

Are We Sinners or Saints?
1 Tim. 1:15; Eph. 1:18 - 12/27/09
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Our identity is who we are. We are known by our name, appearance, and documents that verify who we say we are. What a tragedy to lose our identity. Identity theft is everyone's nightmare. The thought of someone using our name and information to take out loans, receive health care, or make major purchases causes us to shudder.

The type of identity we will explore goes deeper than the above. Self-identity is the way you define who you are. To discover our true self-identity we'll have to dig deeper than beneath the surface. If you were to ask me who I am, I may define myself as a male, age 62+, married, father of four, grandfather of 3, a pastor, with a hobby of landscape painting, and living in Loveland, CO. "No, No," you might say, "*How do you define who you are down deep in the center of your personality, down in the recesses of your emotions?*" I might reply, "*Just back off a bit, I'm not going to tell you, that is much too personal!*" But this is exactly where we need to rummage around during this series of messages. We need to open some closet doors, lift a few lids off some dusty old boxes filled with memories, and move around some furniture of life experiences so that we can grasp how we truly see ourselves.

Why is this topic of self-identity so important that it becomes a subject to deal with in church? It is simple: **We cannot consistently live or act in ways that are inconsistent with the beliefs we hold about ourselves.** If our self-identity is "I'll never amount to much," then we will live consistent with that belief. If our self-identity says, "I am a capable, confident person" Then we'll live consistent with our self-assessment.

It is common knowledge that teenagers are trying to find their own identity apart from their parents. To discover who they are is one of the major tasks of teenagers. This search may lead them in all kinds of directions. Some may find their identity in academics, or athletics, or the school marching band. A few find it by dressing in all black, Goth style. Some may join a gang, or seek their own identity in the arms of another which never succeeds. No other human can provide or be our identity. Most individuals survive this search; Others, never truly discover their own identity and emerge into adulthood as a "lost adolescent" in an adult body. Identity confusion hinders their search for a fulfilling life. Damaged self-identities coupled with damaged emotions will directly affect the quality of one's life and their relationship with God.

As followers of Christ we too can suffer from spiritual identity confusion. For instance, if you were asked, "*Are you a sinner or a saint?*" how would you respond? Don't answer with a "Sunday School" answer...down deep in your being, how do you feel about that question? Are you a "*sinner*" saved by grace just biding your time until Jesus returns or do you see yourself as a "*saint*" living out the identity the Bible says is yours as a new creature in Christ? I dare say that most Christians do not see themselves as "saints". Aware of their own personal failures and shortcomings, they readily see themselves as sinners. Saved, yes, but still dominated by the old fleshly nature and all the negative, self-defeating emotions that go with it.

If we perceive that we are "*sinners*" more than "*saints*" then we will not live as a new creation in Christ. Our life will not be much different than the run of the mill person who doesn't even claim to know Jesus. What then are we to believe about ourselves?

Let's look at a well known follower of Christ and see how he saw himself. In a letter to Timothy, Paul's young protégée, he writes: "**Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners - of whom I am the worst**" (1 Tim. 1:15). "O.K. That settles it!" Someone might say, "We are just saved sinners." That's true, but Paul was talking about his life before he came to Jesus. Prior to knowing Christ he describes himself as being "in Adam." In other words, he was just like every person who has lived since Adam, infected by Adam's propensity to sin. Yes, prior to Christ, Paul described himself as the chief of sinners.

A sinner's condition is described in Eph. 2:1-3: **As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath.** This is the condition and the lifestyle of a person who doesn't know or follow Christ.

All of this changed when Paul gave his life to Jesus. His old life died: **I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.** (Gal. 2:20) We could even say, his old identity as a sinner was crucified with Christ.

In Christ, Paul gained a new identity: **"I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe.."** (Eph. 1:18,19a). Paul sees himself as a saint and he wants the Ephesian believers to see themselves in the same way. His new identity in Christ is that of a saint, not a sinner. Paul never addresses followers of Christ as "sinners". We as believers have stepped out of the category of "sinners" and into the new category made possible through Christ's death on the cross, that of "Saints."

Persons who testify against serious crime cases are sometimes marked for death. They may choose to enter the Federal Witness Protection Program. When they do, they break all ties with their former life, move to some new location, and are given an entirely new identity by Federal Marshals. Have you ever met someone who is in the Witness Protection Program? Well, if you did you would never know it because their old identity has been wiped out and they are living by a new identity....totally disconnected from their old life.

Our salvation introduces a radical change in identities into our lives. **Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!** (2 Cor. 5:17) Without a doubt our new spiritual identity that we receive through Christ far exceeds the old identity that went along with our old sinful nature. However, there is a problem. Our adversary loves to convince us that though we may be a Christian, we are still not much more than broken down sinners. He loves to use the old self-identity, corrupted by sin, defeat, pride, self-delusions, and false beliefs about ourselves to defeat us. He loves to rob us from knowing and experiencing our new identity in Jesus.

In WWII the Nazis would take their Jewish prisoners, strip them of their clothing, shave every hair off their bodies, and replace their names with a tattooed number. The purpose was to rob them of their personal, human identity which defeated them and made them more manageable. Satan does the same thing and it works! There are countless defeated Christians living under the weakness of their old self-identity which they, themselves, empower due to their own lack of understanding of who they have

become as a child of God. They don't understand their own sainthood.

How then do we begin to experience the fullness of life that the bible promises to Believers? It is a two step process that is far from easy to do. First we must begin to see that we are believing many lies about ourselves, kept alive and fresh by our old, damaged identity and fanned into blazing flames by the Evil One who seeks to "steal, kill, and destroy".

Second, we are to live by the truth of God's Word. We need to learn what the Bible has to say about us as new creations in Christ. We are no longer in the category of "Sinners", we are "Saints", who sometimes sin. We have a new, rich, amazing identity which is described in God's Word. We are to discover what the Bible says about our new identity, then believe that it is true, and by faith, put it into practice. James, the brother of Jesus, wrote: "***Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. James 1:22***"

Neil Anderson writes, "*But the progressive work of sanctification only has its full and powerful effect in our lives when that radical inner transformation, our newness in Christ, is realized and appropriated by faith.*" Such inner change is not automatic. It is not a baptism by pixy dust where you instantaneously are transformed, never to be plagued again by the remnants of our damaged emotions and broken self identity. It make take some time, perhaps years, for these truths to sink in, but "*by faith a believer can choose to be what in reality, he already is in Christ*" (Anderson). We can experience healing, though in some cases it may take a lifetime of gradual healing and transformation. God wants you to experience the abundant life in Christ, but it is not handed to us on a silver platter. We must be willing to examine our life deep within and identify what no longer belongs as false motivations. We must be open and willing to put into practice, over and over again the truths about who we are in Christ. And we must realize that in eternity we will be totally free of all the old hurts, heavy baggage, damaged emotions, and broken self-identity. Mean while we can begin to experience the healing and significance that only can be found in Christ.