

Confirmed

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[0 : 00] Well, again, good morning to all of you, especially those who are joining for the first time. We have been preaching through the lectionary up until this point this year.

We're going to take a break from the lectionary this year to talk about something called confirmation. And the reason we're doing that is because in May of this year on the weekend of Pentecost, we're going to have a confirmation service.

And I want to strongly encourage those of you who have not yet been confirmed. If you're here, you're a Christian, you've been baptized, but you've never been confirmed. I want to strongly encourage you to consider doing so.

And the reason that we're talking about it now in January, if it's not until May, is because one of the things that you need to do in order to be confirmed is to go through our confirmation class, which is called Foundations.

That happens to start this coming week. And so if anybody is moved after this service to want to do confirmation, then you still have time to join the class, and it would be really cool to see you in it.

[1 : 02] It's a lot of fun. Now, I know that some of you have already been confirmed, and so you're thinking, well, this is not going to be relevant to me. I've already done this. And some of you don't really know what I'm talking about.

You're pretty sure you're not interested. Some are not Christians, and you're thinking, wow, this could not be more irrelevant to my life. I hope to persuade you that this is, in fact, highly relevant no matter where you're coming from, because as we talk about confirmation, it's going to give us a chance to clear up some of the most popular misconceptions about not only confirmation but also Christianity in general.

A lot of churches treat confirmation like a kind of graduation ceremony or a coming-of-age ceremony where kids at a certain age all go through confirmation.

And for a lot of kids, that marks really the end of their formal involvement at church. Their parents say, I just want you to be confirmed. And then they go up, and they get confirmed, and then they're sort of finally released into the wild post-confirmation.

And so that really isn't a faithful representation of the role that confirmation is meant to play in the Christian life. And so what we're going to see is that confirmation is about a lot more than that.

[2 : 16] It's also, as we think about the way popularly, the popular misconceptions around Christianity, we're going to see that Christianity is not just fire insurance. It's not just a way of getting right with God.

It's not just a way to give us ourselves or our kids a list of do's and don'ts that will help out in life. It's actually an invitation to become a fully formed human being.

And one of the things that we believe as Christians is that the gospel is the means, the only means through which we are able to become fully formed human beings. And so understanding confirmation helps us understand and unpack what that means.

So we're going to see this morning three things. We're going to look at 1 Peter 2, verses 1 through 10. And we're going to see that confirmation is really about three core things that are all very important.

It's about our maturity. It's about membership in something bigger than ourselves. And it's about mission and the way God's mission applies to each one of us in our vocations.

[3 : 17] So maturity, membership, and mission. Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word and we thank you for your ongoing work. Lord, I think about our Sunday school class this morning and this idea that the gospel is continually bearing fruit in our lives and in the world.

Lord, and so that's what we're here to focus on this morning is the way the gospel can bear fruit in our lives. I pray as we look at this passage that we would hear your voice.

I pray that you would bring us growth and grace, love, encouragement, Lord, or even if we need it, challenge and conviction.

Lord, I pray that you would do your work in us as you promised to do. In your son's name we ask these things. Amen. So first of all, as we look at 1 Peter 2, 1 through 10, we see that confirmation is really focused on our maturation as Christians.

Before we dive in too far, though, we need to do a little bit of a history lesson, so bear with me. In the early days of the church, baptism and confirmation would happen together at the same time. Christian converts would be baptized by deacons or priests, and then they would be confirmed by the bishop.

[4 : 32] The bishop would make the sign of the cross on their forehead or lay hands on them and confirm the genuineness of their faith and then pray for an increase of the Holy Spirit in their lives.

Now, that was in the earliest days. Now, as Christianity grew and spread, we had more and more families being converted and baptized, and moms and dads would be baptized, and then the kids would be baptized, and more and more churches were started.

And so bishops had to oversee more and more churches as the church grew, and it grew very explosively in the first few centuries. It's actually a great mystery to sociologists and historians. People like Rodney Stark have spent a great amount of effort and time trying to understand how the church could have grown so rapidly. But as the church grew, bishops had to oversee a lot of churches.

So in the Western church, baptism and confirmation became two separate rites. Adult converts would be instructed in the faith, and then they would be baptized, and then infants born to Christian parents would also be baptized.

[5 : 42] That was normative and universally practiced really up until through the Reformation, until some of the Reformers that we call Anabaptists began to question that practice.

But up until then, it was pretty much universally practiced. And so once those kids grew older and they began to show evidence of mature faith, they would also be instructed in the faith. And then the bishop would visit, and then the bishop would confirm everyone who needed it.

So both adult converts who had been baptized and infants who had been baptized and then grown up and evidenced mature faith. All of those people would be confirmed by the bishop when the bishop visited.

And so what we see kind of as this practice begins to spread, if baptism marks the birth of a Christian, then confirmation is focused on the maturity of a Christian as that person grows in their faith, which really is the question that we want to focus on.

We grew up, most of us, in a culture where in the kind of evangelical world, there was such an emphasis placed on getting saved, getting Jesus into our hearts, that a lot of Christians on the other end of that look around and they wonder, well, what am I supposed to do now?

[7 : 01] And I've gotten saved, I'm right with God, so now what? Why is maturity so important? And that's exactly what Peter's talking about in this passage.

He's writing this letter to Christians, and they're spread throughout the known world. And in chapter 1, he lays out the gospel, the fact that they've been born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus, by believing in the gospel.

And as a result of that, they have the Holy Spirit, right? That's what, when you come to faith, you receive the Holy Spirit. So then in chapter 2, he says, therefore, you know, in light of all of that, since you've been born again, put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander.

Like newborn infants long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation, if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.

So he's saying, if you have truly been born again, if your faith is genuine, then you should desire to grow in maturity, like an infant longs for milk so that that infant can grow and develop.

[8 : 15] You should long for the pure spiritual milk, knowledge of God and His Word. You should long for a rich life of prayer. You should long for the fellowship of the saints.

You should long to grow in your ability to love and serve others. In all of those ways, you should seek to grow. So the implication here is that the Christian life isn't just about getting saved.

It's about transformation and renewal. The phrase here is growing into our salvation. Then Peter shifts to an architectural metaphor.

He says, becoming a Christian means Jesus becomes the new cornerstone of your life. He becomes the new cornerstone. Now, most of us have probably not built a house with our bare hands out of rough-hewn stones.

Maybe actually, knowing some of you, maybe you have. But I certainly have not, and so I had to look this up. But when you're building a house out of stones, or maybe a temple in this case, the cornerstone is the first stone that you lay down.

[9 : 19] It's incredibly important because the cornerstone is what determines the entire shape, the entire orientation of the rest of the house. However you lay that stone down is going to determine everything about that structure because all of the other stones are set in reference to the cornerstone.

They all have to align properly, right? And so all of the floors, all of the walls, all of the ceilings, no matter how large that structure is, it all has to align with and be built out from that cornerstone.

So if you were to put a new cornerstone in, that really means that you have to build an entirely new house. In the same way, when Jesus becomes our cornerstone, our entire life needs to be rebuilt to align with that new cornerstone.

So you say, well, what do you mean by that? Well, I mean everything. I mean our character, our relationships, how we handle conflict, right?

How we think about our enemies, our priorities, our politics, our finances, our vocation. Everything has to be rebuilt to align with that new cornerstone.

[10 : 42] Our entire life, our very identity needs to be rebuilt to align with Jesus. What happens if you try to put a new cornerstone under an old house?

If you say, well, I don't have the time or money to rebuild the whole thing, but we really need a new cornerstone. The foundation's all busted up, so I'm just going to wedge a new cornerstone in here and connect it all up, and it should be good.

Well, if you try to do that, you're going to have major structural issues, right? The floors and the walls and the ceilings are not going to line up with the new cornerstone.

So you may not notice anything right away, but eventually what's going to happen? You're going to start to see cracks. You're going to start to see joints coming apart.

The whole structure is going to be fundamentally unstable, and eventually it's all going to collapse because it's not held together and aligned with the cornerstone.

[11 : 39] And that's really what happens when Christians don't seek to grow into maturity. It's like trying to wedge the new cornerstone of Jesus under the old house of your pre-conversion self.

There's an author named Lillian Smith who wrote a book called Killers of the Dream. This is back in 1949, which is this level of self-awareness is pretty striking to me.

She writes about growing up in the deep south. She says, I learned it is possible to be a Christian and a white southerner simultaneously. Now, I'm from the south, so this hits different when I read it. To be a gentle woman and an arrogant, callous creature in the same moment. To pray at night and ride a Jim Crow car the next morning. And to feel comfortable doing both.

I learned to believe in freedom, to glow when the word democracy was used, and to practice slavery from morning till night. I learned it the way all of my southern people learn it, by closing door after door until one's mind and heart and conscience are blocked off from each other and from reality.

[12 : 53] This is a person who had not allowed the gospel to renovate her view of race and society. She had lived with this new cornerstone of Jesus wedged under the old house of her deep southern heritage.

And she had learned to ignore the cracks through compartmentalization. Right? Instead of the house getting renovated, you just take things and you put them in separate rooms, and then you lock the doors.

You know, your faith goes in this room. Right? Your politics, they go in this room. Your relationships with your family, that goes in this room. What you do with your free time goes in this room.

Your finances goes in this room. And you lock all the doors. And you keep faith nice and safe and secure in the room where it belongs. So you can get it out when you want it, and then you can put it back when you don't want it.

And that's what she had done. She had ignored the cracks that were forming in her conscience. Surprisingly easy to do. And, you know, we see the same thing playing out all kinds of ways today, not just when it comes to race, but when it comes to any aspect of our lives, as we try to wedge the new cornerstone of Jesus under the old house, say, of our consumerism, or our individualism, our hyper-individualism, or our nationalism, or our postmodern sexual ethics.

[14:25] However we might apply it, we try to wedge the new cornerstone under a house that was never meant to be built off of that cornerstone. And the only way to make this work is to either ignore the cracks, like Smith did, or to so revise your view of Jesus, to so alter the shape of that cornerstone, that it might fit into the old house, mostly.

But it no longer resembles the Jesus of Scriptures. And so when Jesus becomes the cornerstone of your life, it becomes necessary for everything else to be rebuilt from the ground up.

And Christian maturity means doing that very thing. Through worship, prayer, biblical teaching and preaching, the sacraments, the spiritual disciplines, serving and loving others, all of those are ways that we allow Jesus to renovate us, to rebuild us from the ground up.

So this is the first reason why I think confirmation is not just important in a general sense, but important for us. I think that if we're honest, as we live our lives and as we endeavor to be faithful, those of us here who are Christians, there are cracks.

There are places where the joints have come apart. There are inconsistencies. There are compartmentalized parts of ourselves locked away safely in their rooms.

[15:57] And the whole thing needs to be rebuilt. That's the first reason why it's important. This leads to our second point because this is not something that you can do alone. You can't go home and read a stack of books and work all this out yourself.

You need other people to help you in the journey. You know, in the postmodern West, we have a highly individualistic approach to faith. It's about me adopting a belief system that is right for me. And it's all about my one-on-one relationship with God that may or may not involve a church. That would have been totally absurd to someone like Peter or the early Christians. When Peter uses this powerful image of living stones, he's not only describing our relationship with Jesus, he's describing our relationship to one another.

And by the way, I love to think of Peter, who was renamed by Jesus, given a name that means a stone, right? Using this image as a living stone.

How often had Jesus thought of himself, I mean, had Peter thought of himself in those terms? And now he applies this sort of personal metaphor built off of his own name to describe all Christians.

[17:10] And it's beautiful because it describes our relationship, not just with Jesus, but with one another. What do stones and a wall do for one another? Well, they support one another.

The wall stands up and has integrity, structural integrity, because the stones bear the weight of one another, right? They all support each other. That's how they're able to stand together with such strength.

And in the same way, we need Christians in our lives who can support and encourage us in our faith. The church is by design meant to be interdependent.

We were with our ministry leaders Saturday morning for a few hours doing a training for the year, and this was the whole idea that we focused on, is the interdependent nature of the church.

We all have ways that we contribute, and we all have things that we need, right? And so you need other Christians in order to grow. Other Christians need you in order to grow.

[18:11] Every Christian has been given spiritual gifts that are meant to be used to build up the church. And in this day and age, just, you know, in my opinion, we need the support of other Christians more than perhaps any previous generation, save for maybe Peter's generation and maybe a couple of generations after that, right?

But by the fourth century and on, it's probably been a while up until now where we are hopefully beginning to sort of recapture our sense of need for other Christians.

Why? Because we live in a culture that increasingly sees the claims of Christianity as being entirely implausible. You know, every culture has ways of determining what sounds reasonable and what sounds crazy.

The sociologist Peter Berger calls these plausibility structures, the consensus opinion of what sounds reasonable versus unreasonable. It's this idea that, well, all reasonable people think this.

Only crazy people would think that, right? That's a plausibility structure. How am I making that determination? Well, it's just my sense of what reasonable people around me think.

[19 : 26] Right? So it's very hard to be in this category. It's very hard to hold on to beliefs that people look at you and they say, well, no reasonable person thinks that.

You must be a crazy person. You must be a total wingnut to think that that's true. It's very hard to hold on to beliefs that aren't supported by the plausibility structures of the culture. So we need another kind of structural support.

We need another kind of structural support. Throughout history, the plausibility structures in our society have sometimes been wrong. For much of history, all reasonable people thought the earth was flat.

In the 1800s, some still do. It's amazing. In the 1800s, all reasonable people thought that sickness was caused by bad air. If it smells bad, it probably makes you sick.

In the early 20th century, all reasonable people, including many prominent scientists and politicians, supported the idea of eugenics as a way of improving the human race.

[20 : 31] All reasonable people thought these things. And at some point along the way, in every case, it took people willing to look at the evidence and to challenge the plausibility structures of the day, to hold on to beliefs that most people thought were crazy at the time until there was a shift in public thought.

And I would say, being a Christian in a place like Washington, D.C. in 2023 is a lot like that. We've looked at the evidence. We believe that Jesus did rise from the tomb.

We believe that He is the Son of God and He does forgive sin and He does reconcile us to God and that God is at work renewing and restoring the world. We hold on to these beliefs, but that goes against the consensus.

That goes against what most reasonable people think, the people that we live around and work around, the people that we count as some of maybe our dearest friends, our family members.

We're surrounded by people who don't share those beliefs. So one day that's no longer going to be the case. One day there's going to be a once and for all final shift in public opinion, right?

[21 : 39] But until that day, this is the world that we live in. The point is this. Your faith cannot survive alone. There are some people who are sort of going through a crisis of faith and there's lots of different reasons for that, but one of the reasons that I see people starting to have that kind of experience is not so much about disillusionment with the church or not so much about questions that they're asking that are theological.

It's more about the fact that they've been in isolation for so long that they've not had the kind of support that is necessary.

And so their faith simply atrophies in that environment. So this is the reason, I think the second reason, why confirmation is so important.

It's a public commitment to the church. It's not just a commitment to your local church. It's a commitment to the church as an institution. You know, and that means it's a commitment to the historic faith that's been passed down from one generation to the next that has been safeguarded in the church, articulated in various statements of faith.

It's a commitment to living under the authority of the church given by Jesus. And we all, everybody in the church, no matter what costume you wear, we all live under authority.

[23 : 01] It's a commitment to serving and using your gifts to build up the church. It's a way of publicly saying, I'm not a lone wolf Christian. I recognize I'm a living stone and I'm part of a wall and they need me and I need them.

That's the second point. So this is about maturity. It's about membership. But the church, last point, the church is not an end in itself.

Rather, the church is a means to a much greater end, namely God's desire to love and to bless the world. And here's Peter's glorious statement about God's purpose for the church in verse 9.

It's one of my all-time favorite verses in the New Testament. He says, But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

It is beautiful. This is language that was originally used for Israel in the Old Testament. But now Peter applies these phrases to the church.

[24 : 13] In Genesis 12, God promised Abraham that through him, he would build a nation of people. And through that nation, God was going to bless all of the nations of the earth. That was always God's intention.

And so Peter is saying to the church, You are that nation. God has fulfilled his promise. He's fulfilling it now. As Christians in the church, we're called to live lives that proclaim God's excellence. And you know, we hear the word proclaim and think of it primarily as something that we would declare with our mouths, and absolutely that is part of it. But I think that Peter means it equally, if not more so, as something we display through our lives.

Something that we display through how we live. This is why, as a church, we are called to holiness. To living countercultural lives for the common good.

Living in ways that other people look at, and maybe they're confounded by it. But they also recognize the salt and light that is in the society because of these communities.

[25 : 24] This is why it's so important for us to continue in the work of evangelism. It's why it's so important for us to continue in the work of justice and mercy.

We are proclaiming God's excellence to the world when we do these things. But in some ways, this is going to look different for each one of us, because we each have our own vocation, your own God-given way of proclaiming God's excellence in the world.

There are ways that you do that particularly well, depending on how God has gifted and wired you. So your work, your career, your gifts, your passions, your hobbies, your primary relationships and networks, all of those come together in your vocation.

You may work in banking or finance. You may work in communications or you may run a house and raise kids or do international development work or work in law or a coffee shop.

But the Bible says that all of those vocations are really priestly vocations. That whatever you do, whatever makes up your vocation, you are in some ways functioning as a priest as you do that.

[26 : 47] And the job of a priest is to stand at the intersection of the world and the heavens. It's to stand in between.

That the job of a priest is to point people to God and to embody the character of God and His kingdom for the world to see.

That's why there's such an emphasis on holiness all throughout this part of Peter's letter. You know, Abraham Kuyper famously said, Wherever man may stand, whatever he may do, to whatever he may apply his hand in agriculture, in commerce, in an industry, or his mind in the world of art and science, he is, in whatsoever it may be, constantly standing before the face of his God.

And he is employed in the service of his God. He has strictly to obey his God, and above all, he has to aim at the glory of God.

This is an altar that we use to celebrate and receive the Eucharist. But with all due respect to this altar, in some ways your laptop is a kind of altar.

[28 : 05] Right? The counter where you cook is a kind of altar. Your kitchen table is a kind of altar. Your desk is a kind of altar. These are places where you, if you so desire, have an opportunity through your vocation to offer sacrifices of praise that glorify the Lord.

So this is the third reason why confirmation matters so much. At confirmation, the bishop lays hands on you and prays that you would be filled with the Holy Spirit.

If you're a Christian, you already have the Holy Spirit. You've received the Holy Spirit. You're baptized. You're baptized. The bishop prays that you would be filled to overflowing with the Holy Spirit. Filled with God's presence.

And then the bishop commissions you for your vocation. In the same way that you would see a deacon or a priest come up and we would lay hands on them and ordain them and commission them for their work in the church.