

The Living Stone

1 Peter 2:4-10

prepared by Scotty Neasbitt

for

Northwest Hills Community Church

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Have you ever asked yourself, Who am I? Some of us answer with our roles. Things like mom or dad, banker or teacher. Others of us answer with descriptions. Things like stupid or ugly, friendly or handsome. Who are you? It is an important question to answer about yourself, because it gives rise to your priorities – the way you spend your time, the relationships you engage in, the way you invest money and energy. Who are you?

According to a radio ad I heard the other day, FreeCreditReport.com boils down your identity to a number. They asked the question, What is the most important number in your life? Is it your Social Security Number? Maybe it's your Phone Number? Of course, the answer they were looking for was your FICO score, the number that tells lenders your credit rating. In other words, you are no more and no less than what your FICO score says about you.

It's not unlike the Visa commercial which tries to sell the convenience of using your Check Card. The scene shows a bustling mall making progress because people aren't using cash; instead, they use their debit card. And then the one person who takes the time to open his wallet to pay throws a stick in the wheel and the entire food court comes to a stop. He's the odd man out. The message of the ad seems to say that you are hopelessly out of touch with real life if you're not using a Visa Check Card. What does that say about your identity?

What is your worth, as a person, wrapped in? What is its foundation? Is it your FICO score, or is it the type of payment you make? See, each of us needs to know who we are. Each of us needs to know our true identity. Each of us needs to know who we are in relation to the other people in our lives. And, dare I say, each of us needs to know who we are in relation to God. Identity isn't about a number, or a product that makes us more a part of the in-crowd. Identity is about relationship.

Identity is about our purpose in life. See identity isn't what we do or how we are described, but our identity helps us to know what we should do and how we should be described.

Our passage this morning is about the church. I think it's a timely topic since we are on the cusp of launching this new church. But what about the church? And what does it have to do with your identity?

Peter brings us to a tipping point this morning – a transition. He moves us from the individual to the corporate. In the verses we've already studied, Peter emphasized who you are as an individual in Christ. Now he will emphasize who you are corporately – who you are together with others in Christ. He does this by switching images from the individualistic picture of a newborn baby craving milk to the corporate image of a single house being built of all who believe in Christ. But he is also closing up the first part of his letter, the description of your new identity in Christ and he is preparing us for the second part, an answer to the question of how Christians should live in this world. And so, in preparation for the remaining part of the letter, Peter draws a sharp contrast between the identity of those who believe and the identity of those who don't yet believe.

Let's read our text. 1 Peter 2:4-10. I'd like to start with verse 1 to remind us of what we spoke about last month. *Read verse 1 to 3.*

Last month we talked about cleaning out our closets, getting rid of the filthy rags that each of us so easily hangs onto and then putting on Christ as our cover and like newborn babies desiring milk, we should likewise have one distinct desire for the nourishment that comes from God's holy word.

Now the rest of Peter's summary. Verses 4 to 10. Keep an eye on the kind of imagery that Peter uses to describe God and those who believe in Christ. *Read verse 4 to 10.*

Look at the terms Peter uses to describe Jesus and to describe those who believe. *The Living Stone, living stones, holy priesthood, precious cornerstone, chosen people, royal.* These are just a few of the ways in which Peter refers to Christ and to those who have placed their faith in Him. Now look at the terms Peter uses in reference to those who have not yet placed their faith in Christ. *Christ has become a capstone, a stone that causes stumbling, that causes them to fall, those who disobey the message.* Very different descriptions from the pen of Peter, and yet the world tells us that each of us has our own way to God. But the Word of God seems to make it quite clear. Christ is either a precious Living Stone or he is a stone which causes us to stumble and fall. As we dig deeper, keep those two very different images in mind. Which is he in relation to you today?

Peter is writing to a group of disbanded Christians – far from home and persecuted because of their faith. He is writing to encourage them. And in these verses Peter reminds them who they are. In summary, Peter says to those who believe in Christ, “You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God.” That’s our identity as followers of Christ. And the implications of our identity are clear: we should be about declaring his praises and offering spiritual sacrifices. Do you see the subtle shift from worldly thinking to Biblical thinking? The world would have us believe that we are what we do. But the Bible says we should do as a result of who we are. Don’t miss that point this morning. Because we are followers of Christ, he has expectations that we be about the business of praising Him and offering spiritual service in his name.

Let’s break it down.

Verse 4 As you come to him, the Living Stone – rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to Him--.

This is not a simple drawing near to Christ, as you would scoot over on a bench to get closer to someone. There is intensity and an intimacy being described here in the Greek and it refers directly to your salvation. But it is more than that, it is not only your initial drawing near to Christ, but it is your continuing to draw near to Christ for intimacy, growth, and fellowship. There is not a Christian here who is done drawing near to Christ. Peter writes as if it is a given, *As you draw near* or *As you first drew near and continue to draw near* to Christ.

And then Peter uses the description, "THE LIVING STONE." Peter is speaking of Jesus as this living stone. This is a stone used for building – perfectly cut and shaped to be used as a cornerstone – as a sure foundation. But it isn't a dead stone. It is the living stone. This description hearkens back to the Old Testament description of God as the only rock. Jesus himself is identified in 1 Corinthians as that rock. It's a paradox. Stones are dead. But this stone is living. Founders of religions are dead. But the sure foundation of Christianity is the living God who created life and gives new life to those in Christ. He is the sole person who defeated death, resurrected to life. Peter is saying, you continue to draw near because He is the steadfast giver of life. Some men reject Him, but God chose Him and He is precious to God.

And then Peter explains who it is drawing near to Christ, and he calls us living stones. We are who we are simply because we are in relationship with THE LIVING STONE. We are no longer without life, but like lifeless rocks we've been given new life. John records Jesus in chapter 14, verse 19 saying, *"After a little while the world will behold me no more; but you will behold me; because I live, you shall live also."* He is the living stone by virtue of his resurrection from the dead, and we are living stones by virtue of our relationship with Him. Are you seeing a bit more of your identity yet?

Verse 5 you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

I like what Marvin Vincent says in his commentary on this passage. Listen, *“These living stones picture the union of stability, growth, and activity in the ideal church.”* Don’t forget that the Roman Catholic church says that Peter is the one upon whom the church is built. Of course, proper study of Peter’s confession in the original language makes it highly unlikely that is what Jesus meant – at least grammatically. And now Peter himself is reminding us that Jesus is THE LIVING STONE. He is the only one who can bring the dead to life. Each of us was a dead stone. A lifeless rock. Jesus gives life.

If Jesus is in fact the one upon whom the church is built, then how does he do it? Peter says he does it one living stone at a time. That means you. You are being built up. God is working on you, building you into a spiritual house. WE are being built into a spiritual house. *Don’t miss the community aspect of what Peter is saying.* A building is not built with a single stone, it takes many stones built skillfully together to make a strong building. So, those of us who derive our life from the LIVING STONE are being built into a spiritual house. But what’s the purpose?

Peter says, *“to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices to God through Jesus Christ.”*

When you hear the word PRIEST, you might think of the Pope or a local church priest. Don’t let that image confuse the picture that Peter is painting. Too many years have passed and too many changes have been made for us to get a clear picture of what Peter is describing if we base it on the Roman Catholic priests of today. That’s not what Peter is doing. He is pointing us to the priests of God’s temple that we read about in the Old Testament. Their single goal was to ensure that God’s holiness was displayed at any cost. They were defenders of God’s holiness, if you will. But at a very practical level, they were responsible for offering sacrifices to God on behalf of God’s people. So note

what Peter is saying, *“offering spiritual sacrifices to God through Jesus Christ.”* No longer are we offering slain goats to God through an Aaronic priest; now, we offer spiritual sacrifices to God through Jesus Christ, the spotless lamb – the ultimate, perfect, and final sacrifice.

I said that identity is about relationship. What is your relationship to Jesus Christ, the LIVING STONE? What is your relationship with those who follow Christ, the living stones? I also said that knowing who you are helps you understand what you should be doing. What are these spiritual sacrifices Peter speaks of? How do we offer them to God through Jesus Christ?

The fact that we are being built up TOGETHER into a spiritual house – that is, into a temple of God – it is no surprise then that we would be involved in bringing sacrifices to God. But these are spiritual sacrifices – no more blood needs to be spilled, because the perfect blood of Christ was spilled once and for all. As priests of the new covenant – the spiritual blessings given to us because of the sacrifice that Christ already made – we are to be about giving. Bringing spiritual sacrifices is not about being blessed or entertained or being encouraged. Bringing spiritual sacrifices is not about receiving at all. Bringing spiritual sacrifices is about giving.

We could spend a good deal of time on specific spiritual sacrifices, but let me sum them up for you. Bringing spiritual sacrifices is about honoring God with how you live the life he has given you in Christ. It involves generosity, thanksgiving, meekness, loving justice, seeking mercy, showering grace, and all the fruit of the spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Ultimately, it involves living a life worthy of the sacrifice made on your behalf.

Let's keep going. Look at verses 6-8. *For in Scripture it says: ‘See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame.’* Now to you who believe,

this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe, 'The stone the builders rejected has become a capstone,' and, 'A stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall.' They stumble because they disobey the message – which is also what they were destined for.

Let's work our way backwards on this one. *It is what they were destined for.* One's destiny is a difficult topic to discuss. It leaves some believing they have no say in their future, but you'll remember that we started this series back in April talking about the hopeful future we have in Christ. Some people ask the question, "How do I know if I've been chosen?" In other words, they want to know, "What's my destiny?" The surest way to know if you've been chosen is to believe. And Peter echoes that principle in these verses. They stumble – they trip over Christ – because they do not believe – they disobey the message – which is what they were destined for. In other words, it is inevitable for those who do not believe – for those who do not place their complete trust in Christ & Christ alone – to be destined for nothing but hopelessness and a future – a destiny – without Christ. But is it truly unfair? No, it is the very thing they desired, and God gives it to them. Your destiny is wrapped up in your willingness to believe what God is saying about Himself. He is either your LIVING STONE or He is the thing that will cause you to stumble and fall into an eternity without him.

Peter quotes Old Testament passages from the Prophet Isaiah and the Psalms to make the point that Christ was chosen (remember v 4) and he is precious to God but your experience with Jesus will be much different depending on your faith.

Now look at the final verses, *verses 9 & 10. But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into*

his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not rec'd mercy, but now you have received mercy.

Not only was Christ chosen and precious to God, Peter encourages his readers with the fact that they are a *chosen people*. Do you feel chosen?

As a 3-week old infant, my parents adopted me. They had not seen me, they had not taken inventory of my fingers and toes, but they chose me. To be chosen is a precious gift. If you are a follower of Christ, you've been given a precious gift. You've been chosen.

A royal priesthood. We've talked at length about what our duties are as priests, but note the adjective. Royal. You are priests who represent a king.

A people belonging to God. That's who we are. With the express purpose of declaring his praises. The praises of the one who lowered himself into the hole and dragged us out into his wonderful light.

Once you were not a people. In other words, each of us was a dead stone scattered about, until THE LIVING STONE gave us life and built us together into a people of praise and service. Lest we forget, as dead, scattered stones, we were lifeless, without mercy, but not any more. Praise God!

On October 7, we will begin meeting on a weekly basis, much like the early church did when they decided to meet on what they called the Lord's day, the day of resurrection. And now some 2000 years later, we are going to do the same. I hope you will join us. We need each other. The building will not be the same without you. Listen to what Tony Bartolucci writes, *"There are places in Europe with walls of stone – giant walls that go on for yard after yard if not mile after mile – that were quarried and built by hand. The walls have no mortar; the stones are so perfectly cut and placed that you can't get a credit card between them. Their strength is their unity. As a result they have lasted through the centuries and*

yet stand as firm and strong as the day they were set in place. God cuts and quarries us by His hand. He places us in the body so that we can stand together in strength. We do this apart from the earthly mortar; only the mortar of His love and grace, a love and grace we minister to one another." We are the church! That's our identity. Whether we be called a spiritual building, or the bride or body of Christ, we know that we have taken on the characteristics of the one who saved us. And we are in it together. Now, do you know who you are? God bless you!