

I Am A Saint

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[0 : 00] Anyway, we are continuing our study tonight on the topic of the Christian's identity. That's our focus in the evening services, and that's what we're going to look at again tonight.

In this series, we are looking at some of the concepts and terms that are used in the Bible to describe our identity as followers of Jesus.

I want us to go back to the passage that we read, and we're going to read again from 1 Corinthians chapter 1 verses 1 to 2. Paul called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus and a brother soth's and niece, to the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus, both their Lord and ours.

We are looking at this word tonight, and our title is I am a saint. When we introduced this series, we said that it's grounded on two controversial claims and one crucial diagram.

And I'll say this again and again as we go through this series together. The controversial claims are that it's possible for your understanding of your identity to be wrong.

[1 : 17] And as we keep saying, the reason that's controversial is because it's the opposite of what our culture is saying. Our culture says today that only you can define and declare your identity.

Only you can get it right, whereas we're saying you can actually get it wrong. And the second thing we're saying follows on to that. We're saying not only can you get it wrong, we're saying it's highly likely that you've got it wrong.

And that's especially true for us as Christians. And it's true of me, because the things that the Bible teaches about our identity are things that we actually find hard to believe.

And a biblical understanding of just who we are in Jesus is something that doesn't come naturally to us. It's something that we have to work at. And all of that is explained in the diagram that we use as our basis for understanding this.

We're emphasizing the fact that a biblical understanding of identity has to be shaped by what God thinks. The arrows here have to go in that direction.

[2 : 26] God is our Creator. And therefore, it really is just a very basic piece of theological common sense to say that he defines our identity, our Creator, our Savior.

And what he thinks, what he says, what he does, that needs to shape how we see ourselves. And it needs to shape how others see us. And that's why we have to have the arrows pointing in the right direction.

And the reason we keep coming back to these arrows is because we can so easily get them wrong. So easily our identity is shaped by what others think. Or maybe it's shaped by what we think ourselves.

And sometimes these influences can be so strong that it can all shape what we think of God. All of that's a mistake. The arrows have to be the right way around.

And so as we're thinking about this, the diagram's got three main parts, three prongs if you like. And that raises three questions. We used these last time. We're going to use them again tonight.

[3 : 28] In terms of you being a saint, what does God think? What should you think? And what do we want others to think?

And we saw last time and we'll see again tonight that the does, the should, and the want are all very important. So first of all, we're saying that if you're a Christian or if you become a Christian, you are a saint.

What does that mean in terms of what God thinks of us? What does God think? Well, this whole category of our identity in terms of being described as saints is very easy to misunderstand.

And I think that's for two reasons. First is because we don't tend to think that we're saints. And secondly, if we're honest, we don't really know what that word saint means.

So in terms of the first issue, in terms of not thinking of ourselves as saints, history doesn't help us because if you look back, you can see that for many centuries, the term saint gets used to describe particularly important, particularly influential Christians.

[4 : 38] So Paul, who wrote this letter, is referred to as Saint Paul, same for Peter, same for John. And that pattern continues. You have famous people throughout church history, whether it's Augustine or Colomba or Patrick or Mother Teresa, they all get called saints.

And even in more day-to-day life, if we know somebody who's maybe particularly faithful and generous and kind, we would maybe call them a saint as well.

So that's the way it's done. Over history, it's the way it's done today. It's completely different to the way the term was used in the Bible.

Because in the Bible, saints is the term used to describe anyone who is a follower of Jesus. So here, in 1 Corinthians chapter 1, Paul is writing to a church and he calls them saints.

And that's particularly striking if you read on to the rest of Corinthians, because what you discover is that the church is actually a mess, and yet Paul still refers to them in the same way.

[5 : 47] And he does it again in many other parts of the New Testament. When he writes to the Ephesians, it's to the saints. When he writes to the Philippians, it's to the saints. When he writes to the Colossians, it's to the saints.

And so all of that's telling us that the first thing we need to recognize is that sainthood is basic, not exceptional.

In terms of the way the Bible uses it, it's to describe all of us as believers. It's not reserved for the elite. It's just a basic truth for everyone.

In other words, if you are a Christian or if you become a Christian, when God looks at you, he sees a saint. But what does that actually mean?

And that's the second misunderstanding that we can fall into. And because we associate sainthood with being exceptional, and because we tend to think that, you know, it involves knowledge that it's a really high level, or that, you know, it's got that kind of wisdom and ability that very few people have.

[6 : 51] And usually we tend to think, well, you know, that's something that we will never attain to. And that's why I'm pretty sure that if you have ever been asked the question, what religion are you?

I am 100% sure that you have never, ever, ever responded by saying, I am a Christian saint. And the reason we don't say that is because our understanding of sainthood is often inaccurate.

So what does it mean? Well, when you hear the word saint, the key word that you need to think about is the word holy. It's all connected to the word holy.

Now, this is where English is actually nowhere near as good as Greek, and it's nowhere near as good as Gaelic. In English, we have three words that appear in our Bibles again and again and again, holy, saints, and sanctification.

In Greek, those three words are hagios, hagios, hagasmos. In Gaelic, they are nev, nev, nevhoych.

[8 : 01] And you can see how almost identical they are. They're all talking about the same thing. They're all talking about that. They're all referring to holiness.

So really, what we should have in English is holy, holies, and holinessification. Wouldn't that be a cool word?

That's what we should have. It's all talking about being holy. That has to be the low point of my handwriting on that screen. But anyway, you know what I'm trying to say.

Now, to be a saint, therefore, is to be holy. Now, what are we talking about when we talk about being holy? Well, to start with what you need to think about in terms of holiness is the concept of being set apart.

That's the kind of basic concept behind the word holy, something that has been set apart. You get a great example of that in the Old Testament. In these verses from Exodus, you have the description of various things being set apart for use in the temple.

[9 : 06] You've got the oil, and you've got the furniture, you've got the utensils, you've got Aaron, you've got his garments. All of these things are being set apart to serve a purpose that all made, they're all set aside for a holy use.

So it's giving us this idea of something that's set apart, something that's separate, something that's special. So these are no longer for a common use. They are holy.

And the Bible makes it very clear that holiness, that this idea of being set apart, is a key attribute of God. Again, you go back to the Old Testament, you see it again and again.

Leviticus 20, you shall be holy to me, for I the Lord, I'm holy, and have separated you from the peoples. There's the same kind of language, but it's all grounded in the fact that God is holy.

Isaiah 6, you have the same amazing vision of the throne room of God, and the voice that Isaiah here shouts, Holy, Holy is the Lord of hosts.

[10:10] And all of that is highlighting to us the fact that God is holy, that first and foremost, He is set apart. He is in a category of his own.

And this is part of what something that theologians will often refer to, and that we've mentioned from time to time, what we call the Creator-Creation distinction.

So you've got the Creator, God, and then you've got the Creation here. And so in this little circle, you have all of history, all of matter, all of energy, everything else that exists.

But it's separate from the greater reality from God himself. And part of his status as our Creator is the fact that he is set apart. He is holy.

And so there's a sense in which we can say that the ultimate saint is God. He is the ultimate holy one.

[11:12] But the Bible also teaches us that if you are a Christian or if you become a Christian, that makes you holy as well. You become a saint, a holy one.

And that's true from the moment you come to faith. But the Bible then explains that there's two elements to this. The Bible talks in terms of sanctification, which is just holinessification, sanctification.

But it does so in two ways. It speaks of a one-off, definite, once-for-all setting apart of the believer as a saint.

In other words, when you come to faith in Jesus, you go from not being a saint to becoming a saint. From not being a believer to becoming a believer. That's what we call definitive sanctification.

Something that happens once, a once-for-all setting apart. But then from that point, the Bible also describes a process whereby bit by bit we are made more and more like Jesus.

[12:21] We are being renewed and restored back into what God originally created us to be, to bear His image, to put off sin, to put off righteousness.

And that's a process. And it is usually referred to as progressive sanctification. So you've got these two aspects of sanctification. Definitive, when you become a saint and progressive, where more and more and more you are being made more like Jesus, you are being made more holy.

And you see that in different parts of the Bible. The passage that we read is speaking about the first one. There you go, you've got it there, to the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus. That's past tense.

It's talking about definitive, once-for-all setting apart as holy. But then other parts of the Bible of the New Testament will speak about the process leading towards sanctification, where we're being transformed, restored into the image of God, and whereby we are enabled more and more and more to please God, to follow Jesus, to become more like Him.

And that's all part of God's will that we will be sanctified and made more holy. And so these two elements go hand in hand. Definitive sanctification, progressive sanctification.

[13:40] God sets you apart as holy. You're His child. You're no longer under the dominion of sin. And then from that point, He works in you and restores you and transforms you.

And so you grow in holiness. You grow in your sainthood. A crucial thing to remember though is this. God doesn't transform you in order to make you into a saint.

It's not that the ones who've had loads and loads of renovation work done and who are now really good, that they become saints. God does not sanctify us in order to make us saints.

He sanctifies us because we are saints. He transforms you because you are His. All of that is to say that sainthood is basic and fundamental to our identity as Christians.

When you get up tomorrow morning, if you are a follower of Jesus, when you look in the mirror, you are seeing a saint. So that helps us.

[14:47] That brings us just nicely onto our second question, which is, what should you think?

What should you think about all of this? Again, history has given us a whole load of ways in which

we could misunderstand this aspect of our Christian identity.

And people have thought up loads of different ways in which being a saint involves kind of elite level behavior. Sometimes that's something that people have done to the point of suffering.

The term that sometimes gets used to describe that is asceticism, where you are denying yourself to such an extreme level. Denying yourself food, denying yourself luxuries, denying yourself anything, in order to reach a higher spiritual level.

That it's almost like the more I kind of deny myself, the more holy that will make me. And we tend to think that that's the kind of thing that sainthood involves. And we might think to ourselves, well, I'm not going to do that. I'm not going to starve myself. I'm not going to go around in rags.

But we still do the same kind of thing. We still will find ourselves setting targets that we think that we need to reach in order to achieve sainthood.

[16:03] So things like church attendance, Bible knowledge, discipline in prayer, expertise in all things spiritual. We think we need to attain all that.

And the minute we start thinking that it's usually a one way ticket to a sense of failure and inadequacy, because we just see where we are falling short. And we all tend to think like this.

If I write this word on the screen, I want you to tell me, well, you don't need to tell me, but I want you to think, what is your gut reaction? Do you feel excited or intimidated?

And if you feel intimidated by that term, it's because we are we are we are loading it with a whole pile of expectations that shouldn't be there.

So what should you think? Well, there's loads that we could say. I just want to highlight two words. When you think of the word saint, you should be thinking of the word holy.

[17:06] When you think of the word holy, there's two crucial words I want you to think about. Precious and useful.

To be a saint is to be precious and useful. And instantly, we realize that these are two of our deepest cravings.

When I write the word saint on the board, it can just seem like it belongs to a different world of religious expertise. But when I write those two words, that is everything that we want to be.

We want to be precious. We want to be worth something. We want to be valued. We want to be special.

And we long to be useful. To have something to offer. To make a difference. To have a purpose. And you do not need to look far into the culture around us to see so many people desperately searching for both of these things.

[18:21] Something that will make them feel precious. Somewhere where they can be useful. The gospel gives you both.

And the reason the gospel gives you both is because the gospel makes you a saint. A saint is precious. That takes us back to the whole concept of being set apart.

Often with theological terms like holy, to understand that well, it can be really helpful to think of the opposite. And often, if you're ever struggling with a theological term, you think, what does that mean?

How do I explain that? One of the things that can be really helpful to do is to think, well, what's the opposite of this? And that can be really, really, really helpful. So in this example, it's good to think of the opposite of holy.

And at a very basic level, to be a saint, to be holy, is the opposite of being common. Now, when I say common, I don't mean like a kind of posh sort of upper class, lower class kind of thing.

[19:24] What I mean is being common in the sense of being of no particular value. Nothing that makes you stand out. So to give an illustration, it's like the difference between ordinary potatoes and roast potatoes.

You definitely know what I mean there. And then at a deeper level, to be holy is the opposite of being corrupt. And that's the difference between roast potatoes and rotten potatoes.

Holiness speaks of our preciousness, a purity that is without corruption. Paul describes this so vividly and powerfully in Ephesians 5 when he builds on the imagery that marriage gives us.

He says, Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her. That he might sanctify her. There's the same language again. That he might holinessify her. That he might sanctify her.

Having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word. That he might present the church to himself in splendor without spot or wrinkle or any such thing that she might be holy and without blemish.

[20 : 38] That's such a beautiful description of what holiness means. With God, we see that holiness, that preciousness in all his immaculate purity.

And he's just utterly blemish free. But with us, we see that preciousness growing as God does his ongoing work of purification in us.

In other words, his sanctifying work where he restores us and removes corruption from us. I was thinking about how to illustrate this.

I don't know. This illustration will resonate very well with some of you. It might not with others, but we'll do it anyway. And to understand all this, you need to compare a brand new Mercedes and an old Massey Ferguson.

So you've got a brand new Mercedes in your driveway. What is that Mercedes doing as it sits in your driveway? It's rotting.

[21 : 43] It's depreciating. And every day it's getting one step closer to being replaced. And that's why I can think of cars that when I was young, I dreamed of having.

And now I look at and I wouldn't give you a fiver for them. And so even a brand new car sitting in your driveway, bit by bit, its value is just disappearing.

What about the old Massey Ferguson in your shed? Well, it has been set apart for restoration. So put aside all the imageries in your head of neglected Massey Ferguson.

That's not what I mean. You need to think of the Massey Ferguson that's in your shed. It's there to be restored. It's getting repaired. And it is never getting replaced.

And any rotting that it's been exposed to needs to be restored and put right. Why? Because it's so precious.

[22 : 50] And every tractor lover in here knows what I'm talking about there. And in God's eyes, you are like the Massey Ferguson. You're not as flash or as shiny as a new mark.

And you probably never will be. But in God's eyes, you're irreplaceable. You're set apart for restoration. You're precious.

You're a saint. And like a Massey Ferguson, it's turning into the best illustration ever this, like a Massey Ferguson, a saint is also useful.

And Paul speaks about this very powerfully in 2 Timothy chapter 2. And I want to just read these verses here and look out for the word useful. But God's firm foundation stands, bating this seal. The Lord knows those who are His and let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity. Now in a great house, there are not only vessels of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay, some for honorable use, some for dishonorable.

[23 : 53] Therefore, if anyone cleanses himself from what is dishonorable, he will be a vessel for honorable use, set apart as wholly useful to the master of the house, ready for every good work.

So flee youthful passions and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart. Earlier on, we read about the items that were set apart for the temple.

And you think, oh wow, the garments and the utensils and the bowls, they've been set apart for the temple. And you'd think, they're the temple things, never use them.

But of course, that's to completely miss the point. They're there to be used and they were used. The temple wasn't a museum. It was a fully functioning machine.

It's not the right word, but I can't think of the other word. It was just something that was in use all the time. And those holy items were set apart. Yes, they were precious, but they were useful and they were there to serve a purpose.

[24 : 57] And again, this is so easy to misunderstand. It's so easy to think today, and history is on the same. It's so easy to think that to be a saint, to be a real saint, you need to cut yourself off from the world.

You need to detach yourself and kind of hide. And don't let anything come near you to corrupt you and keep away from everybody else. And just stay safe and secure in this holy bubble.

People do that. It's totally wrong. It's totally inaccurate. Because as Paul writes in these verses and as the whole of scripture makes clear, when God sets us apart to be his saints, he does that, not to make us museum pieces, but to make us useful, to be instruments in his hands.

And that's a key part of God's work of sanctification. That's such an important thing to remember. As God sanctifies you, as he makes you more holy, he is making you more useful. He is making you more and more useful in his church and for his purposes. And you know, there are many, many people who I have come across who would struggle to see themselves as holy, but they have demonstrated again and again and again over so many years that they are so useful because they serve God in amazing ways.

[26 : 29] And it can take, there can be loads of different examples. God sanctifying us to make us better listeners, to make us better communicators, to make us more thoughtful in providing for people's needs, to give us more stamina in terms of our day-to-day responsibilities, to increase our confidence in sharing our faith, to be more attentive in pastoring one another, to be more generous, more patient, more encouraging, to be a more pleasant person to work with, to just be more and more useful to God in every circumstance of our lives.

And this is where we see something so crucial that gets emphasized in the passage that we read, that when we talk about being saints, it is something that we do together.

We're called to be saints together. And as a church family, we serve and grow and support one another and the community around us.

That's what it means to be a saint, to be useful to God and useful to one another. When you invite somebody to the buffet this Saturday, you are demonstrating your sainthood. When you make a lovely dish or dessert, you are demonstrating your sainthood.

When you encourage people to come, it's all demonstrating our sainthood. And it's all bringing us to the key point that if you are a follower of Jesus, even if you are just very early on in your journey following Jesus, when we talk about being a saint, this is what you already are.

[28 : 14] You are already so precious to God. And you are already so useful in His hands.

And again, thinking about the opposite is helpful. Our identity as saints should drive us away from stuff that's going to corrupt us. And it should help us to see that sin is poisonous and polluting and horrible and rubbish.

And it helps us to just turn away from that anew. And it also reminds you that you're never, ever useless to God. Never. And instead it can spur us on as we seek to serve Him.

That reassures us, that challenges us, that motivates us to live our lives as saints. So, we've done that one, we've done that one.

Last of all, and very briefly, what do we want others to think? Well, I just want to say one thing under this very briefly. All of this language about sainthood and holiness and sanctification, it can actually pose a big challenge for us in terms of what we want other people to think.

[29 : 31] When we think of the people we work with, people in our families, people in our community. And the reason it can pose a big challenge for us is because to people outside the Christian faith, words like saint and holy and sanctification, these words can all have negative overtones.

So, to be holy, people on the outside will think that sounds strict. To be a saint sounds kind of pious, maybe even a bit weird.

To be pure, it sounds arrogant. It maybe even comes across as judgmental. And all that language, you know, it has negative overtones amongst many people.

And so, what do we want people to think? When we think about sainthood, how do we get past these negative overtones? What should we try and focus on?

Well, I want to give you a word that I think will help you. When we think of the word saint, that's pointing us to a concept, a word that is absolutely crucial to our witness as Christians.

[30 : 50] And it's a word that is instantly respected and recognized by unbelievers. And it's a word that I hope that this whole series will help cultivate in us.

A crucial word. What's the word? It's the word genuine.

To be a saint, to be holy, is to be genuine. Genuine in your love for Jesus.

Genuine in your love for others. Genuine in your honesty about the fact that you're not the finished article, you still make mistakes, there's still things you don't know, you still stuff up.

And genuine in recognizing that the foundation of your identity and your security is not your job or your looks or your wealth or your success.

[31 : 57] The foundation for your identity is Jesus. His love for you, his commitment to you, and everything that he's done for you.

That is how I want to live my life this week and for the rest of my life. That is what I want other people to see. I am never ever ever ever going to be a perfect saint. But boy, I want to be a genuine one. So, you are a saint. And the one thing I want you to do is I want you to make sure that you do not reserve that statement for the exceptional moments in your experience because with Jesus, exceptional is not rare. Every moment of every day is exceptional when we are following Jesus. Every step you take, every second that you live, the realities of the gospel are true. At every single moment you are God's. You're His, you're precious, you're useful. You are saints. [33 : 22] And if you're not yet a believer tonight or not sure where you stand, God is not looking for you to be super pure. He's not looking for you to be an expert. He's not looking for you to be super confident. He's just looking for you to be genuine with Him. Amen.