

To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father, to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.

**1 PETER 2:9-12. (NIV84)**

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.

We have this innate desire to identify ourselves with something larger than ourselves. Even people who want to give the impression of being independent and unique usually do so not by avoiding being a part of something larger than themselves, but by being a part of a something larger than themselves that is different from the things the people around them are a part of.

We like to do it with many different things. Computers - Are you a Mac person or a PC person? Cell phones - iPhone, Android, or flip phone? Politics - Republican, Democrat, or some other third party? Military - Army, Navy, Air Force, or Marine Corps? Sports - Are you a Packer fan, or are you worthless like Pastor Biebert? School - Wausau East, Wausau West, DC Everest, or Marathon? Even professional athletes love to tell what college they attended. Those of you who are a little older might identify yourselves by the one-room grade schools - Taegesville, Stubbe Hill, Naugart, Monroe, Adams, Maple Grove, or some other. We identify ourselves by favorite authors, favorite painters, favorite singers, bands, or composers, favorite activities, like fishing, snowmobiling, card games, or hunting. Sometimes we even speak about our church or synod as if it were nothing more than a club in which we hold our membership. We like to be a part of and identify with some larger community, oftentimes multiple larger communities.

But how many of those aspects of your identity actually determine the type of person you are and make you a better person? Doesn't the type of person you are usually come first and your identity second? In other words, you don't join a card club in the hopes that you'll become a card-player; you usually join a card club because you're already the type of person who likes to play cards. You could argue that your school has determined the type of person you are to an extent, but chances are that you were shaped in both positive and negative ways by the schools you attended.

Only God can give us an identity that truly determines who we are and makes us better people. Only God can make us a part of something larger than ourselves that has a completely wholesome effect on ourselves. Only God can and only God does. Our God-given identity has a direct bearing on our God-glorifying activity.

**1.**

The apostle Peter really hammers home our identity in this section with a string of striking and beautiful descriptions. He has just finished talking about unbelievers: "Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe, 'The stone the builders

rejected has become the capstone,' and, 'A stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall.'" That's the identity of unbelievers - if it can even be called an identity. They are those who stumble and fall.

But not you who believe, Peter says. You have an identity worth reflecting on and reveling in. "But you are a chosen people." We all like to be chosen. I can remember my kickball days in grade school. My classmates and I always liked to be picked first, but if we weren't picked first, then we would settle for being picked, period. The worst was if you were the last one picked, because then you weren't really picked; you just went to one team or the other by default. To be chosen, to be picked, was to be desired.

As believers, you are a chosen people. God chose you to believe in him. God desired you. He didn't choose everybody. Peter doesn't tell us that we are chosen so that we can figure out why these people are in heaven or going to heaven while those people are in hell or going to hell, namely because these were desirable and these weren't. No, we'll talk more about that in a bit, but for now, Peter simply wants you to know that this is part of your identity. You are chosen by God. You are desired by him.

"But you are a chosen people, *a royal priesthood*." There are actually two parts to your identity here. "Royal" means that you are kings and queens, and "priesthood" means that you are priests. You are kings and queens in that you determine what takes place in the world. God says that everything that happens, happens for your benefit and the benefit of all believers. And God also hears and answers your prayers; when you pray to the all-powerful God, you have his ear and stuff happens. "If we ask anything according to his will, he hears us," John says. "The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective," James says.

And that leads nicely into your identity as priests. Priests in the Old Testament offered sacrifices and prayers on behalf of others. But there is no priestly class of people any more. When Jesus died, the curtain of the temple, behind which only the high priest could go once a year, was torn in two from top to bottom. All believers are priests of God now. All of you may approach God with freedom and confidence. You can intercede on behalf of others, and God hears and answers you in his good time and way. You don't need to offer any more sacrifices for sin, since Christ did that once and for all, but you can show that sacrifice to others by telling them about Jesus, and you can offer your bodies as living sacrifices of thanksgiving to God.

"But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, *a holy nation*." Here Peter is not talking about the nation of Israel, the nation of the United States, or any other physical, earthly nation. He is talking about the nation of believers, no matter which earthly nation has a claim on their citizenship. Believers make up an ethnicity all their own. They are holy, set apart from sinners. Through faith in Jesus, they enjoy the reality of having their sins being completely taken away by him.

"But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, *a people belonging to God*." The idea here is that those who believe in Jesus are God's treasured possession. We are the trophy in his case, the priceless art on his wall, the treasure in his safe. We are the jewel that he turns in his hand and admires and refuses to part with.

But we aren't just a lifeless treasure to be gawked at and admired. "You are... a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light." We are a treasure with a use and purpose, yes, the highest possible purpose,

to declare the virtues of him who called us from darkness and uselessness to be all of these wonderful, amazing things.

Even when we identify with earthly things larger than ourselves, we do this, right? How many of you have tried to convert me into a Packers fan and have retold the great plays of their most recent victory? How many of you not only tell what kind of computer or phone you have, but have recounted all its features and why you think it's the best? If we identify with something, we like to tell others of its virtues.

How much more true that is with God, who has given us our highest and greatest identity! How can we not recount and declare *his* virtues?

After all, "Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy." Really, before God gave us his identity, we had no identity. We were not a people. We were in darkness, by ourselves. After all, all of those other things we identify with—what good are they on the day we die? How will they help us on the day of judgment? Solomon once said, "Wealth is worthless in the day of wrath," and the same is true of everything else we identify with on earth. It's all fleeting and meaningless in the end.

But to be made the people of God! Now *that* means something. That is an identity with eternal value. And note where this identity comes from; it comes from God's mercy. Peter adds this in case we are tempted to get any idea that God gave us this identity because we had it coming, that God desired us because we were desirable. Far from it. We were shown mercy, he says. Mercy is love shown to those who are to be pitied.

All of these identity traits harken back to Mt. Sinai, when God told his people, "Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:5,6). That was a covenant based not on mercy, but on merit. But here Peter tells us that what God would only give on the basis of merit in that covenant, he has given on the basis of mercy in the new covenant, for Jesus' sake. Because if this identity were based on merit, none of us would have it or enjoy it. So God sent his Son Jesus who did earn this identity on the basis of merit, and then shared the identity he won with all of us out of his mercy. All of these identity traits - chosen, king, priest, holy, treasured possession - these are identity traits that are only Jesus' traits by right. But they are also ours by right in and through Jesus, because he shares and distributes them freely to all who believe in him as their Savior.

Chosen, kings, priests, a holy nation, the treasured possession of God with the purpose of declaring his virtues, the people of God, people who have been and continue to be shown mercy - this is our God-given identity.

## 2.

And that God-given identity has a direct bearing on our activity.

"Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us." Because we have this identity, we are but strangers and sojourners in the world. "Here we

have no enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come.” As the hymn says, “I’m but a stranger here; heaven is my home.”

For a few years now, we’ve had a Praetorius Choir. Michael Praetorius always gave his initials as MPC, which he explained as having a double meaning. On the one hand, from an earthly point of view, he was MPC, Michael Praetorius of Creuzburg. On the other hand, Creuzburg was not his home. Rather, as Praetorius said, “Mihi patria coelum” - “Heaven is my fatherland.” So it is with us. While on earth, you all have the city or town that you identify as your home, but that is not your real fatherland. Because you have a God-given identity, heaven is your true fatherland.

So since you and I are strangers and sojourners in the world, just passing through, what will our activity be? We will avoid the fleshly desires that war against our soul, because those desires want to take us away from our true home; those desire conflict with our true identity. When our flesh tells us, “That person did this, now you do that to get even,” we avoid that. That doesn’t reflect our identity as God’s treasured possession that exists to declare his virtues. When our flesh tells us, “Live and let live; stop calling sin sin. That’s just how this or that person has chosen to live. Who’s to say it’s any better or worse that the way you live?”, we avoid that. That doesn’t reflect our identity as those God has called out of precisely that darkness into his wonderful light - a light in which we are able to see sin as sin and to know it is forgiven.

In fact, we don’t just want to avoid sin. We want to be as above board as possible. “Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.” The tendency of those still in the darkness and without an identity is to say *we* are wrong for calling sin sin. But it’s awfully hard to keep on saying that we are the ones living in the dark ages when we keep on helping them out, keep on encouraging them with kind words whenever we’re able, keep on showing an interest in their lives and being willing to listen when something is weighing on their hearts, keep on wanting to tell them of the forgiving love of Jesus. They’re not getting that from others who are in the darkness and lacking a real identity with them. It’s hard to argue with real, substantive Christian love.

They may say one thing about us in public, but in private they are thinking about the identity we have. And for some of them, it will eventually lead to them seeking out that same identity in Jesus Christ, so that ultimately, although they have maligned us so often on earth, they will glorify God on Judgment Day and will have nothing but good things to say about us then when they are rescued from eternal destruction.

God given identity and God-glorifying activity—the two go hand in hand and are never found separate from each other. Bask in the identity, that you may also take part in the activity. Amen.

May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.