

## Identity #4: Calling

March 5, 2023 A.M.  
West Side Church of Christ  
Searcy, Arkansas  
Nathan Guy

### Scripture Reading

*“You are all sons of God by faith in Christ Jesus,” says Paul. “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:26, 28 ESV).*

### **NAMES & JOBS**

I once applied for a job where the recruiter said, “in this job, we need someone who is responsible.” I replied, “I’m the one you want. In my last job, every time anything went wrong, they said I was responsible.”

If the number one question most people ask at some point in life is “who am I?”, a close second is “What am I supposed to do?” If we don’t ask *ourselves* that, someone else will within the first two questions they ask us. “What is your name?” and, “what is it that you do?”

Surveys in America say 55% of us get our sense of identity from what we do.<sup>1</sup> It’s why workaholism is a problem. It’s why so many have trouble retiring. Just who am I outside of what I do? This link between what I am and what I do is so well reinforced by our names.

Where did last names come from? If I asked you what is the most common last name in America, I bet you could guess. It’s Smith. (By the way, one of the most common first names in the world for a century has been “John.” So next time your shepherd calls you and says “this is John Smith,” just respond, “a likely story.”) But “Smith” isn’t just popular in the US. It’s in most all English-speaking countries like Canada, Australia, and Great Britain. And “Smith” of course is where we get blacksmith, silversmith, locksmith, and gunsmith. In German-speaking countries, the most popular last name is

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://news.gallup.com/poll/175400/workers-sense-identity-job.aspx>

“Muller” which means “miller.” In Slovakia, the most common one is Varga, meaning “cobbler.”<sup>2</sup>

Since the Middle Ages, we’ve defined ourselves and others by what we do. And sometimes, our names have a way of determining what we do (just think of a weatherman named Storm, or an archaeologist named Digg). It just seems written in the stars.

## THE CULTURAL STORY OF IDENTITY

**It’s easy to assume your story is already set by your name.** A 2003 article in National Geographic paints a graphic picture of just this point.<sup>3</sup> More than 160 million people in India are treated as “less than human.” They “impure.” You might think I’m talking about those with terribly transmittable diseases. But I’m not. They are treated this way for one simple reason. Their name. They are the “Untouchables.” It says so on their name tag. Each person is given one in India’s caste system. This cast is known as the “Dalits.” Just open a mainstream newspaper from India and you’ll see headlines like these:

“Dalit boy beaten to death for plucking flowers.”

“7 Dalits burnt alive in caste clash.”

“Police egged on mob to lynch Dalits.”

And all of this since 1950, when untouchability was officially banned in India’s constitution. It got to bad that in 1989, the government passed an act making it illegal to parade people naked through the streets, force them to eat feces, or burn their homes.” Yeah—they needed to pass a law for that. In 1989!

A 42-year old Dalit woman was gang-raped and then burnt alive after she, her husband, and two sons had been held in captivity and tortured for 8 days. Her crime? One of her kids had eloped with a girl from a higher caste. The police knew all about it. And they did nothing.

Dalits. Imagine thinking that your lot in life is set in stone because of your name.

---

<sup>2</sup> Kate Morgan, “Why We Define Ourselves By Our Jobs,” BBC (13 April, 2021).

<https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20210409-why-we-define-ourselves-by-our-jobs>

<sup>3</sup> Hillary Mayell, “India’s ‘Untouchables’ Face Violence, Discrimination.” *National Geographic* (June 2, 2003). <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/pages/article/indias-untouchables-face-violence-discrimination>

Most of us don't experience such dire circumstances because of our name. But we do sometimes think our identity is set by it. I imagine a Kennedy feels a great deal of pressure to do some sort of public service. In fact, if you become a long-time serving meaningful member of the state legislature and retire there, and your name is Kennedy, someone might say, “Oh, why didn't you try to be something?” (Because a Kennedy is supposed to at least be a Senator, right?). Or maybe you feel like you always live in your father's shadow. You were told since you were little, “don't soil the family name. What you do is a reflection on me!” Your name, you might think, has a major role in determining who you are.

**It's easy to assume we are defined by our stories.** Or to think our stories are set by our past experience. Therapists see so many examples of people who were deprived of their innocence at a tender age, or witnessed a horrific event in their own home, or lost a loved one at a crucial moment, and each of these events became a daily re-lived experience in their psyche, defining them in all their self-talk.

**It's easy to assume we are defined by our jobs.** We look at our skills and expertise. “I don't just work wood with my hands; I *am* a woodworker.” We look at others on the job with us—on the factory floor, in the fellow cubicles, at the same base. We feel a strong sense of connection to other people who lived where we lived and stood where we stood. Once a soldier, always a soldier, we might say.

**It's easy to assume we are defined by the accidents of our birth.** I am southerner, a northerner. My identity is found in the fact that I am a woman, or I am of light complexion.

**It's easy to assume we are defined by our shared loves.** I am a Razorback fan (because my father was and his father was, and his father was). I am a Republican. I am a Democrat.

**Maybe we define ourselves by our communities.** The cultural narrative we are being fed says that you are an accident; so any meaning in your life has to be manufactured. We know that manufactured meaning is neither stable nor dependable. So we go looking for something deeper. That's why we might practice what some call “identity politics.” But it's not just in politics; it's identity social-ics. Its tribalism. We don't just notice these things; we *define* ourselves by these things. Since I am a southern, white, factory-working male, I must think, believe, vote, and view the world through a certain lens. Since I am a northern governmental contractor for the department of environmental services, I must think, believe, vote and view the world through a certain lens. After all—we tell ourselves—this is who I am.

And it's not just how I see me. It's how I see you. And people *like* you. I was abused by a man close to me, so I view all men and all people close to me in that same light. That is who you *are* to me.

This storyline can get very long, and very dark. And very unhelpful. The only way out of it is to declare all of this as a construction. Something created—maybe out of our past experiences, or the accidents of our birth, or the actions of others who share our same name, or who worked the same job, or who lived on the same street. But we can never really know if we are right to see ourselves or others in this light. It is based only in what other people seem to have thought, or what *we* think *you* think *I* think *you should* think. It's a way of figuring out my identity, according to the narrative of our culture. You are what you do, what your skin color is, what your gender is, what your state is, what your nationality is, what your parents think of you, what your past did to you, what your friends constantly tell you.

## THE CHRISTIAN STORY OF IDENTITY

It's not true. Not, at least, according to the Christian story.

This series is a search for your “identity.” We began by learning we are no accident; we are wanted because we are made with meaning and purpose. So if we are made, it begs the question, “made *of* what?” The answer is that we are made of soul and body. We are more than skin and bones—we are ‘soul.’ What you long for, what you crave, what you sense is missing in your life, what brings harmony and peace to your life is placed there by God. While we are more than skin and bones we are not less than skin and bones—we are “body.” My height, my shape, my skin color, my gender, the things I do with my hands, the things I feel with my skin, the places I've stood with my feet—these affect me, they are huge factors in what has shaped me. Don't forget. You were made; you were made of soul and body. And those things matter.

But the question “what are we made *of*?” leads to another question: “what are we made *for*?” What are we supposed to be? To do? To accomplish? How are we supposed to identify ourselves in this world? We've looked at all the factors that might be candidates for that ultimate answer were we simply the product of a terrible accident. But if we were made with meaning and purpose, if our souls and bodies are given to us by that same God with meaning and purpose, then we must ask if He has anything to say about how He defines me, and how I define myself.

The answer is yes. God knows all the things we tend to rely on in forging our identity. And he comes alongside us every step of the way.

**The first thing he does is he calls us. Mark 2:17; 1 Pet 2:9**

**We look for identity in our name.** Maybe it’s Kennedy. Maybe it’s Untouchable. That name that has come to define us, defines us no longer, when Jesus comes calling. To prove it, he gives us a new name. We are so busy asking “who do I think I am?”, that Jesus turns the tables and says, “Simon, who do you think *I* am?” Simon says, “You? I have no clue who I am, what I’m supposed to do, where I’m supposed to go, how to make sense of my life up til now; You see I’m Jonah’s son. But what does that mean? Am I destined to be living in Jonah’s shadow forever? Am I a recipient of his bad business ventures? Am I to ride his coattails and inherit his good reputation regardless of my own life? I don’t know who I am! But you—oh, that’s easy. You are God’s Son. And being God’s Son is set. Easy to answer. You bask in the glow of God.” (Matthew 16:15-18)

And Jesus said, “Simon, hunh? Jonah’s son? Well, Simon-Jonah’s-Son, I’m going to give you a new name.” There’s a great background to this story. In a time when your name so easily defined you, giving a new name means giving you a new mission, a new calling, a new identity, a new lease on life. Speaking through the prophet Isaiah, God had said to his struggling people who had become known far-and-wide as the “exiled people” “The nations shall see your righteousness, and all the kings (shall see) your glory, and you shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the Lord will give” (**Isa 62:2** ESV). To the struggling church in Pergamum, the risen Jesus tells John to write a letter, listing both the church’s sins known to the Lord but also the noble and valiant fight the church has put up in the midst of great temptation. And the final note of encouragement is that “to the one who conquers, I will give “a new name” (Rev 2:17). To the church of Philadelphia, a similar note: “The one who conquers...I will write on him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God...and my own new name” (**Rev 3:12**).

A new name is a new identity. Some have gone looking for that new name in the New Testament, perhaps thinking it’s the name “Christian” used in Acts 11:26—where the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch. Others think maybe it’s “disciple” (a word used 279 times in the New Testament). But I think this is to miss the power of the imagery. A name is more than letters of the alphabet arranged in a new order. When you lose your good name, or gain a good name, or stop in the name of the law, you are talking about reputation, authority, and power. Giving us a new name—His new name—belonging to His good reputation, in touch with his power, living by his authority—means we are unleashed to live in the glory and power of God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Christian story says if identity is found in a name, here is your new name: the name of Jesus Christ himself, the express image and power of God.

**If identity is found in our past experiences, the Christian story says our new name reframes that past.** Paul gets out his resume and checks all the identity-making lines on the page: Hebrew of Hebrews. Circumcised on the 8<sup>th</sup> day. Of the tribe of Benjamin. Pharisee-level in the “law” category on jeopardy. The zeal of a church persecutor. Blameless in achieving religious status. That, says Paul, was my identity. Until I got the call. I was given a new name. A new lease on life. In fact, a whole new life. “whatever gain I had,” says Paul, “I counted as loss for the sake” of that name—Christ. “Indeed, I count everything as loss because of [its] surpassing worth.” In fact, I’ve lost all things—and I consider them garbage! That I may gain Christ and be found in Him (**Philippians 3**).

Paul says “I am the chief of all sinners!” But God saved me to show his unlimited patience. To say to the world “Paul is at the top of my trophy case—if His life can be redeemed, then what’s your excuse?”

Peter had a name as “Jesus denier.” Until the Risen Jesus met him for breakfast on the shoreline and gave him three affirmation to cover his three denials, giving him not just a new name, but a new calling.

Your past doesn’t go away because of Christ; it gets a make-over; your eyes begin to see everything through new lenses. This always comes when you get a new calling, a new mission, a new name. It gives you new lenses.

**It neutralizes the stories we used to tell based on the accidents of our birth.** Maybe you were a Dalit; but in Christ, you are no untouchable—you are held in the arms of Jesus Christ himself. Maybe you were a Kennedy; but in Christ, you are called to be part of a story larger than your genealogical record. Paul says to the Corinthians, “Consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, so that, as it is written, ‘Let the one who boasts (who looks for a name tag in which to boast, in which to claim this great identity, let him) boast in the Lord.’” (1 Cor 1:26-30 ESV).

The Apostle Paul comes into a bitterly divided world. There are Jews who know they are Jews. They tell their past story. They remember their circumcision. That is who they are. There are Greeks—Gentiles—Romans, proud members of the greatest empire the

world had ever known, they would say. Born in a Roman-owned province, given the keys to the kingdom by the Emperor himself. There are slaves, they know they are slaves and that is who they are. Men define themselves in their manliness; women define themselves in their femaleness. And Paul blows it all up:

"You are all sons of God by faith in Christ Jesus," says Paul. "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:26, 28 ESV).

But you don't lose your ethnicity or your perspective from within your ethnicity when you become a Christian. Someone who knows the Black experience in America firsthand before becoming a Christian knows it after. There are Jews and Greeks. There are slaves and free persons. There are males and females. Christianity does not destroy these parts of our experience. It certainly matters in how we tell our story up to now; but it doesn't serve as ultimately definable when we tell our story of where He is calling us. Like one puts on a coat over our clothes, we put on Christ as the ultimate identity-making and defining thing about me. It's the loudest, brightest, and clearest truth that supersedes all others. And that is a challenge to every single one of us. As Christ challenges us to lay down every identity-making thing that gets in the way of seeing Christ in our lives and in each other.

I don't lose sight of who I was; I gain perspective in the light of who I AM.

In Christ, God gives us a new name. A new lens for our past. A new lease on our future life. He gives us a new identity.

**It changes our desires and loves.** Our new identity lies on top of all those things that our cultural narrative seeks to be our defining and determining characteristics. I don't believe we can or should deny the limits and lenses of our experiences. I see the world through the eyes of a certain gender, a certain ethnicity, a certain height, from a certain place, with a certain background. I don't deny that. In fact, I shouldn't deny that. It makes me compassionate when you see the world differently than I do. I want to try to walk a mile in your shoes, and if I can't, I want to know what you have seen and experienced that comes as a result of those things that have been true about you. We need that from each other. **See Gal 5:13-14: Our calling to freedom becomes a calling to serve each other.**

**It places us in a new community (See Col 3:15) and It gives us a new vocation.**