own perfections in me, including His love? That's the point. Salvation is not just about God writing my name in a book and taking me out of hell. It is about God reworking my affections and through that, my conduct as well. No, it doesn't happen overnight; I still have the flesh and it is a process, but it still remains the goal, the purpose. That those who are truly regenerated and are pursuing something that will be finalized when we see Christ.

By the way, this was not new with Jesus: talking about God as our Father and reproducing a family likeness in us. It had been the point all along, and it goes along with sainthood, holiness. Sinclair Ferguson says this about the Old Testament: "The indicatives and imperatives of the Old Testament relationship are not cold formalities. They have a distinctively familial connotation. They aim at reproducing the family likeness, godliness (or God-likeness) in the people. Just as the heart of the covenantal relationship is 'I will be your God, you will be my people,' or 'I am your Father, you are my son,' so the act of sanctification in the Old Testament is an application of this: I the Lord, your Father, am holy, therefore you, my children, are to express the family likeness and image; you are to be holy too."¹ That's very helpful for context and perspective. Looking at the Old Testament, "Be holy, for I am holy" sounds like God is up in heaven, raining down these commandments and insisting that we be a certain way. But other times, God refers to them as sons and talks about being a Father having compassion on His children. This is not about God dumping things on His people in a harsh, uncompassionate way. He is saying, "I brought you to myself. I brought you out of Egypt. I am Yahweh; I established this unique relationship. You are my sons. Now here is the family likeness." It is not just some kind of abstract, ethical idea out there. This is the character of God being reproduced in His children; that was His intent from the beginning. We, in the New Testament era, have even more understanding and resources to pursue that goal.

I will be "messed up" in my identity if I am not pursuing that goal. If God regenerated me in order to reproduce His character in me, I will be frustrated and out of sync to the degree that that is not the goal that I am pursuing as well. This is why God gave me this regeneration.

¹ Sinclair Ferguson, *Holy Spirit*, 140-141

Third, the new nature engenders *hope*. This idea is that the new life is not just about this era, this dimension, this earth as we know it. There is a future aspect to it as well. For that, please go to I Peter 1:3-9. You see the emphasis on spiritual affections in verse 8: though you have not seen Him, you love Christ. He's the one we anticipate seeing in the future. God is not going to abandon a spiritual life that He has created; He is not going to walk out of a house that He has ordained for His dwelling. He will not take away the life He has placed within you. In fact, this is just the beginning, and the end is our inheritance—which is forever, unfading, which no one can take away or corrupt. That is reserved for us, and we have in our heart already the beginnings of it, the down payment as Paul puts it. The new life in us, in addition to causing us to nurture our affections and imitate God, keeps us moving forward because we know this is not the end of the story. Life is out there in the recreated earth that God has prepared for us. The new life is like a magnet that pulls us toward that. That hope has the power to sustain you in whatever trials you may face as a Christian.

This new birth is something to treasure and nurture. Next week we'll talk about adoption, and to get us ready for that and to apply some of what we've seen today, I want to read a little more from J.I. Packer. Listen to what he says when he goes on to talk about adoption: "Adoption is the highest privilege that the gospel offers—higher even than justification." That could be a little troubling, given that justification is so much at the heart of the gospel. Packer explains that adoption is higher because of the richer relationship that it involves. "Justification is a forensic idea conceived in terms of law and viewing God as Judge. In justification, God declares of penitent believers that they are not and never will be liable to the death that their sins deserve because Jesus Christ, their substitute and sacrifice, tasted death in their place on the cross. This free gift of acquittal and peace, won for us at the cost of Calvary, is wonderful enough in all conscience. But justification does not, of itself, imply any intimate or deep relationship with God, the Judge."

Here is an illustration that has been helpful to me: Justification would be like a judge wiping a criminal's record off the books. But at that point, the judge would never again have any contact with the individual. With these other truths of sonship, after the Judge declares us righteous and free from condemnation, He says, "Now I want you to be a member of my family. One way I will do that is giving you my own life in your soul. Another way is to legally adopt you." Now we get, hopefully, a better sense of our identity. It is this warm, intimate, familial relationship that this all has been working to restore. Packer goes on to say about adoption: "In contrast to justification, it is a *family* idea, conceived in terms of love and viewing God as a Father. In adoption, God takes us into His family and fellowship. He establishes us as His children and heirs. Closeness, affection, generosity are at the heart of the relationship. To be right with God, the Judge is a great thing, but to be loved and cared for by God the Father is a greater thing."

As we apply what we have already seen about sonship through regeneration, let me leave you with this final thought, again from Packer: "Do I, as a Christian, understand myself? Do I know my real identity, my own real destiny? I am a child of God. God is my Father. Heaven is my home. Every day is one day nearer. My Savior is my Brother; every Christian is my brother too." And then, regarding sonship, he says, "Say it over and over to yourself. First thing in the morning, last thing at night, as you wait for the bus, any time your mind is free, and ask that you may be enabled to live as one who knows it is all utterly and completely true."² Let me just put it this way: we just finished a week. Did you think, even

² J. I. Packer, *Knowing God*, 206-207

once, "God is my Father; I am a child of God"? It's not because I'm so great; it is a gift, and not everybody is in that category. God is so committed to be my Father that He has taken up residence within me and imparted to me His own nature. He has made promises to me about my inheritance and legally adopted me. How much have these truths been at the forefront of our minds, and how much difference would it make if they were? In relationship to us seeking joy in other things instead of that privileged connection with God; in relation to our own frame of mind, how can you go around downcast, overwhelmed, or anxious? The God of heaven is my Father! May the Lord help us live in the awareness of that truth.