

BELPRES CHURCH

Just Who Do You Think You Are?

Colossians 3:1-12, 1 Peter 2:1-12, Exodus 19:1-6

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It's so good to see you guys here this morning. Those of you in the room, and also those of you who are joining us online, thank you for being part of our worship today. There are two passages of scripture for this morning. The first one comes from Colossians 3, and it says, "Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died and your life is now hidden with Christ and God. When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory. You have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its creator. Here, there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarians, Scythian, slave or free. But Christ is all and is in all. Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience."

Then the second one is from 1 Peter chapter 2, "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession that you may declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness and into His wonderful light." A couple of weeks ago, I was talking to some people who were relatively new to our church, and they said at first they couldn't figure out why, as soon as I'm done preaching in the sanctuary, I immediately leave. I just walk out. Which probably does look weird if you're new. So they said, "We just thought, 'Wow, he's really a mic drop preacher.'" Now I'm leaving to come over here to preach, but I liked the phrase mic drop preacher. It's better than a couple of months ago when someone said to me, "Is the reason you leave right after you get done preaching because it makes you so tired and you have to take a nap?"

No. I'd way rather be known as Mic Drop Scott than Needs a Nap Dudley. How are you known? What are the things that define you and give you a sense of identity? Is it how well you're doing as a student or as an athlete? Is it your career, the social group you're

part of? What gives you a sense of identity, belonging, and self-worth? We're doing a sermon series called You've Heard It Said, which is a phrase Jesus used to contrast the ideas of his culture with God's ideas. So we're going to do the same thing. Look at some common messages from our culture and compare them to what Jesus says. Because what Jesus says is ultimately more life-giving, more hopeful, and it just plain works better. One of the messages our culture gives us is, you are what you do and how well you do it.

That's our identity. Identity isn't... Identity is more than just how you're known. Identity is closely connected to our sense of self-worth. Identities are closely connected to whether we feel good or bad about ourselves. In non-Western cultures, identity is often largely gained by the family that I'm part of and the tribe that I'm part of. But our modern Western culture is highly individualistic. So we have to craft our own identities as individuals, mostly through what we do, how we do it, how well we do it.

Now, nobody ever says that to us explicitly, but the message is everywhere. What is one of the first things we ask someone when we meet them? What do you do? Or if it's a student, what do you want to do when you get out of college? Are you going to go to college? What do you do? And if someone went to Harvard, or if someone's job includes a C job title, includes a C, CEO, CFO, CO2, whatever, in our culture, that sends a message about who we think they are. It sort of defines them. We carefully cultivate our identities by the car we drive, the clothes we wear, our Instagram posts.

My daughter works in marketing for Disney, and that includes social media. She tells me that my Instagram posts are not cool, dweebish even, because there's no stylistic cohesion, there's no color palette. Apparently, you need a... I didn't know you needed a color palette. I'm a middle-aged Presbyterian pastor. I don't have a color palette. Bland is my color palette. Or we turn to romantic relationships for identity, finding the best-looking, most successful person I can who makes me look good and feel good about myself, which puts way too much pressure on the relationship because now any flaw in my partner is something that I think reflects on me.

Or the big one these days in our country, increasingly, politics is our identity and self-worth. We want to get self-worth by validation from others in our political tribe, which means you always have to do these loyalty tests to prove you're part of all this virtue signaling, to prove you're part of this tribe, and that's forcing people to take increasingly extreme positions on the left and on the right, trying to show their own political tribe, "No, look, I'm really one of you. I'm really, really, really, I'm one of you. Please validate me."

While there are some good things about individualism and focus on the individual, valuing the individuals, there's some good things in that. There's good things in that. But when we have to decide as individuals what our identities will be and then have to

achieve it for ourselves, it puts way too much pressure on work, play, love, politics, everything. If we're successful at those things, we may get a little proud and judgmental of others. Or if career, romance, or being part of the right crowd isn't happening, it'll crush us, which may be why we have an epidemic of depression and anxiety in our culture, particularly in our students, in our young adults. Because we're all... It's killing us. This way to get identity is killing us. We're all stressed out over whether or not I go to the right college, have the right kind of job, or belong to the right kind of crowd. Too much stress.

Okay, the bad news section of the sermon is done. We have eaten our broccoli, so now we can go on to dessert. The good news is, Jesus gives us an indestructible identity that doesn't crush us. Jesus gives it to us, not religion. Religion is just as harsh a task master, all about performance. Did I pray enough? Am I doing enough good things? No, no, religion doesn't help us, but Jesus. When I go to Jesus, what I discover is, I am so valuable to Him that He died on a cross to pay the price for my sins, not because of what I do or how well I do it, but because He loves me, period, full stop. That's my identity, and that's indestructible because it can never be taken away.

As a child of God, that identity stays true. It is true if I am retired. It's true if you're married or you're single. It's true if things are going well, or even if they aren't. It cannot be taken away. It doesn't crush us, and it doesn't cause us to crush others. Because see, if my identity is based in performance, then my identity is always a comparative identity. I know I'm doing well at work, love, or school because I'm doing better than other people. It's comparative. So in order to get a self, we have to look down on somebody else. But an identity based on the fact that Jesus loved me enough to die for me means I can't look down on anyone. I'm just a sinner saved by grace, like everyone else.

Today's passage says, "When Christ, who is your life, that is your whole identity, appears, then you will also appear with Him in glory. Here there is no Gentile or Jew, barbarian, Scythian, slave free, but Christ is all and is in all." Back then, all those different groups, Scythian, barbarian, they look down on other groups. But when Jesus is our all, when He's the center of identity, all those other differences, identity markers, they all become subordinate to Him. It doesn't mean we stop being those things. It doesn't mean you stop being Chinese or Latino or a teacher or a lawyer. That's still a part of you. It's an important part of you. But Jesus is above all of them.

A Christian can never say, "I'm first Chinese or Republican or Democrat, or I'm an American first." We belong to Jesus. That is our identity. Everything else is second place. The question isn't, "Who am I?" The question is "Whose am I?" I belong to Jesus. He made me. So He's the only one that has the authority to tell me who I really am. The only person that can really tell you what a painting is about is the one who made it. The only person who has the right to tell us who we are is the one who made us, Jesus. The

passage out of 1 Peter shows just a few of the things Jesus says you are, just a few of the things He says you are.

So we'll take it one phrase at a time. First, you are wanted. The passage says you are a chosen people, and we all want to be chosen. Back to elementary school, and you're choosing people for the dodgeball teams. Nobody wanted to be chosen last. That's super painful. So I've been told. Not that it happened to me personally. I've read about it. We all want to feel wanted, and that desire to be chosen affects the clothes we wear, the careers we choose. Some of you may be in the wrong profession because when you told people what you really wanted to do, they told you you shouldn't do it. So in order to feel wanted and like you belong, you're in the job you are in now.

A pastor of a big church who had recently retired said to me, "For years, several thousand people every Sunday would show up to hear what I had to say. That first Sunday after I retired, it was just me and my wife at the breakfast table, and she didn't want to hear anything I had to say." He did not feel wanted. You are wanted, chosen before God made the universe. Before God made the universe, He chose to have a you in it. That's how wanted you are. Second, you, in Christ, are a difference-maker. The passage says, "You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood." A priest's job is to help people experience God. They declare God's praises in ways that help people experience Him.

The book of Ephesians says, "For we are God's handiwork." One translation says, "For we are God's masterpiece, created in Christ Jesus to do good works which God prepared in advance for us to do." Before He made the universe, He chose you, not just to exist but to have an eternal purpose by how you bring His kingdom, good news to the poor, helping the lonely feel, loved helping people experience Jesus love for them. You're not a student, an athlete, a manager, a teacher, a lawyer, or a homemaker. You are a wanted, eternal difference-maker.

Third, you are valuable. The text says you and I are God's special possession, which deliberately echoes a passage in the Old Testament where God says to the Israelites, "You'll be my treasured possession, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." And one of the ways we determine the value of something is how much someone is willing to pay for it. The Bible says you were bought at a price. You have infinite value because Jesus, who is God in the flesh, was willing to die on a cross, die for you with His life, give His life for you to pay the price for your sins because you are His everything. You are His life. You are infinitely valued to Him.

Fourth, you are a new creation. The Colossians passage says, "Your life is now hidden with Christ in God." Last week's passage says, "If anyone is in Christ, they are a new creation. The old is gone, the new is here." And that phrase in Christ shows up in the

Bible about 140 times. From a theological perspective, it is meant quite literally. God says, "I don't see you the way you see yourself. I don't see you the way others see you. Your life is hidden in Christ. You are in Jesus. He surrounds you. So when I look at you," God says, "I see you through the completed work of Christ on the cross." A few verses later, it says, "God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God." God treated Jesus as if He were your sin so He could treat you as if you were Jesus' righteousness.

Our identities are not as something, identities as a student, as a CEO, as a this or that. Our identities are not as something. Our identities are in something, Jesus. Not who your parents say you are, not who teachers say you are, a new creation in Jesus, that's who you really are. Not someone who has to live up to all the cultural expectations to be good-looking and successful and all these other things, because trying to live up to all the cultures, that can just be super disappointing. GQ has still not called me to be one of their cover models. Guys, I'm beginning to think it's not going to happen. I don't know why they're not calling. They have all of this to work with. Why are they not calling? I don't understand. It's going to happen.

It's going to happen. Anthony prophesied it's going to happen. So when they need a bland, middle-aged Presbyterian pastor for their cover... That's all a lot of pressure to try to be all the things that were said we're supposed to be. But God says who you are. You are a new creation in Him. Now, that doesn't mean God approves of everything we do because some of the things we do hurt ourselves or they hurt others, and they keep us from God's best. So He calls us out of those behaviors to live as the new creations He says we already are. We just have to live into it, wanted, difference makers, infinite value, new creation. That's just a few of the things that Jesus says that you are.

That first one is the most important. You are wanted. Not wanted if. Not if you get good grades, not if you have a great job, not if you are good and obey and do everything right. You are wanted, not if you are wanted, period, full stop. That's the most important one because we can turn even this list back into something that we have to perform and to get God to want us, "Oh, man, I feel pressure to be a difference maker today. I need to be a... Oh, here you come here. Let me make a difference in your life today." It can be just as much as a trap. But if we understand that we are unconditionally loved and wanted, we will just naturally make a difference because Christ's love will compel us.

So then, how do we experience this kind of freedom? Because we don't always experience it. My identity is incredibly wrapped up in this job. So how do we experience the freedom of letting God tell us who we are? Pastor Rick Warren says, "Think of it like having your financial identity stolen, your credit card, your social security number. Think of it like that." And he says, "Satan and the culture are always trying to steal our true identity." And we hear it all the time. If you get good grades, if you get on the football team, if you land that promotion, if you have the right clothes size, if you look a certain

way, then maybe people will want you. Which means if I don't have those things, then who am I? And that makes us anxious and stressed out. Satan and the culture try to steal our true identities.

If someone stole your social security number and your credit card, what would you do? You would do a couple of things. First, you would recognize that your true identity had been stolen. You can't fix it unless you recognize it. A lot of times, I don't think we even recognize that our identities have been stolen. We just accept them as the culture gives them to us or as others gives them to us. A good way to recognize where our identity has been stolen is that often, when we're anxious or fearful, it's because something that is core to our identity is being threatened. Often, when we get proud or judgmental, it's because we think we're doing really well at something that is core to our identity. So this week, when you feel anxious, proud, or judgmental, ask yourself, is this coming out of a false identity?

Second, if your financial identity had been stolen, you would shut down accounts made with that stolen identity. We open accounts with our stolen identity all the time. We make agreements with our false identities all the time. So shut those accounts down. When you feel inferior or superior, when things are going well or not going well, just shut those lies down and then remind yourself of who God says you are. I find it helpful to say it out loud or whisper it under my breath, "I am more than my job. I am more than my social group. I am more than my looks. I am wanted, valued, have eternal purpose in Christ." And saying it out loud makes it more real.

I got an email from a woman in our church, and this is what she said. She said, "I can remember one of the first times someone declared a true identity over my life. Middle school summer camp with BelPres, one of my mentors prayed over each of us and wrote down words that came to mind. She handed me a rock on which she had written the word steadfastness because of my unwavering relationship with Jesus. Listening to someone declare who they believe Jesus created me to be was an encounter with the Holy Spirit I'll never forget. Thinking of myself as having a steadfast heart and hope in Jesus has carried me through seasons and even years of anxiety and doubt about who I am because there are times where I can't see it and I choose not to believe it.

10 years later now that rock is sitting on my desk in my office and I work in a place where difficult stories are shared with me every day. Seeing the word steadfastness in front of me reminds me of who I am in places where hope feels absent and reminds me to speak truth over those who sit across from me and share their story." Every time she looks at that rock, she's shutting down agreements with her false identity and reminding herself of who God says she really is.

Third, live into your new identity. If someone stole your financial identity, you'd close down all the accounts made with that stolen identity and you would open new ones, and

those would be the ones you use, not the old ones. It's the same in our personal lives. Who we think we are determines our behavior to a large extent. I have a friend who never thought of himself as musical until people started telling him that he sang well, and he began to think that he was musical. So now he plays a whole bunch of instruments. Who he thought he was determined how he behaved. That's what the passage out of Colossians is getting at when it says, "You have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self." AKA, you are a new creation. "Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved," This is who you actually are. So live it, "Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience." Because that's who you really are. So live into it.

Finally, to get this freedom of identity that comes from Jesus, do the Bible reading plan that you heard about earlier in this sermon. We're inviting our whole church, from preschoolers to grandparents, to do a Bible reading plan between now and January. We'll all read the same passages three times a week, three different passages a week. We'll all read them together so that we can do this together as a church, maybe even have conversations, our little kids all the way to grandparents, not as some kind of legalistic religious thing that we have to do, but because who God says we are is in the Bible. Psalm 119 says, "I have hidden Your word in my heart that I might not sin against You." The more I hide God's word in my heart, which tells me who I am, the more it's going to take over my life.

Pastor Tim Keller tells a story of a woman who kept getting involved with men who didn't treat her very well. They would cheat on her. They were emotionally abusive, and the therapist told her, "It's because you're getting your identity from men." And this woman agreed. She said, "As long as I could remember, I didn't feel like I was worth anything unless some man loved me." She was seeking her identity in romantic relationships. Now, for you, it might be different. For you, it might be a career, it might be politics, it might be something else that you're seeking identity from. Her therapist had the right diagnosis but went on to give a terrible prescription. The therapist said, "So instead of finding your identity in men, why don't you go find a very fulfilling career and get your identity there?" Fire that therapist, like, "Whoa, you need a different career."

Fulfilling a career is a great thing, but it's a bad way to find identity because it can be taken away. This woman said, "That's stupid. I would just exchange one idol for another." Along the way, some people introduced her to Jesus and how much He loved her that He died for her, and that really captured her heart. So a few years after the therapist, now she's a Christian, she's a follower of Christ, and she says now when she's in church and worshiping, and when what Jesus did for her feels so real in her heart, she says, "I think of the men I know, and in my mind I say, 'I'm glad I know you, and I'd certainly like to be married, but you're not my life. Jesus is my life.'"

See, she's shutting down those accounts. Rebuking lies, "Jesus is my life. You're a good thing, but you're not an ultimate thing. You can't give me many of the things that Jesus

gives me. I'd love to be married, but if I'm not, I still have Jesus. I will not make career or relationships or anything else the center of my identity. A career didn't die for me. If I live for career and fail, it'll beat me up for the rest of my life."

Jesus is the only thing we have, that if we have Him, we are satisfied. If we fail Him, He will never leave us or forsake us. She practices that when she goes in worship, and it's getting her free of the stress and the anxiety of finding identity in a career, romantic relationships, or finding identity anywhere else. She's experienced a freedom in Jesus, free from all that stress and anxiety, because she knows, "I am a wanted eternal difference maker, a new creation of infinite value. That's who God says I am. Who cares what anyone else says? I am who He says I am. Whom then shall I fear?"

So how about you? Just who do you think you are anyway? Because you are not who your parents or peers say you are. Not who your mistakes say you are. You are not who that divorce says. You are not who being molested says you are. You are not who your successes say you are. You are not who your diplomas say you are. You are not your nationality, politics, age, education, or job. The only one who has the right to tell you who you are is the one who made you, and He says you are a child of God, forgiven in Jesus Christ, bought with a price, paid for by His blood, healed, restored, ransomed of the Lord, loved with an everlasting love, fearfully and wonderfully made, a new creation, a holy nation, conqueror and co-heir with Christ set apart, brand new heart, righteous, and redeemed. Who the Son sets free is free indeed, and you are free in Him. That's who you are. Don't let the devil tell you anything different.

Amen. Hallelujah.

So Jesus, we bring our identities to You, battered, broken, and bruised by the culture, and we give them to You. Lord, my prayer, our prayer is, this week, of all the voices we hear, Yours would be the loudest, telling us who we are in You. Lord, help us to hear that directly in our hearts and in our minds. Help us to rebuke the lies and shut down those accounts with our stolen identities and find our hope and our identity in You, and then, Lord, we will point to You as the author of our freedom and joy. In Jesus' name, amen.

Discussion Questions:

Read this week's scripture(s) & answer the below questions with your friends, family, or All In small group.

Opening Question: Looking back to last week's sermon and scripture... How did you live differently or practice what we talked about in your life this week? What did you do and how did it go?

Scripture Reflection Questions: Read this week's scripture together and discuss the following:

- What do you feel when you read this scripture (excited, angry, worried, etc...)? Why do you think that is? (Explain in your group and then take that response to Jesus in prayer this week.)
- As you read this scripture, where does it challenge your current cultural context?

Sermon Reflection Questions: Reflecting on this week's sermon, discuss the following:

- These 3 passages are similar. What themes do you see that are common to all of them?
- When have you acted out of a sense of who God says you are that was different than who you may have thought you were?

Closing Question and Application: Given what we've discussed together today, how might God want you to apply these learnings to your life or in the life of your community this next week? Who might you share this with?

Closing group prayer: Spend a few minutes together in your group sharing prayer requests and then praying together for each other. Thank God for the time together, the conversation shared, the other people in the group, and for encouragement in the week ahead.