

SERMON: Who Am I... or rather, Who I Am

Kenyatta Ruffin -- The City Gates Church Men's Ministry Summit (4 Jun 22)

OPENING

- Such a great day that I don't wanna break the flow and have so little time, gonna jump right in
- Title of this message is "Who Am I?" or rather, "Who I Am!"

INSERT SLIDE WITH MAN'S REFLECTION

- Prayer

INTRO

Identity is such a paradoxical topic and indeed, a key theme we see throughout Christianity are these same subtle, but profound, dictums that often juxtapose two or more principles. For example, in Romans Paul talks about doing the things he doesn't want to do (Romans 7:15-20), Jesus says in order to be first you must be last (Mark 9:35), and the Old Testament says we can run and not grow weary, walk and not be faint (Isaiah 40:31).

These are strong, impactful proclamations that you really can't gloss over and our focus of the day on purpose and identity is the same sort of theme that stops you in your tracks. What is my purpose? What is my identity? Who Am I? ... or Who I Am!

So when I stop to answer these questions, with the firm supposition and actual commitment to press hold of that for which my Savior took hold of for me (Philippians 3:12), I come away with three distinct views:

1. The Identity of Christ,
2. My Identity Because of Christ, and
3. My Identity in Christ

1. IDENTITY OF CHRIST (love)

The word "identity" is derived from late 16th century Latin word *identitas*, based upon the Latin root *idem* which means "same." Stated another way, identity means "the quality of being identical." This begs the question, being identical to what? Whenever someone uses the word identity, you should ask what are they the same of.

Fortunately for us, this is the very first answer that the Apostle John gives to us in John 1:1-5, and you can turn with me there. But before we read that, first let us simplify and clarify by skipping down to verse 14 to see that the word "Word" is a reference to Jesus;

¹⁴ And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

There should be no doubt that the word "Word" is the same as Christ (most Bibles even title this section "The Word became Flesh"). So now, reading together at John 1:1

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. **2** He was in the beginning with God. **3** All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. **4** In him was life, and the life was the light of men. **5** The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

This Gospel is Good News indeed in that it does not leave us wandering about the identity of the man Christ that we are to look upon as our Lord, our Savior, and our Example.

Christ is all and in all. Christ is all powerful. Christ is a conqueror.

Ultimately, Christ is *idem* as God. The *identitas* of Christ is God!

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Now, if you follow the logic with your mind — or really when you think about it with your heart and soul — you are led to ask and reflect on who God is. We again find our answer in John, but a little later on in 1 John 4:7-10

God Is Love

⁷ Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God.⁸ Anyone who does not love does not know God, *because God is love*. ⁹ In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. ¹⁰ In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.

Love. God is love... and thus Christ is love.

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Friends, Christ must be love if he came down from his other identities of being all powerful and all-knowing to die on a tree for sinners like you and I.

Christ is full of Love. In John 15:13 we see

Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.

And so this would be a pitiful and sorry excuse for a “love story” if this were the end; it would be a horror show if all of this love that He not only had, but boldly and courageously demonstrated in action, was in vain. If that were the case, if there was nothing that was a result of this love, nothing to show for it but some words on a page, just about by anyone’s definition, that would make Christ’s identity a “loser.”

YET! We know this is not the truth. Read on in 1 John 4 verses 11-12:

Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. ¹² No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and His love is perfected in us.

Gentlemen, *if* we love (repeat)... the identity of Christ is completed, is perfected in us.

2. IDENTITY BECAUSE OF CHRIST (Freedom)

This leads us to part two, our identity because of Christ.

Because of what Christ did and because of who Christ is, I can be made complete.

Brothers, I want to shout for joy when I think of who I am because of Christ. I am complete. I am loved. I am steady and secure. I am strong. When you put this all into one word, into one thought that captures the essence of what we know is so vast and so magnificent, I see “freedom.”

Because of Christ, Who I Am is free.

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Interestingly, in the comfort of our lives here in America, in the middle of the overwhelming pressure and distractions, the words we constantly hear -- and maybe, even the ones we say to ourselves -- is “Who Am I?” instead of “Who, I Am.”

Far too often, we hear the shouting question instead of the still, soft but steady voice that declares the Truth. In our restless nights, during our dreadful drives to work or going home, when we are trying to find the strength to come to church and put up that mask that says everything is okay, we hear it, NO, we feel it... “Who Am I?”

Brothers, I’m here to tell you, and to remind myself, because of Christ, *Who I Am* is free!!

These words are not my own and it does you absolutely no good to merely listen to me. Instead, you must hear -- and believe -- the words of the one in whom we identify with. In Luke 4 we find that Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit and He read from the scroll proclaiming:

“The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, ¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

I know we’re not exactly a Charismatic congregation, but sometimes I just wanna take it back old school and scream Hallelujah!! Can somebody say Amen?

Did you hear that — Christ has come to set the oppressed free! I'll bring it back to your seats again, turn to your neighbor and tell him: BECAUSE OF CHRIST... I AM FREE.

Friends, our society wants to tell you that being a Christian is passé, that it's wrong, that it's a drag. Well, when that lie comes fluttering up, just beat it down with the truth that *who I am* in Christ is free.

Say it again after me: who I am... in Christ... is free.

3. IDENTITY IN CHRIST (humble confidence)

So that leads me to our last, and perhaps most critical point, our identity in Christ.

I'm sure many of you have heard this phrase before – you may remember other sermons that discussed it, or recall what an elder, a deacon, or grandmother said to you growing up, or you can simply Google it and recall Pastor's Jeff's comments on it in the beginning of the current 2 Corinthians sermon series.

I didn't review this topic any differently or take a deep dive into this essential question during my preparation. This wasn't because I felt any specific mastery of this important question, but precisely the opposite in that I knew that I do not know it all. This is where the paradoxical nature of Christianity is loudest, or as Pastor Jeff discusses and labels it as the “tension” we face in actively, purposefully and deliberately living, yet while still fully depending on faith. How can you do both? How can you work proactively, while receiving passively? Is it works or is it faith? Of course, the answer is this delicate, God-ordained, and so uniquely specific answer of both! James 2:24 says

You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. ...

Or lest you get excited and misunderstand like I do when you read that verse and feel vindicated by affinity for your actions, the verse could also be read to say: “You see that a person is justified by faith and not by works alone.”

Brothers, we cannot overcome or solve this fact that we are called to live in the world but not be of the world. Thus, our only hope and *the* only answer is found in the cross of Christ. We can live this perfected balance if our identity in Christ is defined by humility and confidence; or “humble confidence” is the same, is identical, as Christ in me.

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Identity in Christ is where rubber meets the road in our walk of faith!

As we saw earlier when talking about Jesus and the Father, identity is defining. And the core definition we see is love. Next, because of Christ, we have freedom. So now, we have love and we have freedom and when we combine those, “humble confidence” is the direct, natural, and

(pure, obvious, undeniable) tangible result. *If you have love in your heart and freedom in your mind, then you will be humble in your words and confident in your actions.* (I'll say it again...)

(Pause) One of the things that God has graciously allowed to torment me throughout my professional life to keep me focused and on the straight and narrow is the concept of doing vs. being. Oh, how I hate this still to this very day, this very minute, as I am confronted with my own fleshly desires in seemingly all facets of my life, not just professional. I'll spare you all the details and background, but will share a quick summary.

Arguably the Air Force's greatest fighter pilot ever and one of its most brilliant strategists who was the author of modern airpower theory was Col John Boyd. Yet, he was not adored by the service, but rather scorned. And as he walked through his own valley and shadow of death, he remarked to his protégées:

“And you're going to have to make a decision about which direction you want to go. To be somebody or to do something. In life there is often a roll call. That's when you will have to make a decision. To be or to do? Which way will you go?”¹

Oh, how I hate this. And, of course, in my selfishness, my answer to God whenever He presents that to me is to pridefully, self-confidently object and claim that this is a false dichotomy.

Actually, I know that my complaint is really just a cry for help, for release of my own desires, and to firmly set my mind on things above. I struggle with “To Be Somebody” or “Do Something” when I forget Christ's love, when I forego Christ's freedom, and certainly when I am not living in Christ's humble confidence.

Brothers, I think if we're honest, a lot of us as men, and particularly as Christian men face this very challenge: *to be or to do*. The tension and the paradox is real! So let's see if understanding our identity in Christ, if living with humble confidence can help. Turn with me to the very end of the Gospel of Matthew where we find the Great Commission.

Read with me in Matthew 28:18-20

Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

¹ <https://www.artofmanliness.com/character/advice/john-boyds-roll-call-do-you-want-to-be-someone-or-do-something/>

“If you go that way you can be somebody. You will have to make compromises and you will have to turn your back on your friends. But you will be a member of the club and you will get promoted and you will get good assignments.” ... “Or you can go that way and you can do something — something for your country and for your Air Force and for yourself. If you decide you want to do something, you may not get promoted and you may not get the good assignments and you certainly will not be a favorite of your superiors. But you won't have to compromise yourself. You will be true to your friends and to yourself. And your work might make a difference.

We can see the “Do v. Be” paradox perfectly in Jesus’ words to us. He could have said “go *do*” these things: pass out tracts, conduct devotions, perform service... and this would have all made sense because, after all, he was commissioning us, right? He was sending out to live actively.

But Jesus didn’t say that, nor did He give us instructions for this great task. I want to ask why not, but don’t I will like the answer. Actually, I’m afraid that I might already know it: *Jesus isn’t as concerned with what you do as much as He’s focused on who you are.*

Look in verse 19 where He begins giving the order, “Therefore,...” Stop, we can’t continue yet. I think many of you know, when you see “therefore,” you should ask, what is it “there for” and that answer usually starts with “because.” So backing up now and examining verse 18, *because all authority in heaven and Earth is in Jesus*, because the identity of who He is, we are supposed to go. Please see that Jesus did not emphasize what we are to do, but instead clearly focused on who we are to be--he could’ve said “do disciplining” but he instructed us to simply *be His disciples*... it was our identity that was His focus and His command.

Because of our identity in Christ that is defined by power, because this is who we are to *be*, then we can proceed forth to *do*.

So the question that each of us face every day when we wake up, is who will we *be* today? Every hour, every minute we must make a choice as Col Boyd said... to be or to do. While this answer leads to some very specific outcomes and actions, it is essential that we understand that identity precedes, nay is the very foundation for action.

Simply, who we are, defines what we do.

CLOSING

The theme for this summit was Ephesians 2:10

For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them. -- Ephesians 2:10 (NKJV)

Men, because our identity is God’s workmanship, each one of our lives individually and meticulously crafted by the all-knowing, all-loving Creator, we should walk in this truth (Every minute, of every hour, of every day).

The identity of Christ is power and love – let us walk in this truth.

Our identity because of Christ is one of freedom – let us walk in this truth.

And finally, our identity in Christ fills us with humble confidence – let us walk in this truth.

And let us pray.