

Big Idea: The world doesn't get to tell you who you are.

Primary Scripture: 2 Corinthians 5:17

Supporting Scripture: Isaiah 43:1-4; Galatians 2:20

- Has anyone ever told you that you couldn't do something, and even though you didn't want to, deep down, you believed them?
 - Maybe it wasn't a big dramatic moment. Maybe it was something small.
- Somewhere along the way you just accepted it. Stopped trying. Started introducing yourself as "not really a math person," or "not really athletic," or "not really the creative type."
- We do this all the time. We take someone else's opinion and turn it into a fact about ourselves.
- Sometimes the whole world agrees on a label. And sometimes the whole world is *completely wrong*.
- For decades, the entire scientific and athletic community agreed on something. Doctors had studied it. Coaches had accepted it. The world's best runners had tried and failed so many times that most of them stopped trying altogether.
 - The conclusion was unanimous: the human body could *not* run a mile in under four minutes.
- The research was in. The record books confirmed it. The people who knew best had looked at the evidence and agreed. It wasn't a matter of training harder or wanting it more. It was physically and scientifically impossible.
- Then on a Tuesday afternoon in Oxford, England, a 25-year-old medical student laced up his shoes and decided he didn't believe them.
 - His name was Roger Bannister. And on May 6th, 1954, he ran a mile in 3 minutes and 59.4 seconds.
- The label was wrong. It had *always* been wrong.
 - And within twelve months, sixteen other runners proved it too.
- The barrier fell because one person decided that the people who set the limit didn't have the authority to set it. The label wasn't *describing* reality. It was *creating* it.
- Now think of the labels you're carrying.
 - Some of them were handed to you by someone else.

- A coach, a parent, a person at school who said something that you've never been able to shake.
- Some of them you handed to yourself after a bad season, a failure, a moment you'd rather forget.
- And a lot of them you've stopped questioning. They just feel true now. You don't even remember where they came from anymore. They're just... you.
 - When a label sits long enough, it stops feeling like something someone said and starts feeling like something you are.
- Last week, we started a series called **You Be You** where we talked about where identity starts.
- Even if you believe God made you on purpose, many of us are still walking around under a pile of labels that were never true, or that stopped being true the moment you began a relationship with Jesus.
 - But you just haven't put them down yet.

SCRIPTURE (What does God's Word say?)

- The Apostle Paul was writing to a church full of people whose labels were still very much true by the world's standards.
 - Former addicts. Former thieves. People whose reputations weren't exactly recovering quickly.
- His point was in Jesus, the old is **gone**. The label doesn't just get challenged. It loses its authority **entirely**.
- Paul wasn't always someone you'd expect to be writing about new life in Christ.
 - Before Paul followed Jesus, he literally hunted down Christians and had them arrested.
 - He was educated, he was driven, and he was convinced he was doing the right thing.
 - His label, by any reasonable measure, was "*enemy of the faith*."
- And then... everything changed.
 - He encountered Jesus on a road to Damascus, and the person who had been tearing the church apart became one of its most important voices.
- If anyone understood what it meant for a label to lose its power, it was Paul.

- When Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, he was writing as someone who had lived on the other side of what he was about to describe.
- And remember, the people Paul was writing to had serious histories.
- Into that situation, Paul wrote something that must have landed like a freight train.

17 This means that anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun! (2 Corinthians 5:17 – NLT)

- Notice the tense Paul used.
 - Anyone who belongs to Christ has *become* a new person.
 - That's already happened. Completed. It's a declaration about what is true right now, not a goal to work toward or a destination you're still trying to reach.
- Next, look at what he said about the old life. *Gone*.
 - The old life has been replaced, not renovated.
- When Paul says "new life," we need to remember that there's "new" and then there's ***new***.
 - He could mean "new" like a brand new car... it's basically the same as a used car, but it just hasn't been driven yet.
 - Or, he could mean ***new*** like a caterpillar coming out of a cocoon as a butterfly... something becoming completely different than it was before.
- Paul isn't talking about the first kind of "new." He's talking about the second.
- The most unlikely person imaginable had become the most passionate voice for the God he once opposed. The label had lost its power entirely.
- If the label "*enemy of the faith*" didn't survive what happened to Paul on that road to Damascus, what does that say about the labels you've been carrying?

INSIGHTS (What might this Scripture mean?)

1. What people say about you doesn't get the final word.

- Paul's saying that the labels we used to carry lose their power because Jesus defeated death itself.

- If He can overcome the grave, that means no label is too stuck to come off.
- When you belong to Jesus, that question has *been settled*.

¹ But now, O Jacob, listen to the Lord who created you. O Israel, the one who formed you says, "Do not be afraid, for I have ransomed you. I have called you by name; you are mine. ² When you go through deep waters, I will be with you. When you go through rivers of difficulty, you will not drown. When you walk through the fire of oppression, you will not be burned up; the flames will not consume you. ³ For I am the Lord, your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. I gave Egypt as a ransom for your freedom; I gave Ethiopia and Seba in your place. ⁴ Others were given in exchange for you. I traded their lives for yours because you are precious to me. You are honored, and I love you. (Isaiah 43:1-4 – NLT)

- What God is saying is right there in the text. *You are precious to me. You are honored. I love you.*
- The coach, the parent, the teacher, the voice in your head that's been repeating the same thing so long it started to sound like fact. None of them have that kind of authority over who you are.
 - One voice does.

2. What's gone doesn't have to follow you.

- Paul used one word for what happens to the old life in Christ. **Gone.**
- There's something genuinely good about a clean slate. The chance to be known differently than you've been known before.
- Paul's describing something in a completely different category. **Gone.** The old life isn't on a clean slate. The person it was attached to *no longer exists*.

²⁰ My old self has been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. So I live in this earthly body by trusting in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. (Galatians 2:20 – NLT)

- This means the thing you've been dragging around, the version of yourself that felt defined by what you did or what was done to you, doesn't have a claim on you anymore.
- You walked away from it the moment you said yes to Jesus. Even if it still feels like it's following you.

3. A new life has already begun.

- The new life tends to feel like a destination.
 - Something that will feel real eventually, once we've changed enough or grown enough or gotten far enough from who we used to be.
- Paul's tense cuts through all of that.
 - The new life has begun. Already. For anyone who belongs to Jesus. The waiting is over.
- When you believe this, you stop spending energy wondering when you're going to feel like a new person, and you start asking, "What would someone who belongs to Jesus do right now, in this situation, with these people?"
- Paul is saying you don't have to prove anything. The finish line already moved. And the life on the other side of it has already started.

ACTION (How could we live this out?)

1. Personalize 2 Corinthians 5:17.

- Take the verse we looked at tonight and use it as a lens to write something personal. Something specific to you and the label you've been carrying.
 - Write it as if you're standing in the room with the Corinthians and Paul is handing you the pen.
- The old life is gone. A new life has begun.
 - What does that mean for the version of you that's been living under that label? What does the new life look like for you specifically?
- If you're not sure where to start, try finishing this sentence: "Because I belong to Jesus, the label that said _____ no longer defines me. What's true now is..."
- Write it down. Read it out loud.
- And if it feels strange to say it, that's okay. You're not trying to manufacture a feeling. You're making a declaration.

2. Name the label... then bury it.

- At some point this week, when you have some time to really think about it, write down one label you've been carrying.

- Don't soften it. Don't make it sound better than it actually is. Write the actual words you've been hearing in your head.
- Then destroy the paper. Tear it up. Shred it. Bury it. Throw it in the trash and don't fish it out. Whatever feels final to you, do that.
 - As you do it, spend some time telling God exactly what that label has been. How long you've carried it.
 - Then thank God that because of Jesus, that label doesn't get to define you anymore. The old is gone. A new life has begun.

3. Challenge a label someone else is wearing.

- Think of someone in your life who's been calling themselves something that isn't true, and this week, tell them one specific thing that contradicts it.
 - It has to be specific. Something you've seen in them that points to who God says they are.
 - Encouragement that could apply to anyone is easy to brush off.
- This might feel uncomfortable. *Say it anyway.*
 - The same way God speaks a true name over you... now you get to speak a true thing over someone else.
- And sometimes that's *exactly* what it takes for someone to start believing it.