

CHIEF MINISTRIES

February 2017

“But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God (that’s identity). That you may declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His wonderful light (that’s meaning). 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. Dear friends, I urge you as aliens and strangers in the world (that’s identity) to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. 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.” (That’s meaning) 1 Peter 2:9-12

By the way, did you notice in this passage that “sinful desires” are the enemies of our immortal souls (our deepest selves)? If you can tell a man by his enemies, what does that say about our souls?

“Since then, you have been raised with Christ (that’s identity), set your hearts on things above where Christ is seated at the right hand of God (that’s meaning)... Therefore as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved (that’s identity), clothe yourself with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience (that’s meaning)” Colossians 3:1, 12

“For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus (that’s identity) to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do (that’s meaning)” Ephesians 2:10

“For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord (that’s identity). Live as children of light (for the fruit of light consists in all goodness, righteousness, and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord (that’s meaning)” Ephesians 5:8, 2 Corinthians 6:14 – 15

Is there a biblical relationship between awareness of personal identity and finding meaning in life? Indeed there is!

In 1 Corinthians 6:1 – 7 Paul is attempting to intervene in some hot lawsuits between fellow believers. They were taking each other to court before unbelievers in order to get justice and thus protect their belongings. Paul had apostolic authority. He could have simply said, “stop doing that.” But he didn’t. Instead he encouraged the frustrated believers to focus on the problem on the basis of their true identities. “Don’t you remember who you are?” Paul was saying. “Do you not know that we shall judge angels?”

“You saints in Corinth, you’ve lost the sense of personal dignity that comes with who you are. This very fact should cause you to take a second look at the conflicts you have among yourselves. If there are not adequate wise men among you, then be willing to be cheated. Striving and fighting to get all that you “deserve” is beneath the dignity of who you are. Real meaning in life is somewhere else!”

Now let’s look at 1 Corinthians 3. Here Paul is addressing himself to their fleshly obsession of jealousy following one spiritual leader rather than another. A very loose paraphrase of Paul’s response would run something like this:

“You fellows are acting like mere men – You’ve forgotten who you are! You are hardly ‘mere men’; you are God’s temple! Meaning in life is not what man you follow..... all things are yours and you are God’s! Now come on! There is work to be done.”

Paul tells these bickering believers that if a Christian thinks of himself as a “mere man” it is bound to color his concept of values.

We can trace this reasoning back even further – into the early years of our Lord’s earthly ministry. We find him in the wilderness being tempted by Satan. “If you are the son of God,” suggested Satan, “command that these stones become bread.” Remember Jesus had gone without food for 40 days and was terribly hungry. Was this a real temptation? Of course it was! But notice his response: “*Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God:* or put it another way, “Satan if my identity was essentially flesh, ‘meaning’ for me this moment would certainly be bread. Fresh, buttered bread – right out of the oven. Ah! But that’s where you are wrong, Satan. I am, first of all, a spiritual being who lives on words from God’s mouth. Did you really think that I would forget my identity and attempt to satisfy some shallow meaning for a shallow identity?” (See Matthew 4:1 – 4)

Are you ready for another illustration? This time imagine that you are a very typical boy in high school who likes two things most of all: food and girls (in either order). If someone asked you who you were and you were quite honest you would have to express both your identity and your reason for living in those terms (with a long list of other ones, of course)

One day you’re standing by your locker in the hall and the track coach spots you. He takes you by surprise when he strolls purposefully over to your locker to talk to you. (The track coach talking to me?)

“Say, I’ve been watching the way you walk – got a lot of bounce in your step. Whether you know it or not, you’re a sprinter. With a little training you could be setting records in the 100-meter dash. I just know it!”

“Aw, come on, Coach. I’m no sprinter. I might win a medal in eating or girl – watching, but a sprinter? You’ve got to be kidding.”

“No, I’m not kidding. And I’ll prove it to you. This afternoon – at practice.”

Now he’s hooked you. You go to practice that afternoon....and every afternoon for weeks to follow. Your first clocking’s aren’t that outstanding but you sense a strange exhilaration as you run that maybe – just maybe – the coach was right. In the days that followed you read biographies of great sprinters; you watch films of great races. You run and run and run. It hurts so much sometimes, yet always deeper is a growing sense of identity. You are a sprinter! Before long the whole shape of your life bends to this new sense of personhood. If someone walks up to you on the street and asks, “who are you?”, Even before you can give your name you spontaneously respond, “I’m a sprinter at Jefferson high! The big meet with Lincoln high is this Saturday – you going to be there?”

And Saturday comes. The crowd stirs as you walk across the track to your starting block. Suddenly the prettiest girl in town walks straight up to you with a large juicy piece of apple pie from the oven and topped with a big glob of ice cream. “Hi,” she coos. “I brought this for you...just for you.”

Now comes the decision. You are free to do what you want. But what will you do?

It all depends on your concept of those two words: IDENTITY and MEANING.

Who are you? Are you a skin – wrapped package of taste buds, salivary glands, and sex drives? If this is your identity, there isn't much question where you will find meaning.

Or are you aware of something else? A new identity, and identity reinforced by warm, relational times with your coach, by a new focus of personhood, a new set of values. If these things are true, your response to sweet Suzy will be automatic and conclusive. On the other hand, if you have missed out on track practice, if you have allowed your mind to focus on those very tangible “fleshly” things where you had always found life before, you will respond in one of two ways: “All right! Who cares about the race anyway; you're quite a special young lady. You're so fine, Suzy!” Or, if not that it will be, “Sorry, Suzy, I want that hunk of pie but I can't have it.”

What is your response as the sprinter you now know yourself to be? With scarcely a second look at her pretty face, you turn to focus on the tape 100 meters away.

“Sorry, Suzy, I'm a sprinter. I don't want that apple pie (not simply I can't have it). Life for me is touching that tape before anyone else. What you offer just doesn't fit in. Thanks anyway.”

“Oh, you must want it....and me.”

“No, Suzy, you just don't realize that there's something far deeper about me than that. I'm not just a mouth connected to a stomach; I'm not just a guy that gets turned on by hot girls. I'm a sprinter, Suzy. That's who I am. That's living. There is nothing like it in all the world. I'm gonna win, Suzy!” BANG! Off you go....and you win.

Oh Christian, do you get the point? If you don't know most deeply who you are – if you have allowed your sense of personhood to be shaped by your own flesh, by Satan, and by the meaning – mad media that saturates the world, you are either consciously or unconsciously a most miserable frustrated Christian. Your Bible reading, such as it is, is self – condemning. 1 John 1:9 is your life verse. God is almost your adversary. Strange that He could be both Savior and adversary. But it's true. It seems the things you want most in life he says you should want least....or not at all. In your view, a Christian is one who must continually say “No” to himself, “No” to his dreams, and “No” to his desires, all the while saying “Yes” to God and His demands. SURRENDER. That awful word.

To such statements Paul would shout with flaming indignation, “God forbid! What travesty! Whoever had the audacity to paint the Christian life in such a way? What a shambles of God's truth. For me to live is Christ!” For you see, even as the sprinter discovered a deeper identity, so God's intention is that every believer become literally obsessed with his own true IDENTITY – MEANING - LIFE!

Who is a Christian? He is God's ultimate spiritual masterpiece. God's purposed new man. Created clean as a flawless prism, progressively being faceted (shaped) more fully to receive, transform and display the otherwise invisible glories of the infinite God into limitless, visible colors – of his own attributes so that all creation might see GOD! This is life. The outflow of meaning. The divine perfecting of our own truest, deepest, eternal identity.

“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.” (1 Peter 2:9)

“You are not in the flesh but in the spirit (Romans 8:9). The spirit gives birth to spirit (John 3:6). Deepest identity is spiritual, not flesh. You are distinctly alive!

Who are you, Christian? Are you fundamentally flesh? If that is indeed so, then that is where life will be found for you and you are not really a Christian after all. Have you willingly been tantalized by TV shows such as Scandal, Good Behavior, Empire, Star, Modern Family, Animal Kingdom, etc. and really believe in your spirit that you are pleasing God? Or that you won't be held to give an account? Not to mention what is coming out of your mouth. *"For every idle word you will be justified or condemned"* (Matthew 12:36, 37)

Or, are you most deeply a spiritual being? If you are to be true to your self – your deepest, truest self – where is life for you? Where are your "wants"? Not your "ought's", but your "wants". When one stops to think about this, it is asking quite a bit of our flesh brain to adjust that it is not the "gang boss" of our total personhood. That shallow level of mortal being – a spiritual level that will externally outlive its own mortality. To really accept myself as fundamentally a spiritual being is not easy.

Perhaps, at this moment a reader is saying, "Sure, that sounds great. Too bad it doesn't work out that way. I'm jealous, I'm lustful, proud, materialistic, and a whole lot more. If I really express what I am, both you and I would be very embarrassed, Chief. You're not only a radical, you're just plain wrong. Every Christian knows that real victory occurs when the Holy Spirit is allowed to control what I am in order that Christ can produce in me what He is."

I hear you. I honestly hear you. I've said the same words many times myself. Whether it's accepted or not, I don't know. But I do know this. It isn't biblical.

Listen to the Bible: *"For in my inner being I delight in God's law."* And preceding these are startling words. *"Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who did it but it is sin living in me that does it"* (Romans 7:22, 20)

John says, *He who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous....No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in him; and he cannot go on sinning because he has been born of God."* (1 John 3:7, 9) Added to these passages are numerous positive expressions of the believer's nature. (See John 17:14 – 16; 1 Peter 2:9, 11; Ephesians 2:10)

I would like to right now paint two totally different portraits of a believer. The first portrait is a common one, familiar in many conservative, evangelical circles. It looks something like this: I am a person with two natures. One of these natures is called "the old man" (otherwise called "the natural man", "flesh", "sin nature", "old nature", "body of sin".) The other is "the new man" (otherwise called "the new nature", "spiritual nature").

Got it? One man; two natures. I, the person, am in some sense between these two capacities. I, the person, am mind, will, personality, body and emotions. This is my personhood. What my personhood manifests in behavior depends on which capacity is energizing me. A victorious Christian, according to this viewpoint, is the one who's new nature is so energized by God that his behavior is Christlike. (Incidentally, no matter how much emphasis this "two nature" approach might place on the "positional" death of the old nature and the living presence of the new nature, as long as Christians feel at home thinking of themselves as "forgiven sinners," it is obvious that they still understand that their "old sin nature" is really their most fundamental nature).

Before going any further, I am convinced this first approach – first portrait of a Christian – is inconsistent with the teachings of the New Testament, even though isolated verses could be seen in such a light.

Let's project this first perspective into a familiar life situation. And since I mentioned TV previously, we'll continue with that theme.

Put yourself at home alone one evening, sitting in front of your TV set. Perhaps quite unexpectedly a new program begins. It takes only a moment for you to realize that this is not a show for a Christian to be watching. You are immediately aware that this show's sole purpose is to stir you to lust (whatever kind of lust you happen to be tantalized by). You know you shouldn't be watching it. But in a few moments you're hooked. Then the thought comes flashing into your mind, "what if somebody caught me watching this? I'd better turn it off. I don't want to but I'd dare not take a chance." So reluctantly you turn the switch, taking one last, longing look. Is that spiritual victory? Hardly. But let's take it a step further.

Same program. Same circumstances. You're sitting there absorbed in the program when the thought hits you. "Goodness! God is watching me! I sure don't want His heavy hand on me! He can be pretty tough." So once again with equal reluctance, you turn the switch. Savoring your last delicious look. Victory? Obviously not. Let's try again.

Same thing. Same place. Watching the show you're hit by a thought. "You know if Jesus were here it would certainly disappoint Him to see me watching this thing. And I love him. Anyway, I don't have to yield to this sinful temptation. By the power of the Holy Spirit I have power to reject what I am doing. I will." Marching to the set, you grasp the switch, hesitate just long enough to see a little bit more and flip it off. You hesitate because you just said "NO" to yourself using strengths from your new nature. And it hurts to do that. Why? Because you, the person really wanted to keep on watching. Your curious mind, your churning emotions, your glandular body. But Jesus died for you – you want to please Him. So, who are you? You are a person who wants on one hand to please the Savior and on the other hand to sin. A split personality. A house divided. Is this then what Christian victory is all about?

Not according to Paul, not according to chapter 7 of Romans. It's hard to know how Paul could have made it any clearer. He stated that when a Christian sins "*it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it.*" And where is it dwelling in me? Paul answers, "*in my flesh*".... operating "*in the members of my body.*" (Romans 7:18 – 25)

Let's look at another portrait. See if it squares with Scripture. Ready?

I am a person who in terms of my most essential nature (deepest self, inner man, new man) is a creation of God who does not sin. I am righteous – delighting in the law of God. This new man is not simply a capacity; it is the real me. The person I once was (the old man), I am no more. I am not by nature a "child of wrath" anymore I am a child of light. If I died right now I would be fit for heaven. And heaven is not a place for people who go against their natural tendencies to do what is right. It is a place for those who by nature do what is right!

You know that's an amazing thing to say, but it's true. If you have received the Savior and five seconds from now you fall over dead, you – YOU – would be at home in heaven. And according to both Peter and Paul, the only thing you would leave behind is your mortality. Peter says, "*I think it is right to refresh your memory as long as I live in the tent of this body, because I know that I will soon put it aside.... I will make every effort to see that after my departure*".... And Paul says "*away from the body and at home with the Lord.*" (2 Peter 1:13 – 15; 2 Corinthians 5:8) there is not a single word anywhere implying that at death the believer is finally separated from his "old man" or his "old self". Not a single word. Why? Because that happened when you really got saved, not just positionally, but actually.

But even though all this is true – even though God describes us as His children (saints) He never wants us to forget that we are for a while inseparably linked to unredeemed flesh. Our bodies are mortal. Not just the bones and the muscles, glands and senses, but mind and emotions as well. That vast, unbelievably

intricate, electronic, chemical complex which is culturally, genetically, diabolically (at times), geographically and pathologically – influenced mortality.

There is indeed a proper dualism in being human. Paul said, *I see another law at work in the members of my body....within my members.....this body of death....my flesh*” (Romans 7:23 – 25)

Remember the TV illustration? Let’s look at it one final time from this second perspective of a Christian. There you are. The program intended to stir you to lust is doing just that. It is of the flesh – for the flesh. And your flesh – your unredeemed flesh – likes it. Wants to watch.

For a moment you find yourself saying, “I want to watch this even though I know I shouldn’t.” Then with a saddened jolt the gracious Holy Spirit reminds you of something so very important. “Hey, wait a minute!” You say. “Who am I anyway? Is watching this stuff truly compatible with who I really am? I essentially am not flesh (eyes, ears, nose, etc.). Life for me is not sleek cars, fantasy vacations, a musical career, a perfect figure, and envious reputation. Who am I? I know who I am – I am fundamentally a spiritual being created by God to display Jesus. Life – real life – is right there.”

So I walk to the TV set and turn it off. No last, longing look this time. I flip the switch off. Not just because I should. Not just because I love Jesus. But because I want to. My flesh may protest. So what? It’s really pretty stupid to allow *“fleshly lusts which wage war against the soul,”* (1 Peter 2:11) to continue when the war is against me, and all I have to do is turn it off.

“Oh thank you God! Flesh, that’s just your tough luck. Go ahead and cry. Go ahead and suffer. Go ahead and bombard my brain with angry signals. I have put to death the deeds of the flesh! This time you lost and I am free to live. This and this alone is the victory.

Do you see it? Do you see the fundamental difference between these two portraits as a believer?

The first concept places you as a person standing between two capacities. The second equates you and your “new man”. Not merely as some secondary capacity but rather as the person you most deeply are.

You are not two “you’s” (which agrees precisely with Romans 7) nor are you both “old man” and “new man”. In no sense is it proper to conclude that Romans 6 views “old man” and “new man” as capacities. It distinctly speaks of the old man as having been crucified and buried! Paul does not refer to the “old man” as an “it”; rather he says *“we died”, “we were buried”, “we shall live.”* The presence and potential for sin is not explained by some scripturally – contradictory continuance of an “old man whose power has been broken” capacity.

Rather, sin is explained by the fact that your deepest personhood is housed in a most demanding, creative, easily – influenced mortality – flesh. This very tangible, though shallow, level of your total personhood happens to be well equipped to function in that crucial realm of meaning in life. It is in this sense that the term “flesh” takes on a negative moral character.

Sin, remember, is the expression of an individual’s response to the issue of meaning apart from the life of God.

Awareness of identity determines meaning in life.

Fulfillment of meaning in terms of true identity for a believer is righteousness.

The “sin – nature” concept of necessity assures that there is always somewhere inside of me something that is essentially evil. And whether or not those who hold this view actually say it, that something clings so tightly to my essential personhood that it is right to describe myself as sinful.

Indeed, there is an operating “principle” at work in every believer. That “principle” – not evil in itself – is the never – ending demand for meaning. (This basic demand, by the way, is found in every thinking creature) The moment that demand for meaning becomes dominant in my flesh rather than in my deepest personhood – at that moment that “principle” is producing evil within me. When flesh determines its own meaning, it always produces sin.

Yet when that determinative search for meaning flows out of the deepest self, empowered and directed by the Holy Spirit, there is at that point nothing inside of me that is essentially evil. My flesh at that moment is a slave to righteousness. My members are yielded to God and the result is purity – holiness in both the outward and inward man.

But since we are still waiting for the redemption of our bodies, the flesh – slave idea must always be reckoned with. Left to itself, the “will to meaning” (the “principle”) will always produce sin. As Jesus said, “*apart from me you can do nothing.*”

We must not fall into the trap of viewing flesh as essentially sinful or move to the other extreme that God makes us absolutely perfect. Both are tragic distortions.

All of this points to a battle. An intense battle. At times and overwhelming battle. Our flesh is constantly receiving independent “meaning possibilities” from its vast computerized brain reservoir. It is almost constantly bombarded with counterfeit meanings from the world and the devil. So we war.

“For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit and the Spirit against the flesh, for these are in opposition to one another so that you may not do the things that you please.” (Galatians 5:17)

True “meaning” is receiving and displaying the risen life of Christ. Rather than this being contrary to one’s essential nature, as is taught by some, it is in perfect harmony with the miracle of regeneration by which we become “*holy... God’s workmanship....children of light.*” To fulfill the will of God (righteousness) is to do what we most deeply desire to do even though this may be contrary to the desires of our flesh. This fundamental awareness of identity brings a believer into the wholesome, positive atmosphere in which God’s intention of manifesting His Holiness in the world can be fulfilled.

Be holy for I am holy (Leviticus 11:44, 45; 1 Peter 1:16)

Chief

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