

A Graceful Identity

By Joe Duke

I recently stepped away from my role as the Co-founder and Sr. Pastor of LifePoint Church. For over 35 years I worked in the trenches of ministry. I watched God do the amazing. I saw people at their best. And I saw them at their worst. Like all pastors, I experienced the joys and heartaches of “the people business.” But God was always among us working His generous plan of redemption and reaching kindly in our direction. Eventually, I was reminded from pastoral succession experts that “Every pastor is an interim pastor.”¹ One day, every pastor leaves. Now it was my turn to pass the baton.

Years ago, a spiritual mentor offered a piece of advice that I took to heart: “Don’t underestimate the emotions you’ll feel when you drive off your church campus for the last time as the pastor.” Turns out, that was good advice. Because that’s a long drive. You’d better grip the wheel at 10 and 2 because every intense emotion and memory are involuntarily summoned for thoughtful review. Fortunately, I survived, and the pastoral succession process at our church was remarkably positive. Textbook perfect if there’s such a thing. I’m grateful.

But my departure as the Sr. Pastor was bigger than tending to the details of an exit strategy. I knew I had some other work to do—work inside my own soul. At one point, I called it *ministry detox*—the gradual rebuilding of my inner life that may have been sacrificed on the altar of *church progress*. And I knew I had to pay precise attention to one area in particular. *Identity*.



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Who am I *now*—since I am no longer who I *was*? Have my accomplishments as a pastor accidentally sabotaged the simple truth that I am also a *child of God*? Is my sense of worth resting on what I have done for Christ or what Christ has done for me? Is my true identity flourishing even though my name is missing from my office door? These are not trivial questions.

The concept of our identity is foundational in our Christian experience. It’s at the core of who we are in God’s eyes. And it answers the question of our intrinsic worth. Like every human being, the believer in Jesus is created in God’s image and is the object of God’s affection. But the believer in Jesus also has a unique identity. Something extraordinary. He or she is *in Christ*.

Thumb through the pages of the New Testament, and you’ll see the phrase *in Christ* or *in Him* peppered throughout. Paul said it as succinctly as possible when he wrote, “For He made Him [Jesus] who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God *in Him*.”² Jesus temporarily changed His identity to a suffering sin-bearer so our identity could be



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permanently changed to a forgiven sinner. It's a change that affects our spiritual DNA. "All things have become new."³ Through belief in Christ, we "become the righteousness of God in Him."

Living in your identity in Christ means you're convinced what God says about you is true. You know, for example, you're forgiven. You're made new. You're one with every other believer. You're dead to sin and alive to God. You're declared righteous. You're a temple of the Holy Spirit. You're accepted in the beloved. And you'll be with God forever. You *experience* your new identity because all those things are true about you, and you've taken God at His word. The degree to which you believe those truths is the degree to which you enjoy the reality of your identity in Christ.

During an especially grueling season of ministry and personal challenges, I met with a counselor to help me process life. In one of our sessions, I was recounting what I believed about God. I went on to affirm that "I am completely and perfectly loved by God. Nothing I could ever do, say, or think could cause God to love me more or love me less." A declaration dripping with biblical profundity. But the way those words rolled off my tongue created a push-back from my counselor. "Did you catch *how* you said those words?" my counselor observed. Apparently, my statement about God's love for me—profound and earth-shattering as it was—had escaped my mouth void of passion and conviction. It must have sounded like a casual weather report. Partly sunny with light wind. What was I really saying? Maybe my words were just a rehearsed, theological talisman. Or maybe I said them because that's the kind of thing preachers are supposed to say. Truth be known, I believed my words, but I didn't feel them. And I wanted to feel them.

Those who know me might refer to me as a champion of grace. At least I'd like to think that's the case. Through all those years of ministry, I've been committed to clearly communicating the free grace perspective of life with God—a completely free salvation accompanied by an invitation to apprenticeship with Jesus and invest our lives in what matters most. I believe it's the greatest message in the world. But my wife has reminded me more than once, "You freely give God's grace to others but not always to yourself." She's

right, again. Maybe it's like the plumber whose leaky sink is never fixed. Or the lawyer who hasn't bothered to draw up his own last will and testament. Even pastors can come up short in experiencing God's grace. I'm guilty. Grace is awesome and, at the same time, elusive. It slips through our fingers like liquid gold. Even while proclaiming its priceless value, I've felt grace flow through my heart without sticking. And sometimes I didn't even realize it.

We cannot fully embrace our identity until we have embraced Jesus. And we cannot fully embrace Jesus until we have embraced His grace. Jesus is inseparable from grace. I know I'm more likely to fully embrace my identity in Christ when I fully embrace His grace. Sounds like the Apostle Paul figured it out and I think we can too. Here's how he said it,

But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me has not been in vain. In fact, I worked harder than all of them—*yet not I, but the grace of God with me.*⁴

As strange as it sounds, grace is passively received. That's a hard admission for me especially since I consider myself a recovering control freak. But "One cannot summon grace with a whistle."⁵ Grace refuses to be manipulated by our clever strategies. Instead, it's free and all around us. David Benner paints a picture that I'm finding more and more compelling when he suggests that "Surrender is the discovery that we are in a river of love and that we float without having to do anything."⁶

When the tentacles of an unsanctified worldview wrap themselves around grace, a struggle is likely to follow. Grace is offensive to many. It hardly makes sense. No



wonder John Wesley is said to have observed, “Nothing is more repugnant to capable, reasonable people than grace.” Maybe grace seems repugnant because nothing we can do will position us to earn it or deserve it. Grace dodges our claim to moral superiority. God’s grace is free. But we’d rather work for it. Or at least try. We’re in trouble and in desperate need of help from God.

In the traditional definition, grace is *unmerited favor*. It’s a kindness directed toward all who have done nothing even to ready themselves for it. While *unmerited favor* is a beautiful picture of grace, I also appreciate Paul Zahl’s refreshing description of grace as “one-way love.”⁷ God’s love and grace are lavished on us without the requirement of a behavioral contribution from us. It’s *one-way*; coming from God to us. And God’s grace illuminates His *prodigal love*—wasteful and poured

out without insisting on a payoff. That’s because reimbursing God is impossible.

The more time I spend in the wonder of grace the bigger and more profound it becomes. Grace is enormous and enormously offensive. It is liberating and off-putting. Grace is ready to free us at every turn, of every sin, through all offenses. Grace is the way God works. We might even say, it’s who He is. “None of us, if left to ourselves, would devise a plan like God’s plan to rescue humanity You should be slightly uneasy with grace! That probably means you’re beginning to understand it.”⁸

Seems like some days I live out of my identity in Christ. Other days, not so much. But I’ve caught the scent of where real life is found. And I hope you have too. I never want to settle for cheap substitutes. I want to enjoy a graceful identity—an identity full of grace.

Notes

1. William Vanderbloemen and Warren Bird, *Next: Pastoral Succession That Works* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2014), p. 9.
2. 2 Corinthians 5:21 NKJV. (Italics mine).
3. 2 Corinthians 5:17 NKJV.
4. 1 Corinthians 15:10 NET. (Italics mine).
5. Scott Russell Sanders, *Staying Put: Making a Home in a Restless World* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1993), p. 191.
6. David G. Benner, *Surrender to Love* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), p. 63.
7. Paul F. M. Zahl, *Grace in Practice: A Theology of Everyday Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), loc. 510, Kindle.
8. Joe Duke, *Reflections: Words to Inspire, Challenge and Encourage You* (Reisterstown, MD: LifePoint Press, 2023), pp. 41-42.

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