

NBC Devotional
April 21, 2021
Who's Your Dad?

As the Nazis were moving into the Netherlands, Henry Kramer (a Dutch theologian) was approached by a group of Christian laymen who explained that their Jewish neighbors were disappearing from their homes. Then they asked him, “What should we do?” Kramer insightfully replied, “I cannot tell you what to do. I can tell you who you are. And if you know who you are, you will know what to do.” Those folks became part of the Dutch Resistance Movement – brave citizens who engaged in covert operations against the German occupation of their country. They produced forged ration cards and counterfeit money, collected intelligence, published underground papers, and many (like Corrie ten Boom’s family) hid Jewish refugees and resistance workers from the Nazi army.

Kramer was right. “If you know who you are, you will know what to do.” So, who are we?

Before I answer that question, let me say that our sense of identity starts taking shape from the moment we are born as we process feedback from parents and primary caregivers. Loving parents, grandparents, and other adults shower infants with affection and praise. On the flip side, less than flattering descriptive words carelessly spoken can have a profoundly negative effect on a child because such terms are both descriptive and prescriptive. That is to say, they tell you not only what people *think* of you but also what they *expect* from you. If you’ve studied family systems counseling, you know that there’s often a “designated patient” in dysfunctional families. That person who has received negative feedback and labeled as lazy, dumb or clumsy can begin to see that label as a personal attribute that seems unchangeable, accept the role suggested by that label, and behave accordingly.

For that reason, we need to be very careful about assigning labels to others. They tend to shape behavior – good or bad.

While parents and caregivers shape one’s identity more than anyone else during infancy, the influence of others grows with each passing year. Relatives, friends, teachers, classmates, advertisers, celebrities and countless others, profoundly affect the way we view ourselves. We are all bombarded with defining messages – spoken and unspoken, positive and negative – from everyone around us. They may not be so crude as to hit us with the dreaded “loser” label, but too often, the subtle feedback leaves us feeling that way.

Keeping it real, I’ve got to say that it’s so easy, for even the followers of Christ, to start buying into the idea that our worth derives from our beauty, our intellect, our athletic ability, our popularity, our career, our net worth, or any other temporary descriptor.

Have you noticed that we tend to define ourselves by what we do, our profession? I have done it repeatedly throughout my adult life - Pastor, district superintendent - You’ve done it too.

Society’s utilitarian view of humanity has crept into our psyche. Friends, we are more – so much more – than producers. And we are more – so much more – than consumers. Don’t you wish that the solicitor who calls you at dinnertime about a car warranty understood that! The current trend in our divided nation is to define one’s self in terms of political affiliation and racial ethnicity.

So... back to the question...who are we?

1 John 3:1-10 clearly and properly defines us. John says,

- *“What great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!”* (v.1)
- *“Dear friends, now we are children of God and what we will be has not yet been made known.”* (v.2)

Of course, there’s a sense in which every member of the human race is a child of God. It’s a cliché... “We are all God’s children.”

But in the gospel bearing his name, John says,

- *“To all who received him (Jesus), to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God – children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God.”* (John 1:12-13)

As believers, we are indeed the children of God, making us heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ (to employ Pauline language). Why? Because God lavished His great love on us by sending His Son as an atoning sacrifice for your sins and mine - Not by our doing, but by His dying - And Paul reminds us that the Holy Spirit testifies that we are God’s children. (Rom. 8:16)

Our identity as the children of God has real life implications:

1. It is a satisfying identity.

If we get our lives grounded in our identity as children of God, we’ll never need to count our Facebook “likes” to improve our self-esteem. A friend of mine has a bumper sticker that reads: “Honk, if you think I’m sexy.” He claims that he sits at green lights until he feels better about himself. Seriously, low self-esteem is a real problem, because we focus on what others think about us, instead of what God thinks about us.

A.W. Tozer was spot on when he said: “True faith requires that we believe everything that God has said about Himself, but also that we believe everything He said about us.” We believe in Him, but don’t forget that He believes in us – so much so that He has adopted us into His family. We are the children of God. It is a satisfying identity.

2. It is also a stabilizing identity.

If we get grounded in our identity as children of God, we can survive amidst the storms of life.

Just as a loving earthly Father would not abandon his children who are getting beat up by life’s trials, our heavenly Father promises His presence whenever we walk through a valley.

In this world, you will have trials and tribulations. I don’t have an adequate answer to the age-old question of why bad things happen to good people. But while we may not have the assurance of full understanding, we have the assurance of God’s never-ending presence.

If we are grounded in our identity as children of God, we can know the peace that passes all understanding when our 401Ks become 201Ks, because our worth is not derived from our portfolio. Our real worth is not contingent upon our net worth.

We are God's children even when our feelings tell us otherwise, when it feels like the heavens are brass, and our prayers aren't getting through. If we get grounded in our identity as children of God, we can thrive in every season of life.

Confession time: Until retirement two years ago, I had no idea that my identity was so inextricably connected to my work.

I am no longer Dr. Berkner, District Superintendent who leads North Arkansas Nazarenes.

I am no longer Dr. Berkner, pastor of Trevecca Community Church.

I am no longer Dr. Berkner, member of NBC's Board of Trustees.

I am just Randy – an old man whose old school ways of doing church have gone the way of the dinosaur.

Retirement has its perks. But the transition may not be easy. But if our lives are grounded in our identity as children of God, we can keep on keeping on when we retire or when we get laid off, because our worth is not derived from what we do. If we are grounded in our identity as God's children, we don't panic when the body begins to wrinkle, and the hair turns gray or turns loose, because our worth is not derived from physical appearance. Oh yes, it is a stabilizing identity.

3. Finally, it is a sanctifying identity.

Now I am getting to John's point in vv.3-10. In v.2, John reminds us that we are caught between the "not" and the "not yet." Because of God's grace (the undeserved love that the Father has lavished on us), we are not what we once were, BUT we are not yet what we shall be.

We are works in progress, Christians in the making. *"When Christ appears, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is."*

Lean into the next statement: *"All who have this hope in Him purify themselves, just as He is pure."* (v.3)

John goes on to remind his readers that Jesus came that He might take away our sins and that no one who lives in him keeps on sinning.

The Son of God appeared *"to destroy the devil's work."* (v.8)

He emphatically states that *"no one who is born of God will continue to sin."* (v.9)

Back in the 70s, Karl Menninger wrote "Whatever Happened to Sin?" I've been pondering that question recently and have come to the conclusion that it's been sanitized, glamorized, legalized, normalized and justified. If we were in a theology classroom, we might engage in a discussion about the definitions of sin – missing the mark, willful transgressions against the known law of God, the violation of love. But John makes one thing perfectly clear: Sin should have no place in the lives of God's children. Our identity has a purifying, sanctifying effect. Our attitudes, our actions, even our reactions are bound to be more Christlike as we reflect upon who we are.

As I rise to plant my feet firmly on a soapbox, can I just express my dismay at the way Christians are attacking each other on social media. Christians can disagree, but let's do it agreeably. Ask yourself: "Who's Your Dad?" If that question echoed in the corridor of our mind each day, it could have a sanctifying effect on us.

My wife is really into name tags; she would never settle for the generic “MY NAME IS...” If making names tags were an Olympic sport, Debbie would be a GOLD medalist! I don’t like to wear them, especially the pin-on type. But I think I think that a name tag might be helpful along life’s journey.

Not one that reads, “Randy Berkner, retired pastor or D.S.” but “Randy Berkner, Child of God.”

Because if you know who you are, or better yet, *whose* you are, you will know what to do.

Dr. Randy Berkner, Retired District Superintendent, Pastor, and Board of Trustees member of NBC, Olivet, Trevecca and SNU, Child of God