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Sermon Series: *Show Me Your ID, No. 2*

Broken by Sin

January 22, 2023

Ephesians 2:1-10 (NIV)

As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, ² 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: ³ All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh[a] and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath.

⁴ But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, ⁵ made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions – it is by grace you have been saved.

⁶ And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, ⁷ in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.

⁸ For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – ⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast. ¹⁰ For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

The book of Ephesians is where you’ll find our text today – I’ll meet you there in a few minutes. Ephesians, Chapter Two.

Last week, we began to talk about *identity*, which we very basically defined as *a person’s sense of self and self-worth*.

Now, I know there’s more to it than that, but broadly speaking, I do think that definition is one that is agreeable to believers in God and followers of Jesus, and also to those in our world who are not God-believers or Jesus-followers.

Identity is our sense of self and self-worth.

From there, however, the “God world” and let’s say the “non-God world,” begin to disagree with one another about identity, and one primary disagreement has to do with its *source*.

Those who do not believe in God or follow Jesus – the non-God world – maintain that persons are able to determine their *own* identity – we are able, ourselves, to determine our own sense of worth and value.

Last week, we said that has happened, in our American culture, in two main ways.

For generations, most people rather adopted the identity that some group of people outside themselves had, intentionally or not, placed upon them. I gave my grandfather as an example of that – he did what he felt he had to do *for the sake of those around him*.

Most in more recent generations, however, have determined their identities based on their *own preferences and feelings and desires* – basically taking

their identities in whatever makes them feel good or that seems right at the moment.

There are plusses and minuses to both of those approaches, however *the weakness of both is that they rely entirely on human discernment and wisdom*.

Even though I’m a redeemed follower of Jesus and have His Spirit in me helping to guide me, that – plus 3 cups of coffee – does not mean that I am always correct in my judgments. When determining something as significant and pervasive as my identity, I need something more objective.

My senses and perceptions and feelings and interpretations wind up being wrong multiple times a day, easily. Realizing that gives me enough pause to wonder: is there a *better* way to determine something as *important* as *identity*?

Well, it turns out there is!

We said last week that that other way – the way of those who affirm the reality of God – is to take *His* word about our identity, since *He’s* the One who made us in the first place.

Listen, if you can be convinced that something as intricate as a human being could not have just crawled out of some primordial swamp somewhere...

If you can be convinced that at least some intelligent power has to be behind the making of a person...

Then maybe we ought to take to heart what that Creator God has to say about our sense of self and self-worth.

And He *does* have something to say about our identity.

He comments on it in several places in His Word, but we looked, last Sunday, at one place in particular: the creation account itself, in Genesis 1. There we heard God say that *you* are, that *I* am, and that *all we humans are*:

- 1) made by Him – and in His own image and likeness.
- 2) Because He made us, we are of great value to Him.
- 3) Because we are the only element of His creation that He made in His image, we are ranked above the rest of creation.
- 4) We are made either male or female. God says that several times in the creation account and beyond.
- 5) God made us to flourish and grow and develop and relate with one another and to lead the rest of His creation.
- 6) And, God says that we, and the rest of this world He made: we are very good.

That’s who God says we are, which *is* the *basis* of our sense of self and worth.

So, in a world like ours, a world of people struggling with *depression* and *suicide* and *wonderings* about *who* they are and *if* they’re valuable and *why* they exist, this is great, great news!

Here are the answers to those questions.

Simply because we are human beings, we are inherently special and tremendously valuable to the God who made us.

Which means that all of what our culture sees as negative and even devaluing about persons: none of that matters; none has any foundation in God.

Those around us might critique us in all sorts of ways. To them, we're too short or too tall.

We're too thin or too fat.

We're too young or too old.

To them, we're unwanted because we're not pretty enough or smart enough or athletic enough or artistic enough.

We struggle in some way. And so, they say we're weird; we're whack-o; we're less than whatever standards our society sets. So, we're told we're not worth much.

But God says none of that is so! We don't have to believe the nonsense society tries to sell, because society didn't make us. God made us and we are tremendously valuable to Him.

Just *how valuable* are we to Him? We are so valuable to God that we are worth the *life* of His *one* and *only Son*.

Now, I know we've heard that over and over again, that Jesus died for you and for me. But would you hear that, maybe in a new way, today?

God—the One who made us—offered His *own Son's life* for *your* life and *for* mine. That is how *valuable* we are to God.

So of course, the next question is, "Why did He have to do that? Why did *Jesus have to die* so that we could live?"

Well, the answer to that question takes us to another, more unfortunate, part of our identity—of who we are—which we have to own sooner or later if we're going to be honest with ourselves about ourselves. And that is that *we are, fundamentally, broken because of sin*.

God made humanity, as we said, in His image.

But part of what that means is that we have a free will: we have the ability to choose the roads we take in life.

And in that same Eden where God made us, our forebears chose to do something *other* than what God said to do. And that one, seemingly insignificant, act of rebellion began a series of events in our world that has touched us all in the very deepest parts.

When they said to God, "You know, in spite of what you say, I'm going to eat this," that act of disobedience was...well, it's as if they tossed a snowball down a hill, and as it rolled, it picked up more and more snow and got bigger and bigger, and now it affects everything in its path. It affects all of us and every part of us, in one way or another.

You can read the whole story in Genesis 3, but the sum of it is that although God didn't make us to be self-serving, we are *now* all born with this self-serving

attitude that, if left to its own devices, will eventually kill us and harm those around us.

Inward-curved hearts – that's what sin did to us. It turned our attention and affections inward—and it has made *us* the most important thing to us.

You see, where God created us to be naturally concerned about the good of others, now the concern for our own satisfaction is our highest priority.

Our primary thoughts, now, are about what we want. What pleases me. What benefits me. What exalts me. What promotes me. That's what we're naturally inclined to pursue.

That's not the nature God created us with, but that's the nature sin and all its effects has caused us to have.

Ever since Eden, that's our natural state of thinking and being. That's what sin has done to us.

That's part of our identity.

This is what the Apostle Paul is talking about in our Scripture text today. Look how he puts it there, beginning in verse one. He writes that, "*we are dead in our transgressions and sins.*"

Now that is a profound statement, if you really think about it.

Humanity, in our post-fall state, is *dead*.

What can dead people do?

Not much, and we'll come back to that in a minute.

First, though, let's see what Paul means by "dead," because, let's face it: we're *not* dead.

I'm not dead.

You're not dead.

All those people driving by out there on the road: they're not dead.

The people Paul was writing to: they weren't dead, as we think of dead, anyway, or he wouldn't have had any reason to write this, because they wouldn't have been able to read it.

Obviously, it's not a physical death Paul is declaring, although that does come eventually to us all, doesn't it? That's part of it.

But the far more significant part is the spiritual and relational death.

Because of sin, we are now separated from God.

He is perfect and righteous and good, but we are not. He made us to be perfect, righteous and good, but, now, because of that rebellion back in Eden, we are no longer.

We no longer have access to Him who is our life, you see? The One who made us and sustains us.

So, we are as good as dead, because of, Paul says, sin.

And what does he mean by sin?

Of course, many people today, when they think of sin, they think of things like murder or adultery or lying or stealing, stuff like that.

And sin is that, but it's also far more than that.

Sin is also this state of self-centeredness that we've been born into because of that rebellion against God back in Eden: that rejection of God and His way.

That drive to *do* and to *get* and to *have* what *we* want.

It's the reason that "mine" is one of the first words out of even little babies' mouths.

That snowball rolling down the hill has rolled over us. Just because we're human, we've gotten caught up in it, and we've participated in it, and because of all that, we are separated from God—spiritually dead—because of sin.

Verse 3 there, "*We gratify the cravings of our flesh and follow its desires and thoughts.*"

That plays out in so many ways in our lives—in our fallen state—that we often don't even realize we're doing it.

We step on others to get what we want.

We reject the good of others for the sake of our own.

We ignore even God's will and good in order to do as we please, just as Adam and Eve did in the garden, you see?

That's why Paul says there in verse 3 that "*we were, by nature, deserving of wrath.*"

This is part of human identity as well: dead to God, spiritually dead, and having this preoccupation with self—because of sin.

This is important, you see, because if you and I ever want to really understand who we are and how we work as humans:

- why we do the things we do;
- why we react sometimes the way we do;
- why children need to be taught to share with playmates (but we never seem to have to teach them how to grab things away from playmates—did you ever notice that?).

If we ever really want to understand who we are and how we work, then we have to own this business of being dead in sin as part of our identity.

We have to be honest with ourselves.

We're never going to get very far with God or anyone else, really, if we don't own this. We'll just go around and around in circles of destructive, self-centered behavior—just as most of our world is doing right now.

This is why society is falling apart in so many ways, you see?

If everyone is out only for their own good, then nobody's out for the good of anyone else. And if no one realizes that and owns it and tries to fix it—tries to do something about it—well, that's how you utterly destroy a family, a church, a nation—not to mention our eternal souls.

And try as we might, we couldn't fix it, which is why God, the creator—the one who made us—stepped in and offered *His own Son's life*, which was unstained by sin. God offered Jesus' life for *your* life and *for* mine.

That's how much God loves us—that's how *valuable* we are to God.

Paul says it in verse 4 there: "*Because of His great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace [God's grace] that you have been saved.*"

That's how much we're loved by God. That is our identity.

But that's also how broken we are—apart from Jesus.

That's also our identity.

Apart from Jesus, we are so broken, we're dead. And when you're dead, you can't do much of anything well, and especially you can't determine your own identity—your own self-worth and value.

Why? Dead people don't see correctly or feel correctly. Dead people don't perceive or respond or evaluate correctly.

That's why the world is like it is: because there are lots of dead people trying to do things they just can't do—because they have not received Jesus. They're apart from God and His life—and from His wisdom and discernment.

And that's why it is so important to find our identity in God and what He says, and not according to our own suppositions and "guessimations" and those of the world around us.

When we try to determine our identity for ourselves, we wind up hurting ourselves and others, because that identity we create becomes an idol.

You see it all the time—certainly outside the church, but it sneaks into the body of Christ too—as people get confused and make poor choices about identity.

A wife finds her worth in how her husband treats her.

A man finds his value in his career.

A strong man finds his identity in his strength.

A beautiful woman finds her identity in her beauty.

A doctor finds his worth in the way others' praise him for his talents.

A politician or some other public figure takes her value in the praise of her constituents.

A pastor finds meaning in the responses of the congregation after preaching.

It's not that enjoying these things is bad, but when we let them become part of our identity, over time they overtake, in our hearts, who we are simply as God's broken, but loved and redeemed, child.

That's when identity confusion settles in.

And then, what happens to that wife when her husband has an affair?

Or when the company has cutbacks and the job ends?

What happens when the strength and beauty fade?

What happens to the doctor when he just can't save the patient, or when the political winds shift, or all those positive responses to the sermons turn to critiques?

Their very identities are yanked out from under those people, you see, and their sense of self and worth just evaporates, which leads to utter heartbreak or depression, mental breakdown, substance abuse, or suicide.

In spite of what our world says, we cannot determine our own identities in any way that brings health and wholeness and life. We are too broken to do that.

We need God and His word for that, both His written word—this Bible right here—and we need Jesus, God's living Word, in order to know who we really are.

Will you be honest enough with yourself to admit that?

If you have never done it before, will you admit, today, that you need the truth of the word of God, and the grace and the life of Jesus in order to really, truly know who you are?

Counselor Lee Lewis writes, "As the sufferings and trials of this life squeeze our hearts, what is often exposed is where we have found identity outside of who we are in Christ."¹

Will you, today, let all these temporary, earthly senses of worth go, so that your sense of self and worth is based *only* on the fact that you are the much-loved creation of a holy God, who has saved you from brokenness and sin through the work of His son, Jesus?

Realizing – being honest with ourselves and owning:

- who God really is,
- who we really are, and,
- what God has done for us in Jesus – that is the only place where real wholeness and peace with self will ever be found.

Closing Prayer

Closing Song: *My Faith Has Found a Resting Place*, vv. 1-3

Benediction:

Nearly every time we receive Holy Communion, we recite these words of confession as we pray:

Almighty God, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, maker of all things, judge of all people, we confess that we have sinned, and we are deeply grieved as we remember the wickedness of our past lives. We have sinned against You, Your holiness and Your love, and we deserve only Your indignation and anger.

We sincerely repent, and we are genuinely sorry for all wrongdoing and every failure to do the things we should. Our hearts are grieved, and we acknowledge that we are hopeless without Your grace.

What are we doing? We're saying just what the Apostle Paul says there in Ephesians: that apart from Jesus, we're dead and helpless and hopeless.

The dead cannot make good decisions, so listen: we can't let the dead of our world, or any still-dead part of us that we've not surrendered to Jesus, determine our identity and worth.

God has so much better for us in Christ. Let us believe Him for that, and let's trust Him with who we are.

¹ <https://www.biblicalcounselingcoalition.org/2017/05/03/the-implications-of-misplaced-identity/>