

February 1, 2015

BRAND NAME
Colossians 2:11-15

INTRODUCTION

Two Texas ranchers were bragging to each other about their ranches. One asked the other the name of his ranch. He said, “Well, it’s the Rocking R, ABC, Flying W, Circle C, Bar U, Box D, Rolling M, Rainbow’s End, Silver Spur Ranch.” His colleague was impressed. He figured a ranch with such a long name must be huge and have an enormous herd. He said, “Wow, that sure is some name. How many head of cattle do you run?” In a moment of honesty the bragger admitted, “Well, actually not many. Very few survive the branding.”

Branding is a big deal these days. There are companies like Catchword, Zinzin, Lexicon and Luxon Carra that exist to create brand names and help with branding. I was surprised to learn that 500,000 new businesses start each month in the USA and they all need names. Occasionally a brand name will become identified with the product a company produces so it becomes the name of the product. Some examples of this are Bandaid, Xerox, Kleenex, Jacuzzi, Popsicle, Zamboni, Jet Ski, Scotch Tape and even Rollerblades. Sometimes the naming isn’t all that impressive. In the 1990’s the new president of USAir decided their name sounded too much like a regional airline and he wanted to rename the company. So he hired Luxon Carra to help them find a new name. In the end the rebranding cost \$40 million. The creative new name they came up with was US Airways.

In a sense all of us are concerned about branding. We need a brand name for ourselves, only in humans that comes out more as an identity than as a name. We all are in search of an identity. Today I want to show you what your brand name can be, your identity as a follower of Jesus. This brand name comes as part of a package. We saw last week that we have all we need in the package that is our faith in Christ. Today we will unpack that box as we look at Colossians 2:11-15.

A NEW YOU

Paul suddenly brings in the idea of circumcision in verse 11. That is a little curious since it has not been mentioned prior to this point. It is not a major point of contention like it was in Galatians because Paul only mentions it once more in the book, pretty much just in passing. For most of us circumcision is a kind of curious thing to think about when it comes to spiritual things. It was, however, a big thing to ancient Jews.

Circumcision considered the sign of their special status as God's chosen people. It is quite understandable why they thought that. In Genesis 17:11 God said to Abraham, "You are to undergo circumcision and it will be the sign of the covenant between you and me." *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* tells us that it became "a mark of racial and cultural pride." There were some other racial groups that practiced circumcision in the ancient world. But by the time Colossians was written it was considered by both Jew and Gentile alike a peculiarly Jewish thing. It was what marked Jewish men as Jewish. They often referred to Gentiles as the "uncircumcision." When Paul was addressing the predicament of ancient Gentiles prior to knowing Christ he said in Ephesians 2:11, "Remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called "uncircumcised" by those who call themselves "the circumcision" (that done in the body by the hands of men)."

Circumcision is the mark of the uniqueness of the ancient Jews. I wonder if there were some ancient Gentiles who were attracted to the God of Israel and might have wanted to enlist, but who were stopped by circumcision. Did any of them ask, "couldn't you have picked some other identity symbol?" Whatever the case, in the thinking of the Jewish people circumcision was the sign that they were God's chosen people. More than anything else, this is who they understood themselves to be. It was at the very core of their identity, of how they thought of themselves.

The Colossians were hearing from some people that they had to become Jewish to be part of the kingdom of God. Believing in Jesus was necessary, but not sufficient. You also had to be Jewish, so you had to be circumcised. This was not being pushed as hard in Colossae as it was in Galatia, but they were hearing it and wondering about it.

Paul is telling them they've already been circumcised. The Old Testament refers to the fact that the circumcision God cared about is more than a physical act. Jeremiah 4:4 says to people who were already physically circumcised, "Circumcise yourselves to the Lord, circumcise your hearts." So even the ancient Jews were aware that God really wanted a change of people's hearts.

In Christ you have a new life and a new identity as a member of God's people. What is symbolized in baptism is true. Whatever we were before we followed Jesus was buried when we put our faith in him. It ended. That is depicted in baptism by going under the water, which pictures that old person being buried. Then we come out to a new life, one where the heart has been changed. It now has a desire to live for Jesus. It is a new person who is a child of God, one of God's holy, chosen people. This is now our identity. In his interpretation of the Bible

called *The Message* Eugene Peterson interprets verse 11 to say, “you’re already in, insiders, through what Christ has gone through for you.”

Identity is huge to humans. One of the fundamental questions of life is “who am I?” Go Hawaii or Nepal and you will find people who are trying to “find themselves.” Why do they think they lost themselves in one of those exotic locales? Why don’t people go to Detroit to find themselves? Often those who are adopted have a desire to track down birth parents because they hope to get a sense of their identity. People sometimes go to great lengths to investigate their ancestry because they think it is a piece of the puzzle of who they are.

We will never be at peace with ourselves and with others until we have a clear sense of our identity. It is common today for people to try to build some identity through achievement or through success. I recently read a novel titled *White Plague*, by James Abel. It’s not a particularly noteworthy book, but there was a section in it that caught my attention. One of the characters is a thin, pompous bureaucrat named Andrew. The author describes him as the kid who when he was young was skinny, small, chased down the streets after school, made fun of by bigger kids. In college he was the nerdy guy who got A’s but looked longingly at the baseball field. Then Abel says later he took “refuge in officialdom, as many in Washington do. What’s the old saying? Politics is show business for ugly people. All those power brokers on the surface walking around, chests thrust forward, thinking inside where you can’t see, ‘I’m big now. I’m smart. So how come I still feel like that jerk of a kid?’”

Somehow our efforts to prove ourselves and gain some sense of identity end up being like that. They just aren’t sufficient. Inside we recognize they are superficial. They always leave us easily threatened for whatever success or achievement we have it can disappear in an instant in this world. We need something more solid, something deeper and more permanent. We need an identity that nothing can shake. If we try to find our identity in something that can be taken away from us we will never be secure. And a secure identity is essential for peace and for our ability to love others. Until we are secure in who we are we will use others, try to draw from them a sense of our identity, rather than actually love them.

Laurie and I watched a TV show called *Blue Bloods*. In it Tom Selleck plays the NYPD Commissioner, Frank Reagan. His father, served as the commissioner before him. In one scene they are talking and his father, now retired, talks about how he still has ideas, thoughts, opinions, he has wisdom and expertise to share, but no one cares. It creates a sense of sadness and frustration for him because a part

of his identity has been taken away from him. We all are subject to that danger unless our identity is grounded in something that can never be taken away. And that is exactly what we have in Christ.

Jesus Christ provides that identity for us. He has given us new life. The old has gone and been replaced by a new life as a member of the people of God. That is who we are at our very core and nothing can threaten that. At times we might question this because we see our own hypocrisy, we see how short we fall of what we should be. But this passage makes clear this is a “circumcision made without hands.” In other words, it is something God has done. It is his work from beginning to end, so what we do or don’t do cannot threaten it. It is safe from the human foibles we all suffer. So we can be totally at peace with this identity.

A NEEDED FREEDOM

Paul goes on to describe what we have in this new life, this new identity, in the package we have in Christ. He says God “forgave us all our sins.” Forgiveness is one of the biggest matters every human faces. We all know we’re not what we should be. Even the best of us sees a gap between what we should be, what we want to be, and what we are. In fact, the better we are the more aware we are of the gap. We end up with dissonance between what we appear to be, what we want to be and what we actually are aware is true of us. That dissonance never goes away. It eats away at our peace, our joy, even our ability to love others is impacted by it. It certainly creates huge problems in our relationship with God.

A couple of weeks ago I played bass in the worship band. As you know this is a new thing for me and while it is fun it is stressful for me because I am not good at it. I can’t play like a real musician could. I have an electronic tuner that I use to keep the instrument in tune. That Sunday I had a problem with the tuner. Now a true musician could have handled that, but I couldn’t. I ended up with one string that was badly out of tune and I could not fix it. We were in the middle of the songs we were doing and we had a couple of songs in which I had to use that string a lot. The notes were so obviously out of tune that I determined I had to just find another place on the guitar to play them or just skip it. I’m just not good enough and experienced enough to make those kind of adjustments easily on the fly. I got flustered and, well let’s just say I had a rough morning playing that day. I failed to meet even my low level standards. It was interesting to me to observe how that felt. For days afterward it rankled. It bothered me and I had trouble just not letting it bother me. I felt the musical equivalent of guilt and I had no peace about it.

That wasn't a moral problem. It was a musical problem and probably had more to do with hating to think people will see me as completely inept than a moral or spiritual thing. But it illustrates how something can eat at us. Our problem is that in life we are saddled with guilt about things that are of way more significance than playing the bass in our little church. Our guilt rankles, it nags, it eats at us. We need some help. We need forgiveness.

Here is where we have a big problem. Ultimately the one we need forgiveness from, in fact the only one who can forgive us, is God. The late novelist and secularist Margherita Laski said, "what I envy most about you Christians is your forgiveness. I have nobody to forgive me." What do you do when you haven't really wronged a particular person, but you know there is something wrong in you? Who can forgive you? What we need is God's forgiveness. Of course the way people often think they want this to happen is that God will just say, "Oh, it's okay. I love you and forgive you no matter what."

But do we really want that? No we don't. We want, we need God to be just. We need him to deal with evil and wrong. Have you ever had something painful, some wrong done to you by someone, a wrong that you can do nothing about? What is your desire? That somehow, somewhere along the way, that person will be confronted with their wrong and will have to deal with it. Wouldn't that be the most satisfying thing? It would feel good.

The idea of God not dealing with wrong, with evil and sin, is actually horrifying. If that is how the universe is then it is a hell. We cannot stand the idea that wrong would never be made right. Would it be all right with you if the brutal, violent leaders of ISIS never are brought to justice for their atrocities? Would it be fine with you if the New England Patriots never had to answer for deflating their footballs? Okay, never mind on that last one.

It doesn't require a lot of reflection for us to understand that we want God to deal with evil and wrong. We desperately need him to do so. But now we have a problem. That means he is going to have to deal with the evil in us as well. That is the only way for him to be fair and to deal with evil. Which means he must punish our evil, our sins. God will deal with all sin, all wrong, all evil. He will punish all of it and thus be just and fair and protect his creation from the horror that evil always causes. What is the penalty? Eliminate it because it is so destructive. In other words, death! Uh oh. That's bad news for me. If there is evil in me death is the penalty. Then I've got to die. That is really bad news, but there is good news that is the best news ever.

In verse 14 Paul says God canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us, he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross.” A few years ago we refinanced the mortgage on our house. We had to sign an absurd number of documents. No wonder some people are concerned about deforestation, they had to wipe out the equivalent of a Brazilian rain forest to get enough paper for all those forms. At the core of them is a document that says we owe a very large sum of money to Wells Fargo Bank. It is a certificate of indebtedness.

Paul says we have such a certificate before God. It is our IOU to him and it lists all the wrong, all the sin, all the evil we ever have or ever will do. If Laurie and I are faithful and diligent and disciplined over many years we will completely pay off that debt to Wells Fargo. Here’s the debt I owe to God: death. Only not just dying physically. That’s part of it, but the bigger part is eternal death. Eternal separation from real life, from anything good.

We typically like to think we’re not that bad and that our good outweighs our bad, so God should forgive us. We set up some standard that we think we should meet, it becomes our law that we must live by. Here’s what the Bible says about whatever law you choose: it does nothing but condemn you. In the National Hockey League fans do something that reminds me of this. Particularly in important games like playoffs they like to try to rattle the opposing team’s goalie in a particular way. When the goalie of the visiting team lets in an important goal the home crowd starts to sing his name. “Craw-ford. Craw-ford.” Imagine if that’s how God did things. What if every time I call some driver a jerk, every time I have an unkind or impatient thought, every time I say an unkind word, every time a sort of make myself look better than I really am while telling a story I hear booming out of heaven, “Myatt, Myatt.” That’s what the Law does for us. It condemns us.

This is all bad news except for one thing. God had a divinely brilliant plan. He said, “I will die in your place.” He took our penalty. Notice Paul said he nailed our certificate of indebtedness and nailed it to the cross. When the Romans put a man on a cross they made a sign that listed the reasons he was being punished and put it on his cross. In the case of Jesus he hadn’t done anything wrong, so Pilate had them put up a sign in three languages (Latin, Greek and Aramaic) that read, “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews.” The crimes Jesus died for were our crimes. Paul says that list of all our evil, all our wrongs, that certificate of indebtedness, was nailed to the cross. This is why Jesus was there. Just like the death of the criminal paid the debt of his crimes, the death of Jesus paid the debt of our wrongs and evil.

But how can that be? How could Jesus die for all of us? And how can that be fair? And is that really sufficient? Laurie and I went to a restaurant and encountered some people we knew. We chatted briefly with them before we sat down at our table. They finished their meal before we did. At the end of our meal we waited for our bill. It was our certificate of indebtedness that listed what we owed to the restaurant. When our server came to our table I asked for our bill and she said, "It's been taken care of." I said, "I don't understand." She said our friends had paid our bill for us. They voluntarily paid the bill. May their tribe increase. I did not say, "But that's not right. We ate the food. We should pay for it." No, someone should pay for it, and someone, out of their goodness, kindness and grace, did. It just wasn't us. Out of his goodness, kindness and grace God paid for our indebtedness and thus cancelled the bill.

Yes, but how could the death of one person pay for the sins of all? That would be like the restaurant saying those people paying for our bill covered the bills of everyone who ate in the restaurant, wouldn't it? That's where we have to remember the unique thing about Jesus. Had he only been a man, a perfect man, he could have died for the sins of one other man, but not all. But Jesus wasn't just a man. He was the infinite God in human form. Paul has made that point in 1:15-17 and again in 2:9-10. How many sins would you say the human race has been guilty of? The number approaches infinity. Ah, but the infinite God man's death, because he is infinite, is sufficient payment for all of that evil.

There is nothing left to pay. Like the old hymn says, Jesus paid it all. We have been given a delicious freedom. We are free of guilt, free of the awful fear of failure, free from the need to somehow prove ourselves and win God's acceptance. It is all done!

A BIG WIN

Verse 15 is an interesting conclusion to the section. It says that Jesus "disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross." In particular Paul referred here to the "powers and authorities" in the spiritual realm. He says that Jesus defeated them publicly and resoundingly.

Something unusual happened at the cross of Christ. That event represented a unique fusion of forces. The Bible says there are beings, forces in creation in the spiritual realm that are opposed to God. We know they are led by a being called Satan. Satan was integrally involved in what happened at the cross. The night Jesus was arrested, at the last meal he had with his disciples, one of them, Judas, ate some bread Jesus gave him. John 13:27 says, "As soon as Judas took the bread,

Satan entered into him.” Satan was plotting the destruction of Jesus. He was opposed to what God was doing and thought he could thwart God’s plans by killing Jesus.

The religious leaders of Israel were totally opposed to Jesus. They finally had decided the only way to put a stop to him was to have him killed, so they, too were involved in the plot. Of course the Roman authorities were the only ones with the power to execute Jesus. The religious leaders had Jesus brought to the Roman governor and essentially threatened him if he didn’t have Jesus killed, which was exactly what he did.

What you see at the cross is this fusion of spiritual, religious and secular evil, power in all three areas, designed to rebel against God and defeat him. And that day evil won out. In the greatest injustice in all of history, the blameless God man was rejected, scorned, mocked, tortured and killed. It was a total victory for evil in all its forms. The God man went down seemingly without a fight.

Every ounce, every milligram of evil in every form is ultimately about rebelling against God and destroying his work. That’s exactly what we see happening at the cross of Jesus Christ. The cross reveals the meaning and intent of evil, wherever it exists. And that day it seemed to win.

But it only seemed to win. Its victory was only temporary. For the following Sunday morning Jesus came out of his tomb, alive again. He was revealed as the victor who has power even over death, for he has power over everything. He won the victory and evil was defeated. Today someone will win the Super Bowl. A couple of days later their city will hold a victory parade for them. If they did it like the Romans the defeated team would be in the parade, riding along as the vanquished foe so all the fans could jeer at them. Jesus has won the victory and has all the powers of evil, whatever form they take, coming along behind, publicly displayed as utterly defeated. They gave him their best shot...and lost.

Ephesians 1:20-22 says God “raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but in the one to come. And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything.”

In Philippians 3:10 Paul said, “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection.” We can know Christ and the power of his resurrection. It is the

power of new life and the power of victory over evil. We can live in the reality of that victory.

CONCLUSION

REST IN GRATITUDE

A little over a year ago Laurie had to have a couple of surgeries. Before the second surgery I received the bill for her first surgery. Now I needed medical help because the size of the bill caused cardiac arrest. The bill was in the tens of thousands of dollars range. Then we started getting bills from the second surgery. They were double teaming us. The second one was twice the amount of the first one. Combined it wasn't national debt big, but I had as much chance of paying it off as our country has of dealing with what our government officials have done to us. However, we paid a chunk, then the hospital worked out a plan where we could pay hundreds of dollars each month until it was finally paid off.

Each month I received bills on our two accounts. It would list previous balance, any charges and any credits. First there were some credits that came through our insurance company negotiating more reasonable prices from stratospheric to merely ghastly. Then they made the payments they were contractually obligated to make. It appeared to me they determined what those amounts were by pinning numbers up on a wall and throwing darts at them. But those payments went into the credit column, and at the bottom of the charges and credits columns was our remaining balance. Our depressing remaining balance. Each month we would make our payment and the next bill would show that the remaining balance had been reduced.

Finally last fall the day came when the remaining balance was zero. That was a great day. You have a certificate of debt before God that is like our bill. It lists all the charges against you. That is going to be one long bill. Every single unworthy, unholy, unkind, thing about you is listed on that bill, everything from the day you were born until the day you die. Down at the bottom is your remaining balance. Here it is: death. Eternal death. But if you have put your faith in Jesus Christ and his work on the cross on your bill in the credit column you will see "the cross of Jesus Christ." And at the bottom you will find your remaining balance is zero!

What are you going to add to the death of Jesus as the payment on your bill? It is ridiculous for us to fret and to feel like there's something more we must do. The bill is paid in full. What God wants us to do is rest. Romans 8:1 says, "therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." That's a way of saying that the remaining balance on your certificate of debt is zero. So at the end

of Romans 8 Paul wrote, “neither height nor depth nor anything else in all of creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus.”

Comedienne Cathy Ladmon says, “All religions are the same: religion is basically guilt with different holidays.” She has never understood the gospel of Jesus Christ. She’s right about religions, but the gospel is about the opposite. It is freedom from guilt. It is the only real freedom from it. If you have trouble with this write out your certificate of debt. Write on it everything you think God might be displeased with in you. Write those down as the charges against you. Then put down in the credit column “the cross of Jesus.” Write across that bill “Paid In Full.” Then thank God for what he has done for you. One of the best things you can do is to give thanks to God that in Jesus he has paid your bill.

REJOICE IN THE WIN

Have you ever seen a story where evil wins? How does that feel? It is awful. What if in *Star Wars* Luke and Han had been blasted out of the sky during their attempt to blow up the Death Star, and the horrifying Emperor had gone on to oppress and destroy without any check on him? What if Sauron had captured Frodo, taken the ring of power, gone on to annihilate the armies arrayed against him and his reign of darkness had spread to all of Middle Earth? Would you have enjoyed that story? What if the Nazis had won the Second World War?

If Jesus Christ did not die on a cross for us and if he did not rise from the dead, life is that story with a dismal end. Death and evil win. There is no justice and no hope. Jesus appeared to lose to the forces of evil that united against him. It was the darkest day in all of history. But that was not the end of the story. Had it been it would have been the worst story ever. But Jesus staged the greatest come from behind win in history. All was lost. He was dead. Game over. And then he rose from the dead. To the horror of the forces of evil they discovered their win had just been ripped from their grasp by the Almighty God. Victory was his.

Fine, but so what? What this means to us is that in every little loss we encounter there is still hope because Jesus is there. No matter how dark the day, no matter how awful our failures, no matter how great the enemy arrayed against us, we need not despair, we need not fear, for he will win the victory. Somehow God will win even in the worst moments, somehow his good purpose will prevail. You see a person whose life is a mess and you think, “there’s no hope.” But with Jesus there is always hope.

This is the new you. You have new life. You have an identity, you are a child of God, precious and loved in his sight, utterly secure in that love. You are free of the burden of guilt and of fear of condemnation, free of the need to win acceptance. And you go through life reveling in the triumph of Jesus over every form of evil.

The movie *The Hunger Games* pictures a time when an oppressive government keeps its citizens in check in part by running the Hunger Games, an event in which young representatives from each district are pitted against each other in a fight to the death with only one winner. The death of the young people is intended to warn the citizens that the government could kill any of them, but there is one survivor so that they can have a little hope. There is a scene in which President Snow, the cynical and merciless leader is talking to Seneca Crane, the man responsible for running the games. In effect he is warning him because they see people taking too much hope from Katniss, the heroine in the story. He says to him, "Hope is the only thing stronger than fear. A little hope is effective. A lot of hope is dangerous. A spark is fine, as long as it's contained." Crane says, "So...?" Snow says, "So contain it." The victory of Christ is dangerous, for it cannot be contained. This is your identity, a person walking in Christ's victory and thus a dangerous person, feared by the forces of evil.