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THE PARABLE OF THE PUTTER

Romans 1:1-7

There is a 22 year old man who lives in Bangladesh who has an unusual problem. His name is Apu Sarker. He is from a long line of farmers, and he lives with his family in a village in northern Bangladesh. His problem is that the men in his family have a rare genetic mutation that causes them to lack fingerprints. In previous generations this was not a big deal, but it is definitely a problem now. They now have national ID cards for all adults in Bangladesh, but a fingerprint is required to obtain one. When Apu’s father applied for one, they didn’t know what to do, so they issued him a card with “No Fingerprint” stamped on it. However, now the government has made it mandatory to match a fingerprint with the national data base in order to purchase a SIM card for a mobile phone. When Apu tried to buy a SIM card the computer froze every time he put his finger on the sensor. He has the same problem trying to obtain a drivers license. He uses SIM cards issued in his mother’s name to buy a phone. After he presented a medical certificate verifying his situation the government issued him a new kind of national ID card that uses a retina scan and facial recognition. However, he still can’t buy a SIM card or get a driver’s license. He hopes to travel to other countries, but getting a passport could be a problem.

Not being able to establish your identity could seriously complicate your life in our modern culture. In these days of identity theft we are all protective of our identity. It unnerved Laurie and me recently when we got an email confirming our order for a dinner from a Chili’s restaurant in Indiana. The confirmation was addressed to a Randy Myatt, who had used the same email address that we have. Was this some sort of fraud situation? We were concerned. Google does not issue the same email address to more than one person, so how did this Randy guy have the same email address as us? We think we have it figured out. We suspect Randy from Indiana typed the wrong email address so the confirmation of his dinner was sent to us instead of to him.

Sociologists and psychologists tell us that identity is crucial to us. For us to have a fulfilling life we have to have a strong sense of our identity. That’s why at vacation destinations you will find lots of young people who are there trying “to find themselves.” They are trying to figure out what their identity is. A person who doesn’t know his or her identity is likely to experience anxiety, depression, meaninglessness, frustration and an unfulfilled life.

People try to establish a sense of identity in a lot of ways, one of the chief of them being through a career or through having some exceptional ability or talent. However, those efforts inevitably fall short. Those things cannot provide what we need to be secure in our identity. There are some things that are needed in order to have a secure sense of identity. We need to have a sense of our worth and know where it comes from. We need to know why we are here, a sense of purpose. We need to have a sense of what defines us as a person. And we need to know who loves us, to know who we matter to, to whom we belong.

Some people might think that as we get older we become more clear on our identity. We aren’t likely to suffer an identity crisis when we are mature. But that’s not always true. In our youth identity is a big issue as we try to figure out who we are, where we fit in with other people and what our lives are going to be about. Then we get in our adult years where we have families and jobs. We tend to see our identity as being tied to success in a career and our role in a family. But then we get into our later years and our children are grown. Our role as a parent diminishes to almost nothing. As we get older in this youth oriented culture, we begin to be seen as irrelevant in the career field, then we retire and that job identity is completely removed. We look at our remaining years and increasingly we can feel put on the shelf, and we wonder what our identity is. At every stage if we define our identity the way people often do, heavily influenced by what we do and how the world values it, the effect of that will be to put great stress on us, to warp our priorities and negatively affect our relationships. My point here is that having an identity that is secure and focused on what really matters will be crucial at every stage of life. There needs to be something down deep in us that can’t be threatened by the many changes in a world where the only constant is change. That’s the only way we can really be truly secure in who we are. In Romans 1:1-7 we will be reminded of some essential aspects of our identity that nothing can ever take away.

Today I’m beginning a series of sermons on the book of Romans that I’m calling “The Road To Glory.” Romans is kind of Paul’s magnum opus. It is his most thorough theological treatise. It presents a challenge in that to explain every verse thoroughly you could spend 3 years going through it, and in doing so lose the forest for the trees. You lose the movement of Paul’s argument. I will attempt to move through the book at a fairly rapid pace, hopefully while discussing enough to make it comprehensible. First we need a little background on the book of Romans.

Scholars think Paul wrote this letter some time around 56 A. D. He was likely in the Greek city of Corinth. He did not personally plant the church in Rome. We aren’t certain how the church in Rome began. However it started, it grew from that initial seed and included both Jews and Gentiles. It is apparent from the last chapter that Paul personally knew quite a few of the people in the church there.

Some time probably around 49 A. D., the Roman Emperor Claudius expelled all Jews from the city of Rome. It is possible, according to the historian Suetonius, that he took that action because the Jews were having numerous disruptive conflicts among themselves. There is a theory that these conflicts had to do with the Gospel. There is a pattern in the book of Acts where some ancient Jews in various cities put their faith in Jesus and this resulted in conflicts and even riots between them and those who did not believe in him. That may have happened in Rome. By 56 AD the Jews had been allowed to return to Rome.

The church in Rome consisted of groups that met in homes. Some have surmised that there were about 5 house churches in Rome. Contrary to what the Roman Catholic church maintains, there was no apostolic presence in Rome when Paul wrote his letter to the Roman church. These facts give us some hints as to why Paul might have written this letter.

First, at that time it was a little unclear exactly what one was supposed to believe and do in this new faith called Christianity. Believers had heard about this Jesus being the Messiah of the Jews, but might not have been real sure what that means. They knew this Jesus was executed and came back to life. But what does that all mean? There is no central authority they could consult to clear it all up, and there are lots of people running around telling others what the truth is, but they don’t all agree with each other. It’s confusing, and at the moment it was a bit of a theological wild, wild, West.

Second, there was a little bit of friction between Jewish followers of Jesus and those who are not Jewish. The lack of clarity about what this new faith is has resulted in some tension between those who say believing in Jesus is nice but you still have to follow all the ancient Jewish rules and those who say that those rules no longer apply to people who believe in Jesus.

Finally, they had heard about this Jewish religious leader named Paul who has stirred up all sorts of controversy everywhere he’s gone. There are rumors that he teaches that all you have to do is believe in Jesus and that makes you good with God, so you can pretty much live however you choose. There are no rules to follow and you certainly don’t need to pay any attention to the old Jewish laws. In some ways it’s better, some claim Paul says, to be as contrary to those laws as possible because it makes God look all the better for loving you no matter what you do.

Paul wrote Romans to resolve all of that. He cleared up some of the things that were being said about him, to correct the misquotations of him that were floating around. He explained exactly what it means to believe in Jesus and how a person should live as a result of it. And he sought to end the tension between the Jewish and non-Jewish followers of Jesus. These opening verses are the introduction to the letter, but in the process of explaining the mundane matters of who wrote it and to whom it was intended, Paul reveals several crucial aspects of the life-giving identity of any follower of Jesus Christ.

WE ARE CALLED

In the first 5 verses Paul identifies himself as the writer of this letter, and in so doing accomplishes a couple of things. First, he establishes his credentials. He says in verse 1 he is called to be an apostle and has been set apart for the good news of God. In verse 5 he repeats that he has received his role as an apostle from the Lord Jesus Christ. This settles the question of why anyone should pay special attention to what Paul says. He has identified that he is authoritative because he was hand picked by the Lord Jesus to have this position of leadership in his movement.

The second thing Paul does is to remind readers of the Jewish roots of the Jesus movement. He points out in verse 2 that this new message of grace in Jesus Christ was promised by the ancient Jewish prophets. He also points out that Jesus was a descendant of the great Jewish King David, as Messiah had to be. This would give a greater comfort level for the Jewish believers in Rome that faith in Jesus was the culmination of the ancient Jewish faith. It would also cause Gentile believers to see their need to understand and value their relation to the Jewish believers.

In verse 6 Paul said that his readers, and by extension, we, are the “called of Jesus Christ.” If you are a believer in Jesus you are called by him. In 1 Peter 2:9 it says God, “called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.” You are a follower of Jesus because God called you. Ephesians 4:4 also says we were called, and Ephesians 1:4 says God chose us before the creation of the world.

The first thing I notice about this is who is doing the calling. If you call me, you are the one doing the action. I’m just the one receiving the call. It was your choice to call. I read a newspaper article yesterday about Craig Stammen, a pitcher for the Padres. The article pointed out that he is the Padres’ representative to the players’ union, and is part of the union’s negotiating committee. This is important because right now everything in baseball is frozen due to the fact that the contract between players and owners has expired, and there won’t be any baseball until they get a new one. What is interesting is how Stammen became the union rep. One of the Padres owners asked him to take on that role because he is so highly respected by the team. That is unusual. In effect he was called to that position.

This is what these verses tell us. God is the one doing the acting. He called us. This is not something we decided for ourselves. This has some big implications for us. For one thing, it means we have nothing to be proud of, because we didn’t do anything. God was the one doing the calling. We have much to be thankful for. In fact, gratitude should be continually characteristic of us. But we have nothing to be proud about because this was God’s doing.

That implies something else. Because it was God’s choosing, his action in calling us, we don’t need to fret that the calling is in jeopardy because we fall short or mess up. We were falling short and messing up when he called us, and he did it anyway. In other words, we can be very secure in this truth about our identity. We aren’t going to ruin it because it was never anything we did in the first place.

Being called is a big deal. I’ve always felt that I’m not a very interesting person. I’ve known people that others seem to gravitate to. They just seem to draw people to them. People love to be around them. I’ve known others that have done fascinating things, or seem to always have something interesting or funny to say. The men in the next generation of my family are good examples. Toby is a great story teller and is always fun to talk with. Plus he is loaded with understanding of all things medical, things that are fascinating. And of course, he has stories from his experiences in the emergency department that range from bizarre to hilarious to tragic. Michael is a former combat Marine who flew top tier fighter jets and now is an airline pilot. There’s stuff there I could talk to him about forever. I feel like I, on the other hand, am as interesting as melba toast.

But here’s the amazing thing. There’s this woman who I think is the most beautiful, wonderful person I’ve ever known, a delightful person who brings joy to people and lights up any room she walks into, and this woman chose me! And she continues to choose me every single day. You could line up all the people on the planet and tell her she can pick any one of them to spend her life with. And she picked me! Every day of my life I find myself amazed at that because I don’t understand it, but am very thankful for it. It doesn’t matter to me that other people ignore me, because she chose me.

Being called by God is kind of like that. You have been chosen by him. It doesn’t really matter much what other people think, because the Ruler of the Universe has called you! Whatever else is true of you, whatever some people might think, as a believer in Jesus who are a person called by God, and that’s huge.

On February 22, 2020, David Ayres, a 42 year old resident of Toronto, was at a hockey game between the Toronto Maple Leafs and the Carolina Hurricanes. Ayres grew up in Canada playing hockey, and he had dreams of playing professionally, but never got close. He works in operations at the Coca Cola Arena where the Toronto Marlies minor league hockey team plays. He plays recreational hockey as a goalie. The National Hockey League has a provision for a rare disastrous situation. Without a goalie a team wouldn’t have a chance to compete. Goalie is a highly specialized position, and not just anyone can do it competently. NHL teams typically carry 2 goalies on their roster. In the unlikely event that somehow both of a team’s goalies should get injured and be unable to play, the NHL says each home team must designate someone to be an emergency substitute goalie for every game. This person usually has some experience tending goal but doesn’t do it professionally. They get two tickets to the game and get to watch for free. That night David Ayres was the emergency substitute goalie. When one of the Carolina goalies was injured, Ayres was asked to go down to the locker room and begin donning his goalie equipment. 8 minutes into the second period the rarest event happened. Carolina’s other goalie was injured! Suddenly the unexpected, the almost unthinkable, had happened. Ayres found himself inserted into the game to play goal! The first two shots he faced ended up in the net. Not a good start. Carolina was ahead 3-1 when he entered, but very quickly it was 3-3. But after that he settled down and he stopped every shot the rest of the game. Carolina won 6-3 and he was named first star of the game. He became the oldest goalie ever to win his debut game and his goalie stick was sent to the Hockey Hall of Fame. A couple of months ago in October it was announced that Disney is going to make a feature movie based on his story!

When I read that I thought, “Why doesn’t something like that ever happen to me?” It doesn’t happen because I can’t play goal, but I mean that brief chance to do something I dreamed of as a kid. But here’s the thing about that. It really changes nothing about David Ayres’ identity. He has a few moments of glory, but it will last a nano second, and he will end up being the same person he was before. The truth is that great success and fame are an illusion that actually can distract people from their real identity.

This is crucial for us. Our deepest identity as followers of Jesus Christ is that we are called by God. We are chosen by him, and nothing can ever shake that. It doesn’t matter what other people think. It doesn’t matter whether the world notices or not. It absolutely does not matter what our enemy, the devil, says. We are called by God, and that is who we are in the deepest part of ourselves.

WE ARE LOVED BY GOD

In verse 7 Paul said he wrote “to all in Rome who are loved by God.” He literally wrote “to all in Rome who are God’s beloved ones.” This is crucial for us to comprehend. We are God’s beloved ones. He truly loves us, and he loves us in ways and to degrees that we cannot fathom. His love is vast, furious, ferocious and implacable. Later in this book Paul will tell us that nothing can ever separate us from the love of God.

Astronomer Dr. Peter Edwards of Durham University in England has a You Tube video in which he says that we will never be able to grasp how immense the universe is. As an illustration, he says at one point they pointed the Hubble Space Telescope at what appeared to be an ordinary patch of sky. He says if you held out your arm and had a grain of sand on the tip of your finger, the part of the sky that grain of sand would block was the size of this part of the sky they looked at. What they saw was stunning. In that tiny, ordinary looking patch of sky they found 10,000 galaxies. From that they have calculated that there are 100 billion galaxies in the visible universe, each of which contains 100 billion stars. That means there are more stars in the universe than there are grains of sand on the earth.

Imagine that somehow there are billions of beings living on one of those grains of sand. How much would you care about one of those tiny beings living on one particular grain of sand, perhaps one on a beach in, say, Madagascar? The vastness of it, the enormity of it, causes my brain to lock up. It just goes blank because it runs into something it can’t deal with. When I think about it, I find it unimaginable that God could actually love me. How could he even care about one insignificant being like me in all of that immensity? Isaiah 40:26 says God, “brings out the starry host one by one and calls forth each of them by name.” God created and knows every single one of those billions and billions of stars. Which means it is possible for him to know and love every single human being. There are more stars than there are human beings, by a long shot.

Of course, to make matters worse, he is a holy God, meaning he cannot put up with even one speck of pollution, even the tiniest atom of evil. And I know that I’ve got more than a tiny atom. Evil is like a pollutant that taints every part of my being. That’s true of every single one of us.

Yet, God loves us so much that he entered into this little world, lived here as one of us, and died for us so that we might live. You can measure the depth of someone’s love for you by what they are willing to sacrifice for you. Shallow love, which really isn’t love at all, won’t do much. How do you measure God’s love? It is by the fact that he sacrificed for us to a degree that also stuns us. It is beyond our imagination. And he tells us that he loves each one of us that way.

To be secure in an identity we have to know that we are loved, that we belong to someone who rejoices over us, who cherishes us. God does just that. He revels in, delights in you. In your worst moments, in those times when you even are disgusted by yourself, God loves you and delights in you. He does not love you any more when you are at your best than when you are at your worst, because his love is not caused by you.

Knowing that you are loved by God is revolutionary, and it is the most important component of your identity. In Ephesians 3:17-18 Paul prayed that we would be rooted and established in God’s love and that we would be able to grasp how vast his love is. He prayed that we would know God’s love. He didn’t mean have an intellectual awareness of it, but that we would experience it, be absolutely convinced of it, that we would feel it in the marrow of our bones. Pay attention to verse 19. “To know this love that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.” It is having our very being, our identity of identity, rooted in this love that enables us to be filled to the fullness of God.

In his book, *The Ragamuffin Gospel*, the late Brennan Manning wrote, “My deepest awareness of myself is that I am deeply loved by Jesus Christ and I have done nothing to deserve it.” Manning was very much aware of his flaws. There were some very obvious and undeniable failings in him. That could easily have destroyed him. But what enabled him to live and impact other people powerfully was that he knew the ultimate truth about him was that he was loved by God.

In his book, *Abba’s Child*, Manning wrote, “Define yourself radically as one beloved by God. This is the true self. Every other identity is an illusion.” That last statement is enormously important. Every other way we try to define ourselves and establish some identity is an illusion. When you live with illusions you guarantee that at some point reality will unravel the whole thing.

WE ARE SET APART

In verse 7 Paul said followers of Jesus are “called to be his holy people.” What does it mean to be holy? The biblical meaning of the term goes back to an ancient Hebrew root word that meant “to divide.” To be holy is to be set apart, divided out from that which is mundane. Something that is holy is set apart for special uses.

Think for a moment about a particular golf club. Consider a putter. You might be surprised by this, but putters are holy. Um, what now? You might ask how a putter could be holy. What could any kind of golf club have to do with spiritual things like holiness? A putter is special, set apart for special uses. If I was playing baseball I would never use a putter as a baseball bat. If I was digging weeds out of our yard I would never try to use a putter as a hoe. We recently helped my mother hang some pictures in her new place and we had to hammer nails into the wall to hang them on. I did not even consider using a putter to hammer those nails.

A putter has a special use. It is only for playing the game of golf. In fact, it is really holy, because you only use a putter for one particular purpose when playing golf. You don’t use it to tee off. You’d have a difficult time trying to whack a golf ball a couple of hundred yards down the fairway using a putter. You don’t try to blast a ball out of a sand trap using a putter. The putter is holy. You only take the putter out when your ball is on the green and you are going to try to knock your ball in the hole using finesse. That’s what a putter is for. It is reserved for that special purpose, which means it is holy. Of course, the times when I have played golf it doesn’t feel holy. It feels the very opposite of holy. It feels unholy, evil, because it doesn’t make the ball go where I want it to go. But, still, it is holy.

No doubt you see what this means for us. We have a special identity. We are holy because we have been set apart by God. We have a special purpose. Our purpose, according to 1 Peter 2:9-10 is to declare his praise. It is to honor God, to make him known, and we do that both by verbally praising him and by serving him. We honor him when we do what he has told us to do.

We got a glimpse of this in verse 1 where he said he was “called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God.” That’s why he called himself a “servant of Christ Jesus.” Paul would once have defined himself as a “Hebrew of Hebrews,” a Pharisee, a Jewish rabbi. He was now done with all that. His most common description of himself was that he was a slave of Jesus Christ. This was his purpose. It was why he was on the planet. He was “set apart” for that purpose.

We, too, have that holy role. We are called to be servants of the Lord Jesus Christ. We don’t serve God as apostles, but we are on this planet to serve Christ. This is our identity, and it is an identity that we can live by no matter what we are doing. Last week I went to get my hair cut, then stopped in to the grocery store. My identity, the purpose for my existence, the thing I was to do more than anything else as I carried out those errands, was to be a servant of Jesus Christ. I sought to do that by caring about the people I encountered, hoping to bring some of Christ’s grace, love and joy to them.

When I was in college I worked in the summer time as an engineer’s aide at an oil company. When I was in seminary at various times I worked as a clerk in a grocery store and as a janitor. I was as much a holy servant of Christ in those positions as I am as a pastor. Laurie and I helped take care of our little grandson, Wesley on Friday. This little guy has enough energy to power a major city. He loves to run. It is one of his favorite things to do. Recently when we are with him he has said a lot, “Bapaw, fast.” That’s his way of asking Bapaw, his name for me, to run fast with him. He loves to have grownups run with him. He never seems to tire of it. Over and over and over it’s Bapaw, fast. On Friday Wesley had laid a line of pillows in the family room and he wanted to run laps around them. This meant running around a small oval repeatedly. Do you know what that does? It does nothing to Wesley, but after about 4 laps Bapaw is getting dizzy. In literally running myself dizzy I was being holy, bringing the grace of God to a little boy.

There is never a moment in our lives, never a single thing we do, that we cannot be servants of Christ, we cannot be holy, set apart for his use. This is an identity that touches and shapes everything we are and do. I find this hugely encouraging. After 4 decades of being a pastor I am now serving a church of a small handful of people that many people would consider to be on the other end of the spectrum from impressive and highly successful. Many would say it is utterly insignificant. Last week Jerry and Connie got married at Connie’s church in Orange County. The facility looks like a college campus. Their worship center looks like an arena with thousands of seats. Now this is a big deal. But here’s the thing. The world may not be impressed with what I am doing here, but that doesn’t matter. I am set apart to serve Christ. It doesn’t matter if I’m serving 5 or 5,000 people. It only matters that I’m serving him.

CONCLUSION

We try so hard to establish an identity in so many ways. All of them are illusions, and they are actually damaging to us. We need to live by the identity we see in these verses as people called by God, loved by God, separated out for God’s use.

Madeline DiRado was a competitive swimmer. Her coach pushed her hard because he thought she had the potential to compete in the Olympics. While still a teenager in 2012 she just missed qualifying for the US Olympic team. In 2016 she had one more shot. She was 23 and knew 2020 would be out of the question. She worked hard and that year she qualified for the Olympic team in 4 events. It was a huge accomplishment. But in an interview in Yahoo Sports she said, “I don’t think God really cares about my swimming very much. Making the Olympic team is not my end purpose.” She was asked what she thinks God does care about. She said, “I think God cares about my soul and whether I’m bringing his love and mercy into the world. Can I be a supportive teammate, and can I bless others around me in the same way God has been so generous with me?” She understands that is her end purpose. She understands that she is set apart, called by God and loved by him.

Richard Halverson was a Presbyterian pastor in the D. C. area and served as the chaplain of the U.S. Senate. He used a benediction at the end of all of his worship services for many years that we should remember.

“Wherever you go, God is sending you. Wherever you are, God has put you there. God has a purpose in your being right where you are. Christ, who indwells you by the power of his Spirit wants to do something in and through you. Believe this, and go in his grace, his love, his power. In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.”