

How Do You Identify?

Identity is something at the center of our current conversation. We are constantly searching, both inward and out, for our “true selves.” We examine and hyper-analyze every passing thought, every feeling and sensation, every urge and instinct. We scroll through social media, following others on their journeys of self-discovery, researching various studies, discovering infinitely more identification options which could potentially fit us. What this insatiable search and the increasingly eccentric identities which arise out of it reveal is a deep restlessness in our hearts. Human beings crave definition, stability, and a strong sense of who we are. We are desperate for a true, accurate identity. Yet we continue to look in all the wrong places.

All human beings have two key identification markers that define everything else about them. The first is that we are creatures made in the image of God. “Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens, and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.’ So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:26-27). This means a few things. For one, we are not self originating. Human beings actually were made by God Himself. We are not the result of eons of blind chance but are rather the delicate work of a master craftsman who was delighted to intentionally bring us into existence. We owe the fact of our very being to God, we would have no life whatsoever apart from Him. Therefore, we were created for the purpose of worshiping, loving, obeying, and glorifying the God who lovingly made us, and we are morally bound to do just this.

God created all things, and so all things share in this obligation to glorify Him. Yet people are not merely creatures, but are creatures made in His image. This means we are unique among the rest of creation. We can seek an understanding of God, we can express deep emotion, appreciate beauty, create, worship, and on and on. It also means that every human life is exceedingly valuable—to destroy human life is to deface God’s image. And it also bestows on us a great responsibility to represent God and His will in the world. We are told that God has given man dominion over all creation (Genesis 1:28-29), giving humanity the mission of bringing to realization all the endless potential of the whole world for the glory of God. We are required to do all this according to God’s law, and that begins by recognizing that we ourselves are under God’s authority, we are defined by being creatures made by Him, and we have no right to reject or oppose our Creator.

Yet this brings us to the second aspect of our identity. Because mankind didn’t continue in obedience, sin entered the world, and so also judgment and death. The first people, Adam and Eve, sinned against

their Creator by disregarding His authority, and every person since has been born a guilty sinner: “For all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23); “Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me” (Psalm 51:4); “None is righteous, no not one” (Romans 3:10). Our default position is one of rebellion against God. We are born with a desire to disobey, born with sinful inclinations and disordered passions that nevertheless feel natural. Though we are creatures made by God, we don’t want to admit it, and so we try to become our own authority, our own maker.

This is the reason for all the different identities we pursue. We are so desperate to not be identified as creatures made in God’s image that we turn inward to try to discover what our deepest longings and most powerful feelings are, and then make that our identity. The problem with this is that no matter what we pursue, no identity we invent for ourselves will make us right with God. God made us to be in relationship with Him, and we cannot find fulfillment apart from that. It’s true for people who derive their identity from sexual desire, political alignment, their jobs, or even how faithfully they go to church. The problem with all of these is that they look inward for salvation—their identity arises from within—instead of looking outward. And everyone who grounds their identity in themselves will suffer the same judgment: “But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death” (Revelation 21:8); “Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Corinthians 6:9-10). Everyone who dies in rebellion against the Creator will suffer eternal judgment. Our sin will be paid for. To remain with an identity of one at war with God will not fulfill us, but will ultimately destroy us.

There is a way, however, to receive a new identity. Though we are born as image-bearers in rebellion, we can be transformed into image-bearers in right relationship with God. But this cannot be attained by looking to ourselves, either by trying to cut ties with God altogether, or by trying to earn our way into His good graces. It only happens because God became like us. God’s own Son, Jesus, became like a creature. He took on a human nature and identity, and did what none of us could ever do: He lived a perfectly sinless life. He deserved no judgment, yet He was executed on a cross. Why? Because He was doing what it took to make His people right before God, to give His people a new identity as perfect sons and daughters of God: “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might *become* the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21). When He died on the cross, He was taking our place, paying the price for our sins. And because He never sinned, He didn’t stay dead, but was resurrected in power and glory. And He offers this powerful new life to all of us.

When we recognize ourselves to be guilty sinners, that we desire and pursue things that are wrong, and repent of those sins—turn from them, stop pursuing them—and trust that Jesus paid for them, we will be saved. That means we will be re-created, born again, made new, given true new identities that are not marked by rebellion against God, but reconciliation to God: “And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God” (1 Corinthians 6:11); “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2:20). This doesn’t mean that we’ll never be tempted again or that we will never sin, but it does mean that our temptations and sins no longer define us and no longer control us, and that we now have the power to resist temptation and turn from sin. Every person who remains identified as a rebel against God will suffer eternal judgment. But we can receive a new identity, one defined by Jesus’ perfect life which restores our relationship with God and gives us both fulfillment and peace in this life, and also hope of eternal, resurrected life with God in glory.