

Our Identity

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When you meet someone for the first time, what are some things that person might say about themselves? Most often they say their name, where they're from, or what they do for a calling. Did you ever wonder why people choose that information? Similarly, did you ever notice that if you criticize some people's work, they get very sensitive about that and very defensive? Or perhaps if you say something about their family or church, maybe then they would get sensitive or defensive or even offended? Why is that?

When you get right down to it, people say what they say about themselves and are sensitive about some things and not others because these are issues involving identity—and one's identity is a very important matter. Identity is a critical topic to consider as it tends to have a much greater effect on us—on our attitude and how we process life—than we might realize.

Our identity will be the focus of our consideration. Let us pray to the Lord not only for understanding about this, but also for a right application of this tremendously important matter in our life. The texts we will focus on are Romans 7:17, 20 where Paul writes, "It is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me."

We've often heard that we should live our lives according to Scripture; we are to live to the honor and glory of God. How do we really do that? How do we go from reading our Bibles—the histories, the Psalms, the Gospels, the letters, the wisdom books—to actually weaving it into decisions we make, attitudes we have, and words we

speak? Or to put it more simply still, how do we go from the world of Scripture to the everyday lives we actually live? How does the history of Samson relate to my situation today? What about the letters to the seven churches in Revelation? And how do I connect the Proverbs I'm reading with decisions I need to make in my family, in my business, or in my studies? Most Christians have a difficult time doing this, except perhaps for the most obvious commands and prohibitions.

As important as such questions are, there is one matter we need to consider first. We don't undertake a task before discovering what we have at our disposal that would enable or assist us in doing that task. So before we consider how to go about translating Scripture into holy living, it would be good to start by seeing what God has given us to work with and how He has equipped us to actually do this important work called holiness. He has given us His Word to guide us, but He has given us so much more. It is important to know what this provision includes in order to be motivated and encouraged to pursue godliness with our whole heart. We will undertake this chiefly by taking a good hard look at our identity.

Who We Were

Perhaps someone reading this might look at this first point and think, "Not this again! Haven't we heard so much about what we were—the misery, the sin, the depravity—I am more than ready to hear about holy living." Though I understand and sympathize with this sentiment, we need to remind ourselves that God Himself contrasts what we were before He lavishes upon us the encouragements of what we are now through His grace.

Who were we, beloved? This question is not about demographics—ethnicity, place of origin, or upbringing. Instead, God's Word speaks plainly and clearly about who

we were before His grace and Spirit began to work in our lives. You are familiar, no doubt, with the descriptions. No one, of themselves, does good (Ps. 53:3; Rom. 3:12). We go astray as soon as we are born (Ps. 58:3). Every imagination of the thoughts of our hearts is only evil continually (Gen. 6:5). “All we like sheep have gone astray” (Isa. 53:6). “We all had our conversation in times past in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind; and were by nature the children of wrath, even as others” (Eph. 2:3). “The carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be” (Rom. 8:7). “Dead in trespasses and sins” (Eph. 2:1). Let this suffice. The description is thorough, it is deadily accurate, and regardless of how we see ourselves or others, God is telling us in clear terms how He sees us and all mankind through His perfect eyes. This isn’t to say that some of us couldn’t have been God-fearing already in our youth or when we were young. But if that was indeed the case, it was only because that’s when God’s grace met with us.

Now this last statement is a bit of a problem for a great many people. From all appearances, there are lots of good people. Look at charitable contributions, people helping people in all kinds of ways. We all know very nice people who may not even be very religious. So how, many ask, can we possibly believe in total depravity? They would admit some people do evil things sometimes, some a lot more than others—but is everyone totally depraved? Are things as bad as that? They don’t appear so—and that is just the problem.

We may often evaluate what’s going around us as opposed to what God says is going on around us. The challenge with this comparison, of course, is that we don’t have Bibles in front of our eyes each moment. So what we see and feel sways our thinking, If we’re not interacting

much with God and His Word, we will start to question such truths as man's depravity. No wonder the Psalmist wrote, "Thy word have I hid in mine heart that I might not sin against thee" (Ps. 119:11). Daily interaction with God's Word informs our mind and helps us process the onslaught of our senses.

Who teaches toddlers to misbehave or say "no" or throw a tantrum? Do they need training or an example for that? No, they'll do these things all by themselves when their little wills are crossed. If mankind is evolving, as so many claim, why is it that people worldwide are not treating each other better over time? Why can't we seem to learn from the sins and mistakes of generations? Why are there not fewer wars? Less persecution? Is good breaking out all over? Nations coming together in lasting peace? Scripture says God's grace is the only answer to the depravity of man. Only when He intervenes in hearts and minds do swords get beat into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks.

Let us go with the obvious—that the God of heaven and earth, the living God, the Creator of all, the One who governs all, the One who knows all things, sees all things, including all hearts all motives, who is everywhere—He has the perfectly accurate perspective on what man really is apart from His grace. Depravity must not be measured or quantified in a relativistic ways. God's standards, those that reflect His blessed image, are those against which all must be measured.

Just as the ground is frozen in the heart of winter, so the heart of man is to that which is truly good. What appears good to us often seems so because we have never seen perfection (except in God), so all our comparisons are relative. Additionally, we only see the activity, hear the words—we don't see or know the motives or intents like God does. Finally, we've become so accustomed to

sin that the norm for what is good in our eyes tends to deteriorate over time. For example, consider moral norms today with those of twenty-five or fifty years ago. I am not suggesting that former times were the “good old days”; each era had its besetting, reigning sins. What I am suggesting is the threshold of what is considered wrong tends to deteriorate with the passage of time, especially when a culture rejects God and His Word more persistently and blatantly—unless revival interrupts that tendency.

So we have considered, briefly, who we are apart from the grace and mercy of God. For some of us, blessed be God, it is what we were. One of the saddest things I notice is the truly godly, those whom God has changed, tend to think of themselves more in terms of what they were. On the other hand, those who have not really changed tend to think that they’re really not all that bad and are not too concerned about depravity and related matters. But we are not the judge; God is. We will not hold God to account, but He will hold us.

Let these considerations suffice. Man’s natural condition is very bleak despite appearances to the contrary.

Who We Are

Based on experience, my guess is the first point is pretty familiar territory for most of us, theologically. If anything, we’ve heard more than enough about the misery of man. But what we’re about to consider is less familiar and lived out by fewer still. As we turn to the chapter from which we read, Romans 7, we see Paul beginning with a discussion about the law of God. As fascinating and instructive as that is, a careful consideration of that passage would take up more time than we presently have. But in verse 4, God points out through Paul that our relationship to His law changes when we become believers, as does our relationship to God because of what Jesus Christ has done for

us. Verse speaks about what we were before that change. The law shows us our sin, pointing out to us how we should be living, convicting us that we're not living that way. That is a painful and often prolonged experience. Verse 6 speaks of our deliverance from the condemnation of the law so that we might serve our God and those around us in newness of spirit.

Then, beginning with verse 14, we have what is perhaps the most well-known part of the chapter. From that verse through to verse 24, Paul gives us a detailed, intimate look at his own personal struggle with indwelling sin. Many a saint has taken comfort from this heart-level confession because we can so identify with that struggle ourselves. The language is honest and powerful: he does what he hates to do, and the good that he wanted to do he finds himself not doing. In verse 24, he exclaims that this warfare makes him feel wretched, longing, asking when and how he would be delivered from all of this. Then follows the beautiful, God-glorifying answer to that question in verse 25: "I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord." The words, however, that are so often overlooked are found in the words of our twin texts—verses 17 and 20, "Now then it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me."

Is Paul excusing his wrongdoing? It almost sounds as if he had no choice or that it really wasn't him. But what Paul is saying here and in verse 20 couldn't be more important, beloved! When he writes, "It is no more I that do it but sin that dwelleth in me," he is stating something profoundly encouraging about the Christian identity. This is true about every believer, weak or strong, new or experienced. But to really grasp this principle, we should start somewhere else first.

In 2 Corinthians 5:17 we read, "Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed

away; behold, all things are become new.” We have heard that being born again a renewal, but Scripture speaks in much stronger terms than this. Second Corinthians 5 speaks of a new creature or new creation. “Old things are passed away; all things are become new.” When the Lord works in our life with His grace and Spirit, He not only gives us spiritual life, not only forgives our sins through faith in Christ, but He also changes us in demonstrable ways. This is significant! Notice that in verses 18–20 of Romans 7, Paul contrasts what he calls flesh with his new identity. He no longer considers himself flesh; this is no longer his identity. He no longer is the old man. He is also not some hybrid of old and new man. Instead, “[i]t is *not* I but sin that dwelleth in me.” This is what John writes about in 1 John 3:9: “Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin.”

So what then was Paul struggling against in Romans 7? He describes it in different epistles as the “old man,” “the flesh,” “the body of sin.” Yet Paul does not identify himself by any of these. Rightly understood, these are remnants of the former life of the believer, a life that was crucified when Christ died on the cross. “Knowing this, that our old man is crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin” (Rom. 6:6). These are aspects of a lifestyle that the new man, the new woman, is to put off. “That ye put off concerning the former conversation [lifestyle] the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts” (Eph. 4:22). Dear believer, you are not the person you once were. You must not identify yourself nor think of yourself in that way anymore. That is no longer you. Let’s pause a moment to explore this principle even further.

When we are born again, the faculties which had been corrupted by the Fall and by our own sins are renewed in a most wonderful way. Describing this new man in

Ephesians 4:24, Paul writes, “Put on the new man, which after God (i.e. after God’s image) is created in righteousness and true holiness.” In Colossians 3:10, we read, “And have put on the new man which is renewed in knowledge after the image of Him that created him,” again meaning after God’s image. Think of it, beloved: recreated in righteous, true holiness, renewed in knowledge—what a wonder this is!

Adam and Eve had righteousness, true holiness, an unfallen and true knowledge, an unrestricted walk with God, and vision for the glory of God in everything in creation. We lost all of that and were left with tattered remnants of what we once were. But see what God has wrought, beloved, through Christ Jesus and the wondrous work of the Holy Spirit! We are recreated after God’s image again by His grace. We are once again made holy, consecrated to the glory of God, to His service, and to the service of others. We are once again set apart by Him for Him! We are again made righteous—not only made right with God through the life and death of Jesus Christ, but by His grace we begin to live righteously. We live now with a deep desire to keep all of God’s revealed will. We are once again renewed in knowledge so that we see life and the world around us clearly, even as He describes them in His Word. We begin to receive knowledge of those things which are most needful and delightful, things to which we are blind by nature.

In terms of this new man is how Paul the believer identifies himself. Our forefathers wrote of this new man in the very same way. Consider this excerpt from Head 3–4, Art. 11 of the Canons of Dort:

But when God accomplishes His good pleasure in the elect or works in them true conversion, He not only causes the gospel to be externally preached to them and powerfully illuminates their mind by His Holy Spirit, that they may rightly understand and discern the things

of the Spirit of God; but by the efficacy of the same regenerating Spirit, pervades the inmost recesses of the man; He opens the closed, and softens the hardened heart, and circumcises that which was uncircumcised, infuses new qualities into the will, which though heretofore dead, He quickens; from being evil, disobedient, and refractory, He renders it good, obedient, and pliable; actuates and strengthens it, that like a good tree, it may bring forth the fruits of good actions.

Art. 12 continues in the same vein:

And this is the regeneration so highly celebrated in Scripture and denominated a new creation: a resurrection from the dead, a making alive, which God works in us without our aid.... Whereupon the will thus renewed is not only actuated and influenced by God, but in consequence of this influence, becomes itself active. Wherefore also, man is himself rightly said to believe and repent, by virtue of that grace received.

Such descriptions are good news indeed for sinners so fallen as we all are by nature! And this description is you, beloved, if you sorrow because you see the ugliness of your sins and how they offend God, and if you turn with desire and need to the only Savior Jesus Christ, leaning all the weight of your sin upon Him, trusting in Him alone. It is not necessary to identify the moment of regeneration. We look elsewhere for our confidence, even to the Savior, Jesus Christ. He is all our hope and salvation.

“It is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me.” Even though Paul embraced this blessed identity, it did not prevent him from lamenting, in this very same passage, over remaining sin that clung to him. This will be our experience as well, beloved, if we’ve truly become a new creation by the grace of God. We face a lifelong battle, punctuated by His commands for us to “[m]ortify, therefore your members which are upon the earth; fornication, uncleanness, inordinate affection, evil concupiscence and

covetousness which is idolatry” (Col. 3:5). “[A]s strangers and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul” (1 Peter 2:11). “Put off concerning the former conversation the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts” (Eph. 4:22). We are in a war and we need all our wits about us, every ounce of strength devoted to the King and His kingdom, even as we pursue our daily callings.

With all of this in view, it is important that we keep in mind two cautions.

First, because the Lord endowed us with such gifts and graces and has empowered us to be the sons of God (John 1:12), He fully expects us to use these renewed faculties for His glory, for the putting off of any sinful patterns from the past, for the putting on of Christ in each aspect of our daily walk with God, and to battle hard against temptation.

The second important reminder is that, despite the wonderful changes God produces in us, we still need Jesus Christ every day in order to walk in a Christ-like manner. John 15:5 is still as true today as it was day Jesus spoke it. “I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing.” God’s firm and unwavering determination is that His Son should receive all glory, not only for our salvation, but also for our sanctification as well. He does not regenerate us, forgive us, wash us from our sins, make us new creatures with renewed faculties, and then let us work the rest of our Christian life out ourselves. No, beloved, we are to abide in Christ. We are to walk with Him in prayer, commune with Him through daily interaction with the Scriptures, call upon Him at each twist and turn in our daily life situations, look to Him for strength, call out to Him for wisdom, cling to Him when we’re struggling, rejoice in Him for who He is for us

and how He loves us still. And the present life with Him is just the beginning. “If God be for us, who can be against us? He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?... Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?... In all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us” (vv. 31–32, 35, 37).

Our identity is secure. It is not based on our work, on our performance, on our holiness. Our identity is Him, Jesus Christ. Our identity is firmly rooted in His love, in His grace, in what He has done and not in ourselves. “For to me to live is Christ” (Phil. 1:21). “I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” “He hath made us kings and priests unto God and his Father” (Rev. 1:6, 5:10).

Seeing we have this confidence from Him, how then should we live unto Him? To start with, let us not live as defeated slaves of sin and evil. Yes, we do fail. We do sometimes groan over our remaining sins. But let us stop identifying ourselves as failures, as sinners. “It is not I, but sin that dwelleth in me!” As believers, we are not fighting with ourselves; we are fighting against our former self, the remnants of what we once were. We are laboring, warring against the slowly-dying patterns of life that once held us fast in the chains of spiritual death. But no more! “Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid. How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein?... Our old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin” (Rom. 6:1, 6). We are royalty, beloved. Let us live as such. We are servants and handmaidens of the most high God; Let us serve Him as such. Let us, with His help, put on the armor that He has given us in His Son,

employing to the full every renewed faculty with which He endowed us, looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith! "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works" (Eph. 2:10).

If you are not looking to, leaning upon, crying out to, and trusting in Christ; if you do not sorrow over your sins, repenting over them to God; then you are missing so very, very much! Repent of your deplorable state, your desire after sin, your prevailing slothfulness regarding spiritual matters, your neglect of so great a salvation and so great a sanctification as this! Will you not know these things for yourself, but instead cling to the weak and beggarly elements of this world and the paltry little it offers? Come away to the side of the King and quit the service of the evil one! Taste and see that the Lord is good and know what it feels like to have the newness of spiritual life coursing through your veins! In the multitude of subjects is the King's honor; will you not be one? If not, you will certainly know His just wrath and wish to all eternity that you had never heard the gospel or, for that matter, this message.

Let us conclude with these words from Psalm 37: "Trust in the LORD, and do good; so shalt thou dwell in the land, and verily thou shalt be fed. Delight thyself also in the LORD; and he shall give thee the desires of thine heart. And he shall bring forth thy righteousness as the light, and thy judgment as the noonday. Rest in the LORD, and wait patiently for him," for Christ's sake.