

The People of God

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- [0 : 01] Well, we're looking at the passage that Craig Gay read from 1 Peter, chapter 2, and you can find it on page 216 if you'd like to follow along. It's an immensely important passage.
- It's one of those passages that you come to and you, as a preacher, are a bit daunted by it because it is so foundational that everything that the Christian life is about is in it, and how do you preach on that during the length of a sermon and a service, however long that will be today.
- But it's a privilege as well because what this gets down to is really the basis of who we are. It answers the question of who we are and why we are here, which is the question that everyone around us is asking.
- In this city, around the world, it is about identity. Identity is important. It is what brings meaning to us. We look to identity to give us a sense of importance, and it has to do with ultimate questions about ourselves.
- Our culture tries to identify us in many different ways. It gives you identities, gives you choices of what you can be, and it's related to your family, your ethnic group, the type of work you do, what your sin number is and credit card number is.
- [1 : 24] We worry about identity theft because of that. Types of sexual identity is put forward as a way that you can identify yourself. All kinds of things.
- What kind of music we like. The teams we follow. The interests we have. These are the things that identify you. And these come out in a funeral when there is a eulogy.
- Who is that person who died? And it's very interesting that all of those, all of those identities fall short. They actually do not get to the heart of who we are.
- Because of two things. They don't fully define us, first of all. They don't get to the essence of who we are. And secondly, they are all temporary. All of the identities that we have in this world end.
- They let us down as well. Now, this passage is about true identity. It's about a permanent, eternal identity that we have only because of Jesus Christ.
- [2 : 30] That's why this passage is so foundational to our lives. That's why it is so relevant to the human condition. Tells us who am I as a person to the depths of my being.
- What am I about? And it brings us to why we are gathered here this morning. It tells us what the church is about. What is our mission? Who are we? If you remember last week, we talked about the grace of God that leads to a transformed life.
- And at the heart of what we were talking about last week was that Jesus ransoms us. He rescues us from a futile life, a life where we don't really have an identity, to a life in which we are bought at a price and we become his own, freed by the precious blood of Jesus Christ.
- And the term that is used was that we become born again. We receive spiritual new birth, a life that did not exist before.

And it happens to every person who puts their trust in Jesus and his promises. This passage is connected to that being born again because it says with that new life comes a new identity, comes our true identity.

[3 : 49] It is revealed to us in a marvelous way through God's word here. And right away, if you look at verse 4 in chapter 2, we see what that identity is.

And I'm going to change the wording slightly from the RSV because the sense of the original language is what God is doing to us, not what we have to start doing.

Because through new birth, God has made us new people. He has made us something that we are to live into. And so from verse 3, it says this, For you have tasted the kindness of the Lord in being born again, coming to him, that living stone rejected by men, but in God's sight chosen and precious.

Like living stones, you are yourselves being built into a spiritual house. To be a holy priesthood. To offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

You see, this is saying that our identity is found in Jesus. It talks about Jesus as a living stone. And then it describes us as living stones as well.

[5 : 07] Very close identification with Jesus Christ. That word stone is an important one. It's not a picture of stones that are lying around that you can pick up and throw.

And they're sort of randomly around us. The word for stone means a large building stone that is shaped and placed in a certain way to fulfill a task.

A task of building. It has its right place because it is fashioned in a certain way. And Peter is thinking of the temple stones. If you've ever been to the ruined temple in Jerusalem, it was destroyed in 70 A.D.

There are still the original large stones that are there. I've never been to Israel. I'd like to someday. Jim and Annette Ferguson give great, take people on trips every year.

I'd like to go someday. I took a free trip this week. I went down to the internet and took a wander through photographs of the temple. Not quite the same thing, but great photographs.

[6 : 11] And what you see are incredibly impressive stones that are still there. They are massive. And they've all been formed by being chiseled and carved in just the right way.

So that they fit together. And they still stand strongly today. Especially the foundation stones. The larger ones took a long time to get exactly right.

Because the lines of those rocks were completely foundational in every way. The lines of the temple extend out from those stones.

So they're incredibly important, essential to the structure itself. These are the stones that Peter is talking about. And amazingly, there are two radically different ways of looking at the living stone.

The same living stone. The first way, as you see in verse 4, is that it is rejected by men. It's repeated in verse 7, isn't it? It says, for those who do not believe, the very stone which the builders rejected.

[7 : 21] And what you have there is a sense of the builder looking at the stone, considering it and thinking, this does not meet my needs. This does not fit my expectations. I will toss it away.

Or have it moved away, as it should be. Get rid of it. In the temple itself, there's a sense, probably Peter was remembering, that it is in the temple itself that Jesus, the living stone, was rejected.

That he was put on trial. That his own people, the religious leaders, sent him to die. Jesus is considered, and he is rejected.

But not only that, the stone not only is rejected, but in verse 8, he is a stone that makes people stumble. And it goes on to use a different word, instead of stone.

It says that it is a rock that will make them fall. And that word for rock is different. It's like a big outcropping, a massive one.

[8 : 22] It's like the chief in Squamish, this huge granite monolith. And the interesting thing about the chief is that you are supposed to be able to see a chief in it.

I don't know if any of you have ever seen the chief in it, but you can drive by it time and time again, and I've never been able to actually see that chief in that rock. But apparently it's there.

In a way, this is the way it is with Christ. People come to him, but in a different way, he has been perfectly revealed. They do not see him. And in fact, it becomes a block.

It becomes something that keeps people from seeing him. They are blocked by the fact, they can't get past the fact that Jesus died for them, for their sins, which means, and rose again, which means that he is Lord of their life.

And which also means that they and we are in need of his rescue. That we are, in fact, people who are moral failures, as David reminded us this morning.

[9 : 24] This is the humbling thing about God being our living stone in Jesus Christ. And it says here that they stumble because they disobey the word. In other words, the living word, the only word that can give us life, is the very word that they reject and disobey.

So there is no life. There is a block that happens. But there's a radically different way, as well, that the stone is looked at, and it's God's view of it.

Look at verse 6. It says there that it stands in Scripture, Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone, chosen and precious.

How different can you be? Precious means deserving of all the honor, of utmost value. Chosen and precious is God's way of looking at Jesus Christ.

And not only that, but he is actually the cornerstone as well. And David helped us with the children's talk in explaining the cornerstone and its importance. It's amazing because it's saying here that the professional builders, in other words, the ones who were in charge of religions, were the one who rejected the living stone.

[10 : 39] But that stone becomes the head of the corner. The cornerstone is the first one put into place. As I said before, the angles of the walls and the level of the stones throughout the temple depend upon that cornerstone.

And unlike the cornerstone here, if you pulled the cornerstone out here that says 1949 on it, this building will not tumble down, thankfully. But if you take the cornerstone from the temple out, this massive rock, if you could somehow do that, the whole temple would come crashing down.

The foundation would, even now. This is what it means that Jesus is the cornerstone. He is the one to build your life on. It was great to hear that passage from Matthew 7 where Jesus says, Be like the wise man who builds his house on solid rock, which are God's words in Jesus Christ.

Build your life on that. This is what this is calling us to be. He is the only foundation that will never let you down. Build your house on him.

He will not put you to shame. And so if you come to believe in Jesus, verse 7 says, You know that God, as God knows, that Jesus is precious. That he shapes the church and that he alone gives us our identity.

[12 : 01] Now we move at this point to the most important verse as far as our application. And that's verse 9. We could do a whole sermon series on verse 9.

And I'll try not to do that series in the next few minutes. But there are four things that are very important for us to know about our identity here in verse 9. Four things.

The first thing is that you are a chosen race. What that tells us is that we have a common ancestor. You have entered a new family.

You're related to other Christians at the deepest level that relationship can be because of the fact that you and I have been born again. We have spiritual life from God.

He has planted eternal life within us by his word. That is the gift we have in common. And it's not deserved. It doesn't mean that we are special and elite in any way.

[13 : 01] In fact, the Old Testament tells us, tells Israel that the Lord didn't choose you because you were the most numerous. In fact, you were the fewest in people. You were the least strong of all the nations.

But it was because the Lord loved you and kept his promises. That's why you're chosen. And it's humbling. In other words, Israel was not a choice nation.

It was a chosen nation. And that's us as well. We are chosen. God has given you new life not because we deserved it in our elite, wonderful nature.

It is only because he loves us. And there's a deep bond that comes from that common receiving of the gift of love from God. We receive it together.

When we're born again, we enter into a new family. And it's a very large family. Baptism is a sign of that. We receive you into the household of God, we say, at baptism.

[13 : 59] It's a great picture. And that is why we are meant to welcome each other every day. This is our mandate. This is who we are. And we must welcome those that we are related to in this way.

I think it's a wonderful thing that we have a relationship with the people of the Upper Shira in Malawi because that relationship expresses this fact that we are a chosen race together.

The people in Malawi that we are in relationship with are very different from us culturally, geographically, language, and the things that are their needs, the way they do church is slightly different.

There are many differences we can think of. Yet, they are our brothers and sisters because of our new spiritual birth. And we welcome one another into one another's lives because of that deep bond we share in Jesus Christ.

Miles do not become an object at that point. All of the differences culturally, language, and the way we do things and our needs mean nothing because of the fact that we have the new birth in Christ in common.

[15 : 15] And that's why it's good for us to be in a long-term relationship with them because we are constantly reminded that we are a chosen race together with them and with all Christians throughout the world.

Secondly, besides being a chosen nation, you are a royal priesthood. And what this is, it's a commissioning verse. Verse. Every bit as real as an ordination.

Or, in a few minutes, Marian will be commissioned. Hers will be a bit more public. It is a commissioning to a new ministry in which we will pray for her. This is something that is directed to each of us and to a church as a whole that you have been ordained in a sense.

You are a group of priests that belong to the king. That means you can wear collars if you want. If you want to, David makes collars out of cottage cheese containers and he can give you one.

If you want a strong response on an airplane ride, wear that collar. You either will be completely ignored or you will be giving spiritual direction for the next three to five hours.

[16 : 28] But, in a sense, we really are priests. People who, in the Old Testament, were responsible for making sure there was a right relationship between God and his people.

They came into God's very presence. They were concerned about the forgiveness of sins and made sure that this was happening through sacrifice. But because Jesus has offered the one perfect sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins, each of us, like the priests, come into God's very presence directly through Jesus, each of us can help others to have a right relationship with God by telling the gospel, by affirming one another with the good news of Jesus' forgiveness, the forgiveness of sins.

That gospel is the mandate of the priest. And it's crucial that we as a church understand that each of us are priests. We are meant to be a living building in which we are serving one another by being ministers to each other.

Often, and this is often unintentional, we devalue our priestly ministry. And we do it by saying or assuming that it can only be a professional who can visit or pray or give godly and biblical advice and wisdom.

Well, this verse says your identity is as royal priests, that Jesus, the king, actually commissions you. And so, when another Christian visits you or listens to you or prays with you and you are blessed by it, know that you have received royal priestly minister.

[18 : 11] And you are doing, and if you do it yourselves, do it with the authority of King Jesus, which comes from this passage. You are commissioned here to do it. And I know firsthand that I have received this priestly care from this congregation, and it has been very good care, often better than I could give.

But we need to have a mandate. We need to say, what is our authority? What comes from this fact that we are a priesthood, a royal priesthood, commissioned to do this ministry? And, you know, verse 5 says, what is the work of a priest?

It is to actually give spiritual sacrifices. It is to be a place devoted to God in worship where we are offering spiritual sacrifices.

And, you know, spiritual sacrifices in the Bible run everywhere from offering our bodies to offering thanksgiving to God, offering our finances to God, as David talked about, offering good deeds for the glory of God.

All of these things are offering. They are varied. Just as the stones in the literal temple were different and shaped for a specific role, you will serve God in different ways.

[19 : 24] And I need to tell you something that may not be known, that David serves the church in ways you probably don't understand. Between the last services, the toilet was plugged up. Who was it who plugged that toilet?

Dave. I think that was one of his spiritual sacrifices. And to all of those who are shaking hands afterwards, David did wash his hands afterwards as well.

We will serve God in different ways, but the point is that we are royal priests commissioned by him. Thirdly, and very briefly, it says that you are a holy nation.

What that means is that you've been set apart in a relationship with God for a purpose. And that is to be faithful to him, to obey him, to live a life that is different, that looks different to the world.

In fact, the world may not understand it. life. And it is a life that is faithful to Jesus because he is your foundation, because you take the lines of your life from him.

[20 : 24] It's a different looking life. And then fourthly, and finally, you are God's own people. this is an extraordinary personal verse.

And I want to read from Exodus 19, 5 and 6, because this is where the identity is coming from. In those verses, God has told Moses to tell the Israelites this, You see, in Jesus, the promises of God for Israel become ours.

And this says that even though the world and the universe is God's, you are his treasured possession. Because you belong to him. That's what it means. Our very existence, our identity, comes from this fact that we belong to him.

It means we are of surpassing value. That he praises us. He gives us honor that we cannot imagine. Isaiah 43 drives this home to us.

And I think, I don't know if you've heard this before, but often you hear about the fact that the Old Testament is about the God of justice. The New Testament is about the God of love. Well, anybody who says that has not read the Old Testament and certainly hasn't read Isaiah 43.

[21 : 55] Because here it says this. It's the one place in the Bible where God personally says to us, I love you. He says this, Isaiah 43, 4.

Since you are precious and honored in my sight, and because I love you, I will give men in exchange for you and people in exchange for your life. And of course, Jesus is given in exchange for our life, isn't it?

But this is what it means to be God's own people. We are precious and honored in his sight. And he says to us directly, I love you. This is what it means to belong to him.

As Christians in this world, we will be rejected. The world will reject and will accuse us.

Even our own thoughts accuse us because of the fact we belong to Jesus Christ. It goes with being a living stone. As Jesus was rejected, we will be.

[22 : 56] But all the rejection of the world, in fact, all of the affirmation that we hope to get from the world means nothing because of the fact that we belong to God and we are his treasured possession.

Nothing can change us. That is the truth that ought to shape us and make us who we are, this people. You know, often what we hear in the news is about parents who have gone wrong.

They dominate the news. You hear about children who are damaged and turn out very badly because of their parents. But I think it's great we have Mother's Day today because on this day we are reminded of the treasure and how wonderful it is when mothers love and treasure their children and honor them in a way that they would want to give them all that they need.

And when you see that, this constant love and honoring of a child, you see a child's life that is shaped by that. There is a gift that's given to that child. They are given goodness and grace that God gives through a mother.

And I think that in the same way, we ought to let the truth of belonging to God who deeply loves us, who calls us treasured, we ought to let that shape us.

[24 : 17] That's our identity. As God's own people, we are being built into a temple, into a building that looks the way God would have us, that reflects the love and the truth and the sacrifice of the chief cornerstone, Jesus Christ.

It's a living temple that is growing as the stones are being shaped and perfected by the fact that we belong to him. And as stones are added to it, this living temple grows as well.

And this brings us to the final point of this sermon, and that is, there is a purpose for the new identity. We are not blessed in this way simply to feel special.

There is a reason for it and there's a mission that we are given. It's a mission for each of us at St. John's. It's a mission for the whole Christian church throughout the world. And it's in verse 9.

It says, There it is.

[25 : 30] There's our mission. God, by his word, has called us out of spiritual darkness, the place of not seeing God, of God being hidden and being separated by sin.

He has taken us from that spiritual darkness and he has brought us to the marvelous place of seeing God in Jesus Christ, of knowing his glorious truth and his purposes for us in Jesus.

And this gives us wonder and amazement. We see God in Jesus and we see what he is doing in this world and it is beyond all that we can ask or imagine.

It is marvelous light. And declaring the good, the powerful things that God has done and who he is means actually telling people about it.

It's about making known outside the church what we are about inside the church in what we do in our life together and also in what we say to those around us.

[26 : 33] And so we should ask ourselves, this passage calls us to ask ourselves, what are we doing about that mission? Are you being built up? Are you ministering to one another because of Jesus?

Does our life together encourage and strengthen us to offer spiritual sacrifice to God? Do we correct and challenge one another with the truth that we are set aside to be different for him?

Do we comfort and affirm each other with the truth that we belong to God and that he treasures us and loves us? All of this affects the world when the world sees it.

It declares God's praises to us. That's what it means to be living stones, a living temple of God, which is the church. And this is a heartfelt and joyous thing to share with the world.

It's not a drudgery because verse 10 reminds us we were once no people. In other words, we were separated from God and we were separated from other people by language and cultures.

[27 : 38] But now we are God's own people. Once we had not received mercy, we didn't know the forgiveness and love of God. Now we know it and we receive our joy every day from that fact.

That's an exuberant verse that Peter is giving to us. And our mission is to bless the world with that truth. That we will desire above all things in our mission that others would know the mercy of God.

That others would come into this relationship where they are God's own. They belong to Him. And know that they are God's treasured possessions because of Jesus Christ.

Amen.