

Identity and Inheritance

I Corinthians 3:16-23

¹⁶ Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? ¹⁷ If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.

¹⁸ Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise. ¹⁹ For the wisdom of this world is folly with God. For it is written, "He catches the wise in their craftiness," ²⁰ and again, "The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile." ²¹ So let no one boast in men. For all things are yours, ²² whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, ²³ and you are Christ's, and Christ is God's.

- I Corinthians 3:16-23, ESV

Introduction: Heir of All, Living in Poverty

Strider the Ranger was a dirty, shifty character who spent most of his time living in the woods, living off the land. The people around Bree did not trust him, for he was disheveled and seemed a bit anti-social. He was in hiding and on the run, hiding from his true identity and destiny, on the run from forces and responsibilities that seemed distant and overwhelming. In truth, he was actually Aragorn, the heir of Isildur and rightful claimant to the thrones of Arnor and Gondor.

Only once Aragorn “put off the ranger” could he become who he was born to be. He needed to embrace his true identity and claim his rightful inheritance, but to do so, he had to risk, to fight, and to put off the identity and life he had embraced for so long.

To use a Bible example, Moses was born to brave, faithful Hebrew parents, who trusted God and hid him in a basket of reeds in the Nile River. Raised as the Son of Pharaoh’s daughter, Moses struggled to find his true identity. At the age of 40, he visited the Hebrew people and tried to force deliverance by his own hands when he killed an Egyptian soldier. When he found out that his deed was known, he fled and lived in the Land of Midian for 40 years.

It wasn’t until God called Moses from the burning bush that he understood and accepted his calling as a servant of God and took the mantle of leadership of the children of Israel in Egypt – as God reminded him of his identity and gave him his calling and used him to lead God’s people toward their inheritance.

So many Christians are living life in deception and bondage because they do not understand who they are or what they have been given by God in Christ. We chase after the world and personality cults and professional success, and we tell ourselves all sorts of stories about ourselves – good and bad – because we do not understand or truly believe all that the Lord has said about us and promised to us in His word.

A. Identity: Who Are You?

So, we begin with the core, key issue of identity: Who are you in Christ?

¹⁶ Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? ¹⁷ If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.

Two weeks ago, we considered the great privilege and humbling responsibility it is to be involved in building the New and Living Temple of the Lord. When we live out our faith in Christ in community, using the spiritual gifts God has given us to bless and serve each other, we are participating as God's hands in building His eternal and glorious Temple, which will resound for His glory forever. Of course, when our community church life is driven by fleshly selfishness and worldly compromise, when we imitate the secular world in desire for its approval or when we act out of pride to promote ourselves, we only build with wood, hay, and stubble, and what we build will be burned up when Jesus returns in glory for His own.

This is a call to us to grow up and seek to be mature and growing actively in Christ, so that we can build well and honor the Lord properly.

However, today we're told something we might easily overlook when we're focused on how we're building and growing as builders of God's Temple, and that's this: This is a living Temple, made up of living stones, joined to the Chief Cornerstone, and WE ARE these living stones. We are the Temple. Here's how I Peter 2:1-5 combines these themes in a way very similar to I Corinthians –

So 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.

As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. – I Peter 2:1-5, ESV

“As you come to him . . . you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house.”

These statements of identity from I Corinthians and from I Peter are personal and plural, made to all Christians personally and yet to Christians together. So, each one of us personally is a living stone, but we are living stones together being built up as a spiritual house, and we together are God's temple and God's Spirit dwells in us – He dwells in each of us and in us together.

This is powerful. It shows us how deeply and truly we personally belong to God and how we belong together as the church to God. This same truth also applies when God uses the metaphor of the body of Christ instead of the Temple of God:

For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. – Romans 12:4-5

Ephesians 2 also unfolds this picture for us, very powerfully:

For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility ¹⁵ by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, ¹⁶ and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. ¹⁷ And he came and preached peace to you who

were far off and peace to those who were near. ¹⁸ For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. ¹⁹ So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, ²⁰ built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, ²¹ in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. ²² In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit. – Ephesians 2:14-22

So, we can see this is not some small doctrine of marginal significance, but this is a central truth of vital importance to our lives as believers individually and as the church gathered together as the Body of Christ and the Living Temple of the Living God.

Really grasping our identity in this way has three profound impacts on us:

1. **Humility.** We are what we are because God by His grace has made us that way. And God, by His grace, at the cost of the life of His one and only Son, has chosen to make us His forever, to make us members of the Body of Christ, living stones in the living Temple. This should humble us.

As the application of this identity, Paul says:

¹⁸ Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise. ¹⁹ For the wisdom of this world is folly with God. For it is written, “He catches the wise in their craftiness,” ²⁰ and again, “The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile.”

If pride is the root sin, manifesting itself in a hundred different ways in our lives, then it makes sense that humility is the root virtue, especially as it causes us to be more deeply dependent on God and less judgmental and more loving toward others.

2. **Deep God Dependency.** We were made holy and made part of the Temple of God by God and for God. He has set us apart for Himself, and we need His strength, His grace, His abiding presence and power to live what He has made us to be.
3. **Deep Church Community Commitment and Connectedness.** We cannot ever realize the depth of our identity in Christ in isolation. Lone Christians are not God’s plan. We are fit together, side-by-side, in the Temple of God. We need each other. We build and shape each other and are built and shaped by each other. We connect more deeply to Christ as we connect more deeply with one another.

B. Inheritance: What is Yours?

Once Paul has addressed the issue of the Corinthians’ identity and how it should lead them to humility and away from worldliness, he then turns his attention to their inheritance – from who God has made them to be to what God has given them.

²¹ So let no one boast in men. For all things are yours, ²² whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, ²³ and you are Christ’s, and Christ is God’s.

Here, Paul is taking the boastful claims of the divisions in the church – “I follow Paul” and “I follow Apollos” and “I follow Cephas” – and he is turning them on their heads. Those who boasted of following these men thought it gave them significance to belong to these great men, in the sense of having been baptized by them or taught by them. Paul says they’ve gotten the whole situation backwards: They don’t belong to Paul, Apollos & Cephas, but Paul, Apollos & Cephas belong to them. These men are gifts God has given to the church. They are not the heads of the Corinthian church, as though the Corinthian church were some kind of multi-headed hydra. No, Paul, Apollos & Cephas are servants of the church, not masters of the church. They belong to the church; the church does not belong to them.

Thinking the church belongs to any mere man – pastor or elder or evangelist – is to walk into the Temple, see a man lighting the torches or refilling the incense and then to walk up to him and say, “This is a lovely Temple you have here.” If he is a faithful servant, he would immediately say, “Oh, no. This isn’t my Temple. I belong to it; it doesn’t belong to me.”

Hebrews 3:5-6 speaks of Moses and Christ and us in this way:

“Now Moses was faithful in all God's house as a servant, to testify to the things that were to be spoken later, but Christ is faithful over God's house as a son. And we are his house, if indeed we hold fast our confidence and our boasting in our hope.”

Paul hopes he, too, will be found faithful in all God’s house, but as a servant and not as the Master.

This is one key reason why Jesus had to confront the Jewish leadership in His day. They thought the Temple was theirs, and they could do with it as they pleased and as profited them. When Jesus went to the Temple at age 12, he told His earthly parents, Joseph and Mary, that the Temple was His Father’s house. And when He entered Jerusalem in Triumph, He cleansed the Temple with authority, for He was the rightful Master of the Temple, something which the Jewish leadership was very unwilling to concede.

What about us today? Do we honestly, actively see Jesus as the Head of His church, as the Lord of His Temple? You know the old bumper sticker, “God is my co-pilot,” and you’ve probably heard the response, “Well if God is your co-pilot, you need to switch seats.” What about in worship? Do we see ourselves as setting up the church and the worship service and inviting Jesus to come and join us as our guest in worship? I would say that if you think we’re the hosts and Jesus comes to meet with us as our guest, then it’s time for a reversal of roles here, too. Jesus commands worship, sets up worship, calls us to worship, and meets with us here as the Host. We are His guests. But more than that: If we belong to Him by faith, we are His house, His dwelling place, His Temple, and He comes to dwell in us and rule over us in glorious grace.

If we see Jesus as the Lord and Head of the church, and ourselves as His Temple, do we also believe what Romans 8 says, when it calls us heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ? Do we believe that “the meek shall inherit the earth”? Or what Paul says later in I Corinthians 6: “*Do you not know that we are to judge angels?*” Or what Paul says right here: “*For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours*”

In his sermon on this text, Brian Borgman of Grace Community Church in Minden, Nevada, points out that part of the problem with the Prosperity Gospel is that they aim too low. God has given us

everything for all eternity, and the Prosperity Gospel people think it would be great to settle for a Mercedes Benz and not getting sick in this life. In claiming things God has NOT promised, the Prosperity Gospel neglects and ignores the wonderful things God HAS promised.

C. Influence: The World on Us or Us on the World?

The Prosperity Gospel is also a clear example of a Gospel that is more influenced by the world than is truly influential on the world. A big part of what Paul is telling the Corinthians is a stirring Christ-centered call away from worldliness. These Corinthian believers have received the Gospel of Jesus Christ, but they are still enamored by the world's wisdom. So, Paul has to tell them again how foolish the wisdom of the world is:

“If anyone among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is folly with God. For it is written, “He catches the wise in their craftiness,” and again, “The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile.” – vv. 19-20

Interestingly, the first part of this advice: “Let him become a fool that he may become wise” is actually taken from Socrates. Anthony Thistleton in his commentary points out that it's based on a common Socratic maxim. The meaning is to basically admit how little you really know so you can begin to truly learn.

But when we begin to truly learn, we need to make sure that learning is coming from God's wisdom and not from the wisdom of this age, which is regarded as foolishness by God. What do the wise of this age want? They want to be able to figure out how to be successful, how to get ahead, how to get what they want, how to promote their name in the world. Well, it can be all too easy for churches and Christians to spiritualize the world's wisdom in the name of Jesus. So, we are trying to be successful, to get ahead, to get what we want (in the name of advancing the Gospel, perhaps), and to promote our name (or our church's name) in the world.

When we think like this, we're allowing the world's wisdom to shape the ministry of the church, the values of the church – in other words, we're allowing the world to have influence over the construction of God's Temple. How do we think that's going to turn out in the day when our works are tested by fire? Wood, hay, and stubble.

But, even before the Day of Judgment, we're left with the reality that we're not influencing the world with the Gospel when the world is influencing us. When we settle for the world's shallow, self-centered wisdom, we're not in a position to proclaim to the world the deep, saving, cross-shaped wisdom of God. Chasing the world's approval by using the world's wisdom ends up neither glorifying God nor reaching the world with the true Gospel.

Conclusion & Application

So, what's the solution? How can we remain grounded in who we really are and remain focused on what we've been given, so that we actually live and serve and minister out of true identity and inheritance?

Notice how Paul ends this chapter, this section. It's subtle, but clear and vital:

For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, and you are Christ's, and Christ is God's.

After declaring to us the astounding good news of our inheritance in Christ – “*all are yours,*” he reminds us in verse 23, “*and you are Christ's and Christ is God's.*” At the end of it all, we are given everything as our inheritance, but then we turn around and cast all of our trophies and crowns at the feet of Jesus and worship Him, for we are His, and He, in turn, lives to glorify the Father.

Later, in I Corinthians 15, Paul is going to revisit this truth and unpack it a bit more:

For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. For “God has put all things in subjection under his feet.” But when it says, “all things are put in subjection,” it is plain that he is excepted who put all things in subjection under him. When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things in subjection under him, that God may be all in all. – I Corinthians 15:22-28, ESV

The universe and everything in it is being subjected to Christ as King of kings and Lord of lords. This is the plan of God for ALL THINGS. We will be made alive forever as Christ's treasured possession, as “those who belong to Christ.” But, in the end, Christ will hand everything to His Father, “*that God may be all in all.*”

Do you know *THAT* is what will make eternity glorious beyond description and beyond comparison? Eternity will be glorious because God will be all in all, truly and fully and perfectly and eternally. And that's what makes our inheritance eternally wonderful and deeply, satisfyingly delightful: “*all are yours, and you are Christ's, and Christ is God's.*” If it just ended with “all are yours” – well, that's nice, but that's not good enough, because I need to belong to God to be all that I was made to be. If I were given the whole universe but was not then myself given to God forever, I would still be lost and hopeless. God is what makes my inheritance worth inheriting, and God is what makes heaven heaven. And His presence is what makes a Temple a true Temple.

Psalm 16 ends with a beautiful picture of this eternal reality:

*You make known to me the path of life;
in your presence there is fullness of joy;
at your right hand are pleasures forevermore. - Psalm 16:11*

Earthly pleasures are all temporary and fleeting. In God's presence alone is fullness of joy, pleasures forever. And that's where Paul wants us to train ourselves to look now. Only in the presence of God will we ever find fullness of joy. Only at His right hand will we ever find pleasures forevermore. We were made by Him for Him, and only in Him will we ever be truly, finally HOME. So, why would we want to condition our hearts and minds to settle for lesser wisdom, lesser joy, cheap and hollow imitations of the real thing?

Every lesser thing that is worth having has already been promised to us forever, but the far greater promise is that we will belong to God and be in His presence forever.

