Before and After – Our Identity in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17)

**Introduction:** Let’s play a few rounds of the game, “Who am I?” [Insert three or four facts about important, significant, or well-known people, maybe even people in your church, and get guesses from the participants. I have supplied some people and facts about them in the “Who am I?” file]

“Who am I?” is more than a game. It’s one of the primary life questions. The others are “Why am I here?”, ”Where did I come from?”, and ”Where am I going?” If you can answer these questions correctly and make the appropriate adjustments, life will begin to make sense. It will probably even become more enjoyable.

People of the past were not immune from these identity questions. The same David who boldly faced Goliath hesitated to become the king’s son-in-law. David had an unobstructed view of God’s identity (1 Sam. 17:45-47) but was unclear about his own (1 Sam. 18:18). Joseph’s recognition of his identity (he was not God) kept him from judging his brothers for their previous actions toward him (Gen. 50:19).

Jesus queried His disciples on who the people and the disciples believed Him to be (Mark 8:29). He wasn’t confused about His identity, nor did He need their affirmation to increase His confidence. Jesus wanted them to understand that their status had its foundation in who He was. People often get a distorted view of themselves and others because they use faulty criteria for evaluation.

Even in the game at the beginning, we identified people based on certain norms – job, skills, accomplishments, physical description, or relationships. When you meet someone, one of the first questions you ask is, “What do you do?” If you introduce someone, you do so by drawing a connection between yourself (the person they know) and your friend (the person they don’t know). “This is my…mother, boss, neighbor, fiancé.”

Usually, in an attempt to question your authority rather than gain information, people will ask the question, “Who are *you*?” The Pharisees did that to John and Jesus. Neither of them had any doubt about who they were, why they were here, or where they were going (John 1:19, 23). Having a clear identity empowered them to serve with humility.

*“He must increase, but I must decrease.”* (John 3:30)

*“Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come forth from God and was going back to God, got up from supper, and laid aside His garments; and taking a towel, He girded Himself.”* (John 13:3-4)

Other people assign an identity to you without asking any questions. “You’re a jerk!” Nerd. Freak. Keeper. Classifying people helps us to put them in a box. Those people have tattoos. They fit in this box. These people are from the Deep South. They fit in the unintelligent, red-necked, shotgun-toting, don’t know how to drive in snow box. Until they give us some reason to move them out of that box, the box tells us how to relate to them.

How you answer the question or who you let answer it for you will determine much of your life. Will you shop with cash, purchasing the things you can afford, or credit card, purchasing the things that will afford you a higher status? Do you join a gang or stand alone? Do you find your identity in the car you drive, the house you occupy, the location of your office, or the attractiveness of your spouse? The only safe place to find your identity in what God says about you not in your resume′. Listen to what God says.

*“Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come.”* (2 Cor. 5:17)

You have a past; everyone does. If you go back far enough, you find you had an auspicious beginning. Your original identity was as a creation of God, made in His image (Gen. 1:26), assessed by Him as “very good” (Gen. 1:31). That’s not the history you let define you. Your memory is short-term. It remembers the failures from yesterday, not the future God had planned.

God still has plans. His plans include you. Because of your relationship with Jesus, you are not the same person you once were. The marred image of Jesus is still visible enough for God to see. He is chipping away at all that has accumulated to reveal your true identity. He wants to show His masterpiece so that He can receive glory. You probably don’t believe this, but you are beautiful.

It is sometimes easier to see your actual identity by seeing it reflected in the lives of others. So I want to tell you seven stories about seven people. All of these people, like you, had issues with their identities. And all of them found their true identity in Jesus Christ.

1. **No longer a Slave, but a Son.** (Luke 15:11-24)

His birth certificate told him he was a son, but his heart said he was a slave. And what does every slave want? Escape. So, at his first opportunity, he went to his taskmaster and demanded the rights of a son. His father gave him what had always been his – his inheritance and his freedom. He soon discovered though that freedom can be confining.

A combination of limited finances, pseudo-friends, and a food shortage brought him to a realization. It was better to be his father’s slave than to be a waiter to pigs. So he headed home, the place he once had considered a prison.

Over and over, he repeated the speech in his head: “Father, I am no longer worthy to be called your son” (Luke 15:19, 21). He wasn’t surprised that his father refused to hear his words. He expected that. What did surprise him was how fast the old man could run, the strength of his embrace, and the joyful tears that rolled down his face. Most shocking of all was when his father addressed those who *were* servants in his house and referred to the one in his arms as “my son.”

For most of his life, he had considered himself a slave. His heart now told him his true nature. He was a son.

Did you know you were once a slave? That probably didn’t feel good to hear. No one enjoys listening to those words. Jesus said them to the Pharisees, and they forcefully protested by saying they were sons. They had never been slaves! To hear someone identify them in that way enraged and disgusted them (John 8:33-34).

They didn’t understand that Jesus was talking about slavery to sin. Sin always enslaves. Whoever you obey is your master (Rom. 6:16). Like the prodigal son, Eve came under the whip of sin through her attempt to be free of God’s restrictions. Every one of Eve’s children has been born into bondage ever since (Rom. 3:23). No longer! Now, we can be born a second time into a new family and a new future (John 3:3).

God the Father has already adopted all those who have expressed faith in Jesus, His Son (John 1:12). You can legitimately call yourself a child of God with all the rights and privileges sonship brings. When you pray, “Our Father,” the words are more than just a way to start the conversation. They mean something. God’s your Daddy. No one better mess with you. Your Daddy is bigger than their daddy.

You don’t have to come to Him cowering in fear, afraid He’s going to reject or belittle you. Respect? Yes. Every boy who counts himself a son recognizes his Father deserves respect. Rules? Responsibilities? Yes. There were still days the formerly rebellious son felt like a slave. But then he reminded himself that his relationship with his dad was not dependent on his feelings but rather on his father’s words. The man had heard his father say, “This is my son.” I’ve heard my Father say the same about me (Romans 5:14-17). Have you?

1. **No longer an Enemy, but a Friend.** (Acts 9:23-31)

If you called Saul the enemy of God, he would argue you into the ground. He could do it too. He was a trained debater, and the religious authorities gave him the right to put you in the dirt if you disagreed with his views. But then Jesus came into his life and removed his sight and his objections.

Everything changed, even his name. The Light and His resulting darkness caused Paul to see how blind he had been about his position. He thought he was fighting *for* God; imagine his dismay when he found out he had been fighting *against* God. Rather than continue in the darkness, Paul chose to live in the light.

This radical change in his life was less believable to his former enemies than his former colleagues. How quickly they turned on him! Those whom Paul had been sent to capture were instrumental in securing his escape. Paul, the great debater, could not convince the church leaders of his sincerity. It took Barnabas, the encourager, to get them to allow Paul into the family. The church’s most dangerous physical threat became their most influential human ally.

Paul *had* a resume′. It was impressive. Those credentials didn’t describe him anymore, so he threw them away (Phil. 3:7-8). His past didn’t define him; Jesus did (Romans 8:29). He didn’t care any longer if people knew who he was. He just wanted to know Jesus and point people to Him.

Your story may be similar to Paul’s. Perhaps you too were deluded into thinking you were on God’s side. You thought God’s pleasure came through following a set of rules and performing prescribed actions. Someone taught you that if your good works outnumbered your bad ones, they would somehow cancel each other out (Eph. 2:8-9; Titus 3:5-7). God wouldn’t consider you His enemy then. So you tried, and you worked, and you struggled, but God always seemed distant.

Others of you *purposely* kept God at a distance. You were running from God if you even believed He existed (Psalm 139:7-13). You wouldn’t have considered yourself His enemy (Rom. 8:7; Matt. 12:30), but you didn’t want Him to consider you His friend.

There came a point though where you had an encounter with God. You stopped believing a lie, and you stopped running away. God caught you. But instead of imprisoning you, He set you free (John 8:32).

You discovered that God had been wooing you all along, working to open your eyes to the possibilities of knowing Him and the consequences of refusing Him (John 16:8). The price Jesus paid even before you succumbed to His charms proved He loved you (Rom. 5:8; John 15:13). He was sure it would happen, but you took some convincing. Jesus wasn’t just interested in defeating an enemy. He wanted to transform a foe into a friend (John 15:15).

You didn’t think it was even possible. How could enemies be turned into friends? What could God and humans possibly have in common? (Ex. 33:11) But apparently, the impossible is God’s favorite playground. He loves you. He calls you His friend (Isaiah 41:8; John 15:14).

1. **No longer dead, but alive.** (John 11:38-44)

Lazarus lay there in the tomb. He was dead. There are advantages to being dead. You get to lie around all day without anyone expecting anything from you or calling you lazy. No one asks you to put on deodorant to cover up your stench. They *expect* you to stink. No more deadlines to meet, no more deadlocks to turn, and no more deadwood to carry. You can finally stop worrying about the future.

Lazarus knew this day was coming, so he had prepared himself for death. He met and submitted to the One who was Life. He loved Jesus, and Jesus loved him. So when Lazarus was sick, Jesus came, but seemingly too late. Lazarus was already dead. Who could do anything about that?

As advantageous as death can be, Lazarus’ death had its downside too. It was more so for the people he left behind than for him. His heart decayed; their heart broke. His eyes closed in peace; their eyes swelled shut from sobbing. His body lay still; they had no motivation to move. He was dead; they wished they were.

Jesus listened to their accusations, He felt their sorrow, and then He raised their brother. “Lazarus, come forth!” Not everybody experiences the kind of resurrection Lazarus did, but everybody dies. And anyone can live again.

You can testify to Jesus’ ability to resurrect. Jesus raised you too. Before you could live again, someone had to convince you of your death. It was tough. The last time you went to the doctor for your annual physical, no one dialed 911. They certainly didn’t call for the coroner to come.

Not helping matters, the definition of dead seems to be a little fuzzy in our society right now, especially in the entertainment world. According to zombie shows such as “The Walking Dead,” you can be a threat to living people even if your heart does not function. And you can run really fast when you’re hungry.

In one respect, these shows are correct. Dead doesn’t mean not functioning. It means separated. By that definition, I see dead people. They’re all around me. They live separated from each other by their entertainment, their fears, their ambitions, and their prejudices. What’s worse is their sin separates them from a holy God (Eph. 2:1; Col. 2:13). Because of that, they are without hope (Eph. 2:12).

That’s where you were. That’s where I was. It’s not pretty, but it’s true.

Death’s defeat required a hefty price. Someone had to die in your place. In the past, that someone was an animal – a sacrifice. It was never enough. The most an animal sacrifice could accomplish was a delay of the final deathblow God’s judgment would bring. So God provided a better sacrifice – a Lamb Who would take away, not just conceal, the world’s sin (John 1:29). Jesus’ death as my substitute and His subsequent resurrection gave me life (John 11:25-26).

You were dead, but now you are alive! That doesn’t permit you to live life however you want without fear of repercussions (Rom. 6:1-14). It gives you the opportunity to lay down your life as a worship sacrifice to the One who sacrificed His life for you (Rom. 12:1-2).

1. **No longer dirty, but washed.** (Luke 7:36-50)

No one invited her, but that didn’t keep her from coming. She had to see Jesus. Instead of trying to hide in the shadows, she brazenly let down her hair and her defenses. She exposed herself completely. That was part of her problem. She had exposed herself completely too many times to too many men. All her secrets lay bare to the judging eyes of those who considered themselves clean.

By exposing her filth to the one Man who saw her fully, she found cleansing. He saw a heart filled with sorrow and shame. Most men couldn’t see past her skin or the pleasure she could provide. They didn’t want to, so they never tried.

She touched Jesus with her hair and her lips. Every man she had previously touched only darkened her stain. When she touched Jesus, it left her feeling clean. Jesus took her stain and others’ stares upon Himself. He was willing to have sinful men judge Him dirty for God to declare her clean. She washed the dirt from His feet with her tears; He washed the stain from her heart with His blood.

You may not believe you were ever as dirty as this woman was or in as much need of cleansing. You’re wrong. Simon, one of the participants in the story clearly saw the woman’s filth but was blind to his own. He felt the sting of Jesus’ rebuke and remained in his scum. She left the house that day with Jesus’ dirt in her hair and His peace in her heart. You can identify with her.

There was a time when conviction over your blatant sin, your self-righteousness, or somewhere in between made you desperate for the cleansing only Jesus could provide. You felt so dirty. You didn’t think you could ever get clean. It turns out that blood is an impressive cleansing agent (1 John 1:7).

You feared Jesus would reject your approach. The only ones who had not were those who wanted to use you. When they finished, their feigned love quickly turned to disgust. Your guilt reminded them of their own. You repulsed them.

You didn’t repulse Jesus. He invites “sinners” into His company, not because He wants to be like them, but because they need to be like Him (Matt. 9:10-13). Jesus brought you in, cleansed your soul and your wounds, clothed you in a white wedding gown, and claimed you as His own (Eph. 5:25-27). Now everyone is clamoring for your attention, but you’ve only got eyes for the One who saw your worth when no one else could.

1. **No longer condemned, but justified.** (Luke 18:10-14)

Two unnamed men came to the place of worship. One was religious; people considered the other to be a traitor to his people. One was excited to be there; one was scared to death. One stood tall with his hands lifted toward Heaven; the other was bent over with his face to the ground. Both of them prayed. Neither of them got what they expected that day.

The Pharisee was used to people greeting him with respect. It was an honor to have him as a guest in their homes. The people welcomed him and rightly so. He had worked diligently to get where he was. He earned his position. No one dared insult him; everyone wanted to be like him and to have him like them.

Life was comfortable for the Pharisee, and he expressed his thanks to God. He didn’t *ask* for anything in his prayer. Why should he? He had everything he could possibly want.

The tax collector’s reception by people was less favorable. No one wanted to be him, and no one wanted him in their company. It didn’t matter to people that he only did this job to provide for his family and that he did his job with integrity. No one would befriend him or his family. He represented the enemy.

Unlike the Pharisee, He wasn’t proud of who he was or what he did. He didn’t *thank* God for anything. But he *begged* God for mercy.

The attitude these men had experienced from people, God’s image-bearers, is the same attitude they expected from God. Men looked at what they did, how they dressed, and the position they held to determine their identity. God looked at each of their hearts. Both of them were sinners in need of forgiveness. Both of them got exactly what they asked for.

There are days you fall on your face before God too. You look at yourself in the mirror of His Word, and you don’t need anyone else to condemn you. You do enough of it on your own. You see the flaws (James 1:23-25). They are inescapable. You have to ask yourself how God could be just in forgiving you (1 John 1:9).

Though your standing before God has changed, your behavior has seen little improvement. You don’t fear those dreaded words anymore: “Depart from me; I never knew you.” But you doubt you will hear Jesus’ words of affirmation either: “Well done, good and faithful servant.” Well done. Good. Faithful. They just don’t seem to fit the person looking back at you from the Mirror.

It seems like every time you come before God, you are begging Him for mercy. “Here I am again, Lord. I know I promised I would never do that again, but we both know how that worked out. Can you still forgive me?” And the God whose mercies are new every morning (Lam. 3:22-23) and who requires you to give limitless forgiveness (Matt. 18:21-22) offers you the same.

He could judge you. He has that right. You dare not deny it. His great desire though is to forgive, not to judge. So Jesus came to face the judgment you deserved. He took your sin, all of it. “It is finished!” In place of your sin, He gave you His righteousness (2 Cor. 5:21).

You are no longer a condemned sinner who needs to fall on his face before God. You stand justified – cleared of all charges. You prostrate yourself before Him now, only as an act of thanks and worship.

1. **No longer alone, but part of a family.** (Ruth 1:19-22)

“Don’t call me Naomi. Call me Mara.” That’s how a bitter old woman re-introduced herself to the people of Bethlehem. In her words, she went away full, blessed beyond measure, but came home empty. She blamed God for her predicament.

God had caused the famine that sent their family to Moab. God had taken her husband and her boys in the subsequent years. All she had left was her Moabite daughter-in-law who, for some unexplainable reason, had stubbornly attached herself to Naomi. In her assessment of the situation, Naomi’s bitterness was merely the sum of her many losses. In recounting all her losses, she became blind to the treasure she still had.

Ruth understood value and loss. Ruth had sacrificed everything for Naomi. I wonder how Ruth felt when Naomi referred to her as “empty.” Thankfully, Ruth did not accept Naomi’s devaluation of her worth. Otherwise, she would have never gathered in Boaz’ field, received his kindness, pursued a relationship with him, or borne him a son.

The story ends with Naomi no longer bitter and no longer alone. She’s holding her grandson. She’s part of a family again.

There is no way Naomi could have known the nature of the family she was now a part of. Her grandson was the grandfather of David, the great king of Israel. And David was the direct ancestor of Jesus, the eternal King of the universe.

You too are part of the King’s family, not by birth, but by a second birth. You have royal blood coursing through your veins. The Father recorded your name in the family registry. You are a child of the King.

“If that’s the case, why am I living in this dump instead of in a palace? If I am part of a family such as this, why, even in a place filled with people do I feel so alone?” Your observations, like Naomi’s, are correct. People can be oblivious to the needs of others. They would probably be shocked to know your troubles and the depth of your pain.

Also like Naomi, you have people who do know your hurts and have even shared them. Some of those people are willing to make great sacrifices for you. They want to help, but you keep pushing them away. Be thankful for the people, like Ruth, who tenaciously hold on to you despite your best efforts to set them free. See value in them.

It’s so tempting to maintain your grip on your bitterness. Take a chance, and let go. If you wipe the tears from your eyes for a moment, you might see a revelation. The best chance of ever experiencing joy again comes through your effort to bless others. In the process, you may discover you were never alone. The darkness prevented you from seeing your family.

1. **No longer destined for Hell, but a citizen of Heaven.** (Rev. 21:22-27)

There are too many stories to include here. The thief on the cross, Nicodemus, the widow of Zarephath, no longer blind Bartimaeus, Naaman, maybe even Nebuchadnezzar. Each of these stories wants to be told because each of them manifests the glory of God. We don’t have time now, but the moment we see the New Jerusalem, eternity will have begun. Time will no longer be an issue. I hope you like stories.

Maybe you find yourself envying the characters as you listen to the stories of dramatic transformations from their life before Jesus and their life after Jesus. You compare their story to yours. Perhaps you even wonder if something is wrong. “Did I really change? Is everything new?”

Instead of awe-inspiring before and after pictures, your visible life fits more into the category “one of these is not like the other.” Let me encourage you. Your identity is not defined by how readily others perceive your change. God’s affirmation that it happened is sufficient.

Most of you don’t have what you would classify as a dramatic salvation story. God didn’t speak to you through a heavenly light. He spoke to you through the quiet pages of the Bible and His gentle Spirit. You weren’t a woman with loose morals and a reputation. You were a faithful housewife. You still are. You didn’t require the immediate removal of burial clothes after Jesus raised you out of a rock tomb. You required the slow removal of life-long habits after Jesus rescued you from a grave composed of sin.

It’s okay to have a story that won’t make it to the bestseller list. If every story were radical, then no story would be. Maybe you can’t see the change as clearly as you would like. Seeing didn’t accomplish the transformation to begin with. Faith did, and faith is necessary to acknowledge that the change has happened. Faith comes by hearing (Rom. 10:17). So listen to how God answers the following questions.

Are you a slave or a son?

*“See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us, that we would be called children of God; and such we are.”* (1 John 3:1)

Are you God’s enemy or His friend?

*“And although you were formerly alienated and hostile in mind, engaged in evil deeds, yet He has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death, in order to present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach.”* (Col. 1:21-22)

Are you dead or alive?

*“We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love abides in death.”* (1 John 3:14)

Are you dirty or washed?

*“Such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.”* (1 Cor. 6:11)

Are you condemned or justified?

*“Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”* (Romans 8:1)

Are you alone or in a family?

*“A father of the fatherless and a judge for the widows, is God in His holy habitation. God makes a home for the lonely; He leads out the prisoners into prosperity. Only the rebellious dwell in a parched land.”* (Psalm 68:5-6)

Are you headed for Hell or Heaven?

*“If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also.”* (John 14:3)

By God’s grace, that’s my story. Is it yours?

**Conclusion:** We’ve spent our time here today addressing your status before God. My goal was to encourage you, not to fill you with pride. Of greater significance than your identity is the identity of God.

When God commissioned Moses, Moses asked the self-identity question. “Who am I?” (Ex. 3:11) God’s response to him did not answer his question, but the response met his need. “I will be with you” (Ex. 3:12).

Self-identity confusion can cause you to enter a situation with hesitancy and trepidation. It did for Moses. When we understand that God has promised His presence, courage and authority motivate us to act. But only if we understand who God is.

So Moses’ follow-up question asked about God’s identity. “Who are You?” (Ex. 3:13) God answered, “I Am the God of your ancestors, and I do not change” (Ex. 3:14-15). Rather than affirming Moses’ identity, God expressed His own identity.

Your identity is found in who God is, not in who you are. You change from day-to-day. So do your feelings. He does not change. And because He does not change, you can trust Him to fulfill His promises. God will one day finish His work of transforming you into the image of Jesus, His Son (Phil. 1:6; 1 John 3:2).