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Your Spiritual Identity

I'd like us to think this morning about our spiritual identity – who are we? Who are we collectively as a church and who are you as an individual? What is it that is the hallmark of our identity? What makes us who we are and what differentiates us? It's very easy for the mainstream Christian church today to simply say "Jesus" and move on to the next question. Of course I have no problems with this answer but is there any depth behind this answer? Is there any depth of understanding and reality behind the fact that "Jesus" marks our spiritual identity or is it simply checking off a box on a demographic survey? Our passage this morning has a lot to say about who we are truly in Christ. Let's trace through this passage and see how Peter describes who his audience really is. We're going to see a long list of descriptions that describe who we are. And finally, we will talk about what the implications of that should be in our everyday lives.

Read I Peter 2:1-12

So put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander. 2 Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up to salvation- 3 if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good. 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. 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." 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. 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. 11 Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. 12 Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.

Of course we are starting mid-letter, and verse 1 begins with a "so" or a "therefore" depending on your translation. So we have to briefly look back to the end of chapter 1 to understand the context of Peter's command to put away these sins. Look back to verse 23 of Chapter 1 – "you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God". Now obviously

there is a whole sermon just in this verse – but let’s use this description to frame all that comes in Chapter 2. The absolute clear distinguishing factor that will identify God’s people is that they have been born again. We have been radically and unalterably changed. And we have been born again by the imperishable [un-changing, always effective, never fading] Word of God. This immediately brings to mind Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus where he tells him in John 3, without exception: “unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of heaven”. Of course the fact that that a new birth is required is evidence of who we used to be - that we needed to be born again - that we needed to be radically and unalterably changed. We cannot enter the kingdom of heaven unless we become new creatures because the old creatures that we used to be are dead in trespasses and sins as Ephesians 2 tells us. We have a desperate need to be changed – not to be slightly improved or to form better habits or to improve on our imperfections but to be absolutely, fundamentally, profoundly reborn and made new. This is a fundamental difference in our Christian identity than every other religion in the world – we are not in need of following some steps to improve ourselves morally – we are in need of being changed completely by a Sovereign, gracious God.

So that is why verse 1 in chapter 2 starts with “so” or “therefore”. You have been fundamentally reborn – so put away these sins that Peter lists here: malice, deceit, hypocrisy, envy and slander. We’ll come back to this instruction as we talk about implications of our identity a little later. Peter goes on in these verses to give a much fuller description of our identity than simply saying we have been born again. We move on to verse 2 and see that Peter says we are now to be “like newborn infants” longing for the pure spiritual milk. Now what does he mean by this? In what way should we be like newborn infants? At first glance this may sound like a description of immaturity, making us think even of the scolding in Hebrews 5 that says “everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness since he is a child”. It says in Hebrews that we should move on to solid food. To be clear I don’t think we should connect these two passages as they are simply separate illustrations. Peter is using milk here as an illustration that anyone who has been around a hungry infant can easily understand. You don’t have to teach a newborn infant to want milk when they are hungry. They instinctively want it – and they will let you know when they don’t get it! Why is that? Two reasons come to mind; first, they were born that way. They instinctively want milk because their bodies were made that way. Milk is what sustains them, it is what nourishes them, and they want it whether they consciously realize any of this or not. In fact, if they don’t get milk, they will die! It is absolutely essential for life and so their bodies were made to want and long for exactly what is essential for life. Similarly when we are born again, we are born in a way that makes us long for the true Spiritual milk of God’s word. Our new instinct, our new desire is to want more of Him. Yes, we may experience times when we feel this desire more than others but the reality is we have this new desire when before there was absolutely no desire for the things of God.

The second reason that newborns want milk is because they have tasted it. Once they have tasted it they know what they want more of. They are not satisfied with one drink but long for it again and again to be re-nourished. This should be the same for the Christian identity – as verse 3 says “if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good”. Everyone that is born again has tasted and seen that the Lord is God. We have experienced him, we have partaken of Him. This experience is effective in changing us but it is

not singular – we want more. We are reborn to not be satisfied with that experience but to long for deeper and more nourishment in Christ.

The next identifying statement Peter makes in verse 4 is the statement “as you come to him”. We are people that come to Christ. Now to be clear, this coming is not of our own will and volition – this is where context is so important. We are talking first about those who have been reborn. But if we have been reborn then we will be people that come to Him. He changes our nature, he changes our desires and then we come to Him. The analogy of children I think again illustrates this well: when children are scared or need something, they come to their parents. They identify with them, find security in them and find love and comfort in them. That of course doesn’t mean that they are self-sufficient and by their own will they choose their parents or that they decide to find comfort or love or security there. They were born to their parents and therefore the relationship is established. Similarly when the Spirit gives us new birth we are now children that find comfort, love, security in God and “come to Him”.

Verse 4 also makes a very interesting statement about who Jesus is. This of course is a very important thing to consider about our identity is what is Jesus’ identity? If we identify with him, who is He? Again this is a topic worthy of 1,000 sermons but we will make a few observations about what this text says. If you look back to verse 3 you see who the “him” in the opening clause of verse 4 refers to – it points back to the LORD or Yahweh. But the clause following “him” in verse 4 also makes clear that “him” refers to Jesus. He was the living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious”. So “him” refers both to Yahweh and to Jesus. This is a significant Christological statement – effectively demonstrating that what is true of Yahweh is also true of Jesus Christ. We see here also key indications of who Jesus is. He is called the “living stone”, first referring to his resurrection. Later in verse 7, Peter quotes Psalm 118:22 “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone”. Peter makes this connection explicit in Acts 4:10-11: “let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead—by him this man is standing before you well. 11 This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone.” This makes us think as well back to another place Psalm 118 is cited, to the parable of the tenants in Matthew 21. The tenants kill the vineyard owner’s servants until finally he sends the son in hopes they will respect him. Finally the tenants kill the son in order to inherit the vineyard and gain the inheritance. But that is not the end of the story – as the Psalm says the stone that the builders rejected has now become the cornerstone. Jesus was rejected in many ways by the Jews and Pharisees. As John 1 says “he came to his own, and his own people did not receive him”. Jesus was largely rejected by them in his ministry and the culmination of his rejection came when he was crucified on the cross. The death of the Son was not the end – instead it made Jesus, the slain Son, the foundation on which God would build his church. He was resurrected to be the “living stone” and made the cornerstone – the most important stone in the building that sets the direction by which all other stones will be laid in place. This is not the capstone in the top of a building or a keystone in the top of an arch but instead is referring to the foundation – upon which everything else in the building is built and upon which those who are not believers stumble and fall.

It also says in verse 4 and then again in verse 6 (which quotes Isaiah 28:16), that He is a “chosen and precious” stone. In God’s eyes, Jesus was not rejected but instead was chosen and precious and

honored. In the Acts 4 passage it seems that the rejection of Jesus as the cornerstone was fulfilled in his death, whereas his being honored and vindicated by God was exemplified in his resurrection. The description of Jesus being chosen is also an interesting word choice – I think it speaks to God’s absolute sovereignty in salvation. It points to His sovereign will, dictating that before the foundation of the world, Jesus would be the Lamb slain on behalf of His elect – of His chosen people. This is an intentional, purposeful choice that God has chosen his honored, precious Son to be rejected and crucified on our behalf.

We come to verse 5 and return to see a very interesting description of who we are. Peter says we are “like living stones, being built up as a spiritual house”. Just as Jesus is the cornerstone so we are stones that are built on that cornerstone built up as a spiritual house. What does it mean for us to be “living stones”? Just as Jesus is called the “living” stone because of his resurrection we also await our resurrection. Because we have been born again, we are no longer dead in sin but have been made alive, we have been given new life.

Nowhere else in the New Testament are believers called “living stones” but we are referred to in several other places as God’s house or temple. As many things in the Old Testament are, the temple was a symbol of some new reality to come. We are the new temple – God dwells in and among us. The church is God’s new temple – the Spirit indwells us and God lives among us. The order of the phrases here may sound like the house is being built, but I think the more correct way to understand this is that we as individuals are being built up. The ordering of these phrases in verse 5 may be more correctly worded as “we, as living stones, as a spiritual house, are being built up”.

And what are we being built up for? As living stones, Peter also says in verse 5 we are built up to be “a holy priesthood”. So it seems that believers are being built up to be both the temple and also the priests that minister in the temple. In the Old Testament the role of a priest was limited to the tribe of Levi –they alone could serve as God’s priests. But the focus here is on the church corporately as God’s set-apart priesthood in which all believers can function as priests. What does that mean that all believers are priests? The most important thing that it means is we all have direct access to God by virtue of the cross of Christ. We don’t need another intermediary – our one mediator, our one intercessor is Jesus and as we saw earlier He is God!

There is another function of priests as well that Peter makes clear here in verse 5 – to offer spiritual sacrifices. In the Old Testament, the Levitical priests offered physical animal sacrifices. We know that Jesus’ sacrifice was sufficient to forgive sins, no other sacrifice was necessary. As Hebrews 9(24-26) tells us: “Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf. 25 Nor was it to offer himself repeatedly, as the high priest enters the holy places every year with blood not his own, 26 for then he would have had to suffer repeatedly since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself”. So what is the parallel to the spiritual sacrifices mentioned here? If we look to the parallel verse, verse 9, it says that we are a royal priesthood “that we may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light”. So we can say that one of the spiritual sacrifices or in other words sacrifices enabled

by the Spirit – is to proclaim God’s excellencies, to proclaim the goodness of God. But I don’t think what Peter has in mind is only proclaiming God’s goodness, as pleasing as that is to Him. If we read Hebrews 13:15-16, which says “Through him [Jesus] then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name” (so far seems to again be praises or proclamations of his goodness but verse 16 adds to it) “Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.” Verse 16 broadens the idea of sacrifices pleasing to God to “doing good”. Connecting verse 16 with the start of verse 15, I think the broadest way to describe spiritual sacrifices is “doing good through Jesus Christ”. That sounds a lot like Ephesians 2:10, “that we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them”. So we are a priesthood of believers, a common group of priests, created to magnify, worship and proclaim the goodness of God in doing good through Christ Jesus and enabled by the Holy Spirit.

Verses 6 and 7, which we referenced indirectly earlier, also contain a description of those that are born again: it addresses “you who believe” and “whoever believes in him”. The idea here is very parallel to the earlier description of those who “come to him”. Just as those who come, come because their nature has been changed and they now want to come – so it is with belief. They have not suddenly decided to believe something different than the day before on a whim – they believe because the gift of faith, the gift of belief has been given to them. What Peter is emphasizing here in these verses is that whoever believes in him will not be put to shame. Just as Christ, the living cornerstone was honored and vindicated by God at His resurrection, so those who believe will be unashamed and vindicated on the last day. Conversely, those who reject Christ and do not believe, those who stumble on the cornerstone or are offended by the “rock of offense” in verse 8, will be shamed and ultimately cast out and punished on the last day. And verse 8 explains this thought “they stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do”. Just as we were elected to believe, were chosen by God to be born again, so those who disobey the word and do not believe has been destined to that end as well. And this is both God’s sovereign choice and also their responsibility as verse 8 says, because “they disobey the word”. The fault still lies with man despite God’s sovereign choice.

In verses 9 and 10, Peter continues to list other identifiers of who we are: a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, God’s people. Instead of going through these one at a time, I’d like to think about these collectively. If you look at all of these descriptions, they are all plural – they all refer to believers or the church collectively. We are a race, a priesthood, a nation, a people. We all have our own earthly race, nation and people group we belong to but this new identity as God’s people as his new race is much more important. Again the idea of God’s election comes through here very strongly – He has called out and selected a group of people to name as His. He has put his stamp on us, He has purchased us with His blood – as verse 9 says we are “a people for His own possession”. We belong to Him. This is not a “sign a card”, cheap grace version of Christianity – we are His and He owns us. We are His people, a royal priesthood that is royal because we serve one King – King Jesus.

These terms referring to us collectively should also highlight the centrality and importance of the church. God will judge each of us individually but until then He has called us into a corporate body for

all the same benefits and reasons that social groups like nations or peoples form. We have common heritage (born of the Father, brothers of Jesus), common language (the Word), a common story (the Gospel). And because we have all of this in common, we can be strengthened and encouraged and held accountable and helped by each other. We can utilize our collective gifts rather than just our individual talents. There are so many more benefits of this collective that I believe Peter has in mind here when calling to mind these other societal concepts.

There is one other description of those who are born again at the end of verse 10 that I do not want to miss: those who “have received mercy”. Let us never forget that above all else, we are a people who have received mercy. We are the recipients of God’s compassionate merciful love. Despite being haters of God, his enemies that would kill him if we could so that we could take the vineyard and claim the inheritance, He had mercy on us. Jesus took our sin, paid the price on the cross and gave us exactly what we did not deserve – new life in Him, adopted as His children. As verse 9 says, he has “called you out of darkness into his marvelous light”. And as John 1 says “the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it”. God’s sovereign grace has caused the light of His word to shine in His people and called them out of the darkness of this world.

The last description of our spiritual identity we see in verse 11 – Peter says we are sojourners and exiles. This language reminds us of Abraham, who says in Genesis 23:4 that he is a “sojourner and foreigner among you”. The description now in verse 11 shifts to describing believers’ relationship with the world. And the real point Peter is making is: how comfortable are we with the world? How at home are we in this world? Because the reality is we are strangers and exiles here. We were not made for this world. We were made for something far greater – we were reborn to experience something far better, and that is eternal communion with the God of the universe! And as we switch into looking at the points of application we can take from this passage, we can see from the end of verse 11 why this point matters. We can see why it matters whether we are comfortable really matters – because the reality of this world and the worldly passions it encourages are that these “passions of the flesh” are waging war against your soul. Would you be comfortable with someone living with you that you knew was trying to kill you at every chance he got? This is another hallmark of our identity – we are being attacked! Do you feel like that this morning? Or have you grown comfortable and complacent with your place in this world? Are you aware of the sins that are waging war against you? Are you actively fighting to resist and defeat these sins with every ounce of your strength? We know that God is sovereign and our security rests in Him, but that does not mean we “let go and let God” and become passive bystanders. It means our confidence lies in Him but He has also put his Spirit in us to fight against sin. Peter is not exaggerating when he is using this analogy of war – this is a fight to the death that we are to struggle against for the rest of our days on this earth. As Owen says in Mortification of Sin: “be killing sin or it will be killing you”.

Application

With the time we have remaining, I’d like to turn to the other implications Peter gives us for how these marks of our identity should change our daily lives. How does Peter exhort us to live as a result of who God has made us to be?

The first imperative we see in this passage starts in verse 1 - that we are to “put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander.” With the context of the rest of the passage we just discussed I think we can say that these sins are in stark contrast to the communal descriptions that Peter uses – a race, a nation, a people. All of these descriptions talk about believers collectively, and as a community of believers. These sins are things that kill community. These are “one another” sins that hurt our community because they hurt our brotherly love that we are commanded to exhibit back in I Peter chapter 1. In verse 22 we read, “Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart, since you have been born again”. Peter is directly connecting our spiritual identity with what should naturally flow from that identity – brotherly love. And of course the converse is also true – if this is who we are, and all of these descriptions mark our spiritual identity and truly tell who we really are, then these sins that hinder love among the body, should have no part in us. We should strive to put away these sins that stop us from loving our brother and showing the world the true community that should and does exist in the church.

The second command we see Peter give us is one we’ve already discussed – we are to long for the pure spiritual milk. We talked about this already as one of the identifying marks of a Christian – we now have a longing and desire for the milk of the pure spiritual milk of the Word of God. As this is a mark of our identity, I also believe this is an exhortation and reminder to us. We are to be people that long for the Word – that are not satisfied without it. This means that we demand to hear sound preaching collectively, we long to hear sound doctrine taught and not just what tickles our ears. Individually we must be people of the Word – again people that are not otherwise satisfied. This takes discipline – time spent reading the Word, meditating on the Word, memorizing the Word. How else can we say that our identity is with those that long for the pure spiritual milk of the Word if we do not open our Bibles and drink from it daily?

And finally, we return to verses 11 and 12 to see the exhortation Peter give us there. Peter gives us two imperatives, to “abstain from the passions of the flesh” and to “keep your conduct honorable”. These are similar ideas but Peter mentions two goals in mind. We have already talked about the first – we are to abstain from the passions of the flesh because they are waging war against your soul. I urge you this morning – if you do not know that you are in a war, if that’s not part of your everyday mentality, of who you are – you need to stop and look around. If you are born again, that is exactly the circumstance you are in. In some parts of the world or times in history, you could be born into an environment of war, into circumstances where that is all you knew. You don’t have to tell those people to be aware of the war around them; they see it everyday. We should have the same awareness of the war going on in us. The flesh that remains in you on this earth is waging war against your new spiritual nature. Fight against it. Seek the Lord for strength to continue fighting. Seek the Lord’s protection from the enemies that wage war against you.

Verse 12 continues this thought but gives an additional purpose for this thought. We are to abstain from fleshly passions and keep our conduct honorable because others are watching. God has made us a people and race and nation and those that are not members of this group are watching us. We are a witness to the spiritual Gentiles, the spiritual foreigners, around us – and when they speak against us, not if but when, keep your conduct pure so that they may “glorify God on the day of visitation”.

Scholars have debated what is meant here by this “glorifying of God on the day of visitation”. What I believe Peter is saying here can be stated very simply – who glorifies God on the day when they see Him? Only those who love Him, only those who are His. What I believe Peter has in mind here is that our conduct is an example to Gentiles that they will see our conduct, see the authenticity of the change that God has brought about in us, and ultimately be saved as a result. God will use the witness of our “honorable conduct” as a means to make others those who will one day glorify God. He uses the witness of His people to make more peoples of the earth His people.

I will close with one final question – what is your spiritual identity? Have you been born again? If the answer is no, I urge you to call upon the Lord in the day which He will be found. If you have been born again, I pray that this Word this morning has encouraged you with all the Lord has declared you to be – His people, His nation, His royal priesthood, and that we will be spurred on to seeking Him more fully.