

John 10:14-15 (CEB)

¹⁴“I am the good shepherd. I know my own sheep and they know me, ¹⁵just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. I give up my life for the sheep.

Ephesians 4:17–24 (CEB)

¹⁷So I’m telling you this, and I insist on it in the Lord: you shouldn’t live your life like the Gentiles anymore. They base their lives on pointless thinking, ¹⁸and they are in the dark in their reasoning. They are disconnected from God’s life because of their ignorance and their closed hearts. ¹⁹They are people who lack all sense of right and wrong, and who have turned themselves over to doing whatever feels good and to practicing every sort of corruption along with greed.

²⁰But you didn’t learn that sort of thing from Christ. ²¹Since you really listened to him and you were taught how the truth is in Jesus, ²²change the former way of life that was part of the person you once were, corrupted by deceitful desires. ²³Instead, renew the thinking in your mind by the Spirit ²⁴and clothe yourself with the new person created according to God’s image in justice and true holiness.

Colossians 3:5–14 (CEB)

⁵So put to death the parts of your life that belong to the earth, such as sexual immorality, moral corruption, lust, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry). ⁶The wrath of God is coming upon disobedient people because of these things. ⁷You used to live this way, when you were alive to these things. ⁸But now set aside these things, such as anger, rage, malice, slander, and obscene language. ⁹Don’t lie to each other. Take off the old human nature with its practices ¹⁰and put on the new nature, which is renewed in knowledge by conforming to the image of the one who created it. ¹¹In this image there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised nor uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave nor free, but Christ is all things and in all people.

¹²Therefore, as God’s choice, holy and loved, put on compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. ¹³Be tolerant with each other and, if someone has a complaint against anyone, forgive each other. As the Lord forgave you, so also forgive each other. ¹⁴And over all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity.

1 Peter 2:9-10 (NRSV)

⁹But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

¹⁰Once you were not a people,
but now you are God’s people;
once you had not received mercy,
but now you have received mercy.

Who are you? Who are we?

Usually, when I sit down to begin writing one of these studies, I’ve got things pretty well sorted out in my mind: opening, structure, major points and themes, and so on. But not every week and certainly not this week. The subject seems straightforward: our new identity in Christ. Sounds good . . . but what do we really mean by “identity”?

We live in a time when the question of identity is increasingly thought of as an inward journey. We, or at least generations younger than mine, search for “the real me,” “the inner me,” “the true me.” Here’s a few quotes that illustrate the present-day challenge of identity:

- “I’m a stranger in my own life.” — Lang Leav, from *Sad Girls*

- “I don't know who I am right now. But I know who I'm not. And I like that.” — Amber Smith, from *The Way I Used to Be*
- “Your identity is not in who you can be. It is in who you always have been” — Ricky Maye
- “What matters most is not 'what' you are, but 'who' you are.” — DaShanne Stokes

As I read through a lot of present-day quotes and passages about identity, I was struck by the thought that ancient peoples had an easier time with this. For the people of the ancient near-east, there was no belief in an “inner me” or a “real me” that they had to discover. A person’s “identity,” their “self” was seen in their actions and in their social position. They weren’t worried about “finding themselves” or discovering their “inner spirit;” their actions revealed the truth about their true self and others were always ready to tell them what they saw.

To this day, I suspect that for many of us, our “identities” are bound up with what we do and how others see us. For example, my identity could be centered on my marriage, “I am Patti’s husband,” or my children and grandchildren, or my work, or my hobbies, or . . . and the list goes on. But, there also possibilities that are more immutable. I am also white, male, 67 years old, kinda chunky . . . and that list goes on too. Somehow, out of all this, we end up with a sense of who we are, an identity. We might be comfortable with this identity or we might be desperately anxious to change it.

The new way, befitting a new life

Let’s take a look at the above passage from Colossians, which I’ve quoted at some length. If you look at the beginning and end of the passage, you’ll see Paul contrasts two ways of living. The first way is that of immorality, lust, greed, impurity, and so on.¹ The second way is that of kindness, compassion, humility, and so on. Paul wants these new believers to grasp that they have been reborn² in Christ, they are part of a new humanity. Thus, they are to remove their old way of living and put on this new, this Christ-like, way of living. As Paul puts it, “put on the new nature, which is renewed in knowledge by conforming to the image of the one who created it” (3:10). N. T. Wright makes a marvelous point here:

Here’s the acid test for whether Paul is talking sense or not. Read again through the list of sexual and speech-related misbehavior in verses 5–9. Then read through verses 12–17. Ask yourself this: supposing there was a town in which everybody behaved in the way described in verses 5–9. And supposing, a few miles down the road, there was a town where everybody behaved in the way described in verses 12–17. Which town would you rather live in?

There will always be some cynics who say they would prefer the first. People are free there, they’ll say. People are having a good time. All right, they may lose friends now and then. Some people who can’t look after themselves may get hurt. But they’ll be doing their own thing, living cheerful and robust lives. Whereas the other lot (the same people will say) look like a bunch of wimps. Goody-goodies who can’t stand up for themselves. Always saying ‘sorry’ and singing hymns. This reaction is, I think, quite common in today’s world.

But a moment’s thought will show how shallow such an approach would be. The practices Paul outlines in the earlier section result in communities—families, villages, whole towns—tearing themselves apart. Unbridled sexual license and untamed angry speech result in the breakdown of relationships at every level. Some

¹ When we come to lists like these in Paul’s letters, it is always important to remember that he is writing to people of a world very different from our own. The translators do their best to bring the Greek words to our world, but often, Paul doesn’t really mean quite what he thinks he does. Our cultural translation can leave much to be desired, almost as if we think Paul was writing to us. He was not.

² Paul doesn’t refer to rebirth explicitly. But Jesus’ metaphor in John 3, which we looked at two weeks ago, and Paul’s metaphor both point to the same truth: when we put our faith in Jesus, we become new creations, part of Jesus’ new humanity.

people may fool themselves that they're having a good time in that atmosphere. But again and again, in moments of truth, they will admit that they are lost, confused, lonely and bitter.

Nor are the people Paul is describing in this section a bunch of weak-willed, wimpish people without much to say for themselves. Anyone who thinks that simply doesn't know what they're talking about. Have you ever seriously tried to forgive someone who has wronged you? Have you ever seriously tried to be compassionate and patient? Have you ever tried to let Christ's peace, Christ's word, Christ's name be the reality around which you order your life? If you have, you'll know it's not easy. It takes serious prayer and real moral effort. And people who engage in that effort tend to be people who are also capable of taking difficult decisions and engaging in challenging activities in other spheres as well. Christian behavior, in other words, makes you more human, not less. Self-indulgence and habitual anger and lying may seem like fun for a while, but they destroy you sooner or later—often sooner.³

Or let's take another metaphor, this time from Jesus in John 10. He is the good shepherd, making us what? That's right, the sheep. It is only a metaphor and is limited as are all metaphors, but still. Sheep? What are we to make of this metaphor? A couple of things. First, sheep live in community. The shepherd looks after the whole flock.⁴ Second, sheep follow their shepherd. In the mid-east, that is exactly how it happens. Sheep are not driven, even by an adorable pig, but, instead, follow behind their shepherd. The sheep are not seeking to discover some inner sheepness – they simply do what sheep do. And Christians do what Christians do; we follow Jesus.

God's own people

The belief that we have to find our “true identity” by discovering our “inner spirit” is a burden we need not carry. As the psalmist sings, “It is God who has made us and not we ourselves” (100:3). It ought to be liberating to know that our identity is found in how we live and in the community that is God's people. Do we worship? Do we learn? Do we serve? Do we connect with others? Do we truly give of ourselves to proclaim and build for God's kingdom? These are the questions we need to ask ourselves.

The Jews of Jesus' day had a long tradition of studying God's word. They believed that this was the path to true wisdom, the way to really know God. Of course, such a path wasn't realistic for the average Joe trying to get by day to day. How could he ever hope to know God if this was the path?

But Jesus had known God simply by living in God's presence every day. He offered to everyone the opportunity to set aside their heavy “yoke” of obedience to the law, to come to know God by listening to and imitating Jesus. This “yoke” was easy and the burden light.

Jesus also wants to lift burdens from us, including the burden of thinking that we create our identity. I am not merely a disciple who fails to love as I should, I am God's. We are God's. It is in God that I find my true self . . . and nowhere else.

When Peter writes to the Christians, he reminds them that they *are* a holy nation; they *are* God's people. Not that they are becoming, but that they *are*. We are a holy people, set apart by God so that we might proclaim God to the world in everything we say and do. This is who we are. This is our identity.

³ Wright, T. (2004). *Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon* (pp. 180–181). London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.

⁴ Yes, I checked. The custom is to call a bunch of sheep a flock, not a herd. Must have been started by some cattle guys. Flock?

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

The discussion questions for this series are drawn from the curriculum for our Connection Groups, which will be meeting throughout the series. The questions were written by Rev. Allison Jean.

1. Do you feel that your identity as a Christian defines who you are in a significant way? Why or why not? How does your identity in Christ change what you do every day?
2. When has there been a time you have struggled to recognize Jesus' identity as savior, the good Shepherd, or Lord in your life? What was preventing you from doing so?
3. When do you struggle with assigning identities to others? How can you begin to see them as a child of God instead?
4. What part of your new identity as a disciple of Christ do you struggle with the most? How can you begin to embrace this more fully?

Daily Bible Readings

This week: *More on our new identity*

Monday, Psalm 25 A prayer for a new heart

Tuesday, John 7:45-52 Nicodemus (John 3) is now Jesus' defender. What do his actions say about his identity?

Wednesday, Romans 6:15-23 Once slaves to sin, we are now free

Thursday, Galatians 5:13-26 Living by the Spirit – stepping out as your new self

Friday, Ephesians 2:11-18, esp. v. 15 From two, God has made one new humanity

Saturday, 1 John 2:29-3:3 Everyone who does right has been born of Christ.

An archive with more than 700 of these studies can be found at www.scottengle.org

Scott Engle's Bible Classes

Monday Evening Class

We are studying the gospel of John.

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

We are studying the book of Samuel.

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.

On occasion Scott must cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Scott's 10:50 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

Our current series: *Rescue: Images of Salvation*