



1 Peter 2:9-12 - <sup>9</sup> But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. <sup>10</sup> Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. <sup>11</sup> Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. <sup>12</sup> Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.

## *My Identity*



*How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! (1 John 3:1)*

Who am I? Have you ever found yourself questioning your identity? “Who am I?” Maybe it was when you were a kid and you walked into the living room and your brothers and sisters pretended like you were a stranger and they didn’t know you. It freaked you out. You’d call them all by name, recount memories with each of them, beg and plead for even the glint of a smile to let you know they were kidding and you weren’t crazy. But they’d respond, “How’d you get into our house? Who are you?!” The longer they carried on the ruse, the more you started to question your identity. Or maybe your brothers and sisters were nicer than that ☺. Who am I? In a world where “identity” has become purely a subjective choice – all about me, what I do, what I think, what I feel – in a world like that, it might come as a surprise to hear that your true identity has nothing to do with you. Sure, you’ve got a name, a social security card, a license, maybe even a trophy with your name etched on it. But do any of those things truly define you? Are any of those things your *identity*?

So, the natural question to ask is, What defines me? Who am I? Does my past define me – my failures and shortcomings? Do my present circumstances define me? What’s my identity? What defines me? Better to ask, “Who defines me?” My Savior defines me. I’ve been called out of darkness and into the wonderful light of his grace and forgiveness – never again to go back and revel in the darkness. Remember who you are in Christ and listen to what he says you are in today’s gospel lesson – You are salt, a preservative for a decaying world. You are light – a beacon of God’s light of love in a pitch black world. And that God-given identity makes you different from the world around you. Knowing who you are as a child of God makes all the difference in the world.

But sometimes the wires get crossed. One way that happens is when God’s people start to feel the flames of persecution start to heat up around them. That can easily lead to an identity crisis – when what I hear from God and what I see in my life seem so incongruent that they both can’t possibly be true. The Apostle Peter wrote a letter of encouragement to a group of Christians who were going through such an identity crisis. They were feeling pressure to renounce their faith – because that would’ve been the physically safe choice. They were God’s people living in a godless world. Since they weren’t all official citizens of the Roman Empire, Christians made easy targets. Physical abuse, property seizure, enslavement, and maybe even death – none of these were out of the realm of possibility. Talk about an identity crisis! Who am I? How can I define myself as anything but marginalized, defeated, and endangered? Peter knew that suffering Christians could easily become doubting Christians, and so Peter’s purpose in writing to them becomes clear: Your suffering doesn’t define you. Your present circumstances don’t define you. Your life on earth isn’t your identity. Your Savior is your identity. Here’s your identity: You’ve been called out of darkness to live out God’s praise.

Peter says, **But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.** Do you see his point? Your identity, dear child of God, has nothing to do with you or your present circumstances. Your identity is wrapped up in Christ – the one who called you out of the darkness of sin and unbelief and brought you into his wonderful light.

Think of the marvelous reality that is your identity in Christ; think of the transformation. At one time, you were an object of wrath, but now you’re a recipient of mercy. At one time, you were completely lost, blind to God’s goodness, and hostile to his ways. But now, you’re the very people of God, brought into his family. You’re **a chosen people**. God so loved the world and he also so loved you specifically that he sought you out and brought you to



faith. You're a **royal priesthood**, you have direct access to the holy God in heaven through Jesus his Son. You're a **holy nation, a people belonging to God**, a gathering of believers who have been washed in the blood of the Lamb and set apart as a special, unique possession of God Almighty. That's your identity. And that makes you different from the world around you. You've been chosen, you've been called, you've been gathered, you've been saved – all for a purpose – not to live for yourself, but to live out God's praise. Or as Jesus said in our gospel lesson, **You are the salt of the earth...You are the light of the world...let your light shine!**

Peter says, **Dear friends, I urge you as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul.** What happens when the wires get crossed? When what I hear from God and what I see in my life seem so incongruent that both cannot possibly be true? What happens when I start to question my identity? Peter would tell us, *remember who you are in Christ. This world isn't your true home; heaven is your home. Right now, you're aliens and strangers, just visitors passing through.* How can Christians remember their true identity in the face of a world that wants to make us forget? Live like aliens and strangers in this world, just visitors passing through on your way to heaven. But that wasn't an obvious answer to the 1<sup>st</sup> century Christians Peter was writing to. Blending in was the safe and easy way to go about life – especially in the face of persecution. Making my identity as a child of God completely indiscernible from my unbelieving neighbor – that seemed like the safe way to go. But Peter says, *No, you're different. You GET to be different - so live like it!*

Living like aliens and strangers isn't obvious to us either. We need to be reminded that this life and all it has to offer - this world cannot be the pinnacle of my existence as a child of God. Peter's words to persecuted Christians may have been pointing at the fact that they didn't have much, or what little they had was in danger of being taken away from them. Perhaps having a multitude of "things" in this life is even more of a danger and temptation. When we amass for ourselves so much treasure here on earth, are we living like we're "just passing through"? Think about it...It's like if you stayed in a hotel for the night and brought with you your bed, your entire wardrobe, your full sized refrigerator full of food, your two car garage, and your kitchen sink. It doesn't make sense. You're just staying for the night! In the grand scheme of things; in the grand scheme of eternity, our 70, 80, 90-some years on earth aren't even a blip on the radar. So why do we get carried away? Why do we burden ourselves with needless baggage? Don't misunderstand me – earthly possessions and wealth are not bad things. They're blessings from God, but isn't the temptation there to focus a little too closely on them? Or even more pointedly – is there a temptation to let those things define me? Do I somehow suppose that my comfortability, my success, and my stuff are really my identity?

If we think of our lives on earth in comparison to the eternity in heaven that Jesus has won for us – my how that will change our priorities! We're not in it for just the few years of life on earth – we're in it for the long haul. But it's so easy to be short-sighted! The temptation is to think about and focus entirely on what's in front of me – like a parade horse with blinders on, I'm locked on the present, on short term gain and gratification. The devil owns short-term gratification, he owns it! And he wants that to be our focal point every day of life on earth, because then we'll forget who we are. We'll start worrying - worrying about trivial things, temporary dwellings, and time-bound trinkets. And then what gets forced out? The truth of who I am in Christ; my status before God; my identity.

Peter understood this, that's why he said, **I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires which war against your soul.** Trying to "blend in" with the world around us and pushing aside our identity in Christ is simply a matter of giving in to **sinful desires**. Those desires of the flesh aren't benign or harmless, they're militant. The picture Peter uses here when he talks about war isn't so much swinging a sword or stabbing a spear – it's more of a calculated military campaign to overtake someone and enslave them. This constant



campaign against the soul is something we experience when we're tempted. If there's a sin you struggle with, have you noticed how it seems to have the power to completely dominate your thoughts? It's all you think about, you barely get a moment's rest. This is the one-track mind of the addict looking for his next fix. This is the war – and the stakes couldn't be higher. But what's Peter's reminder? Stay away from those desires because those aren't the things that define you. Yes, you're familiar with those sinful desires. Yes, you've fallen to their temptation. Confess it to God, turn from it, embrace his forgiveness in Christ. Look again at who you ARE in Christ. Desires of the flesh don't define you – alcoholic, lusty, short fused hot-head, shoot-first-ask-questions-later contrarian, grudge-holding hater. Stay away from those natural urges and desires, because that's not who you ARE! Through faith in Christ, his righteousness is what defines you.

There was a young man who lived in the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD and he was what we might call a womanizer. His name was Augustine. He lived a wild, promiscuous life, partying constantly with friends, fathering a child out of wedlock – and by his own admission, he denied himself very little. And, as people frequently do today, he eventually came to hate himself for that. He had an addiction to sin. He struggled with those desires of the flesh that waged war against his soul. He struggled with guilt. And then Augustine came across this passage from Romans 13, **Clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh.** Augustine learned an important lesson, he learned what defined him – not his circumstances, not even his sin, but his Savior.

After he was brought to faith by the Holy Spirit, years later Augustine traveled to a town he hadn't been to in years, and a woman came up to him with whom he had previously had a very physical relationship. She excitedly ran to her old flame, and he was polite to her, he was kind to her, he was respectful to her, but he was different. She didn't quite know how to take it. He said goodbye, and then it occurred to this woman, *Maybe he mistook me for someone else!* So as he walked away, she called to him and said, *Augustine, it is I!* He turned and said, *I know, but it is no longer I.* Augustine learned a vital lesson, one that Peter teaches today. The gospel changes you; it makes you different. The gospel isn't just "Jesus forgives my sins," though it certainly is that. In the gospel, Jesus gives you his righteousness. He sets you apart as salt and light in a dark, decaying world. In the gospel, Jesus gives you an entirely new identity – his identity. HE is who you are now. That's what defines you, dear child of God. Christ is your identity.

*To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy – to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power, and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen. (Jude 24-25)*