

**FIRST PETER 2:9–12. (EHV)**

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, the people who are God's own possession, so that you may proclaim the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. At one time you were not a people, but now you are the people of God. At one time you were not shown mercy, but now you have been shown mercy. Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and temporary residents in the world, to abstain from the desires of the sinful flesh, which war against your soul. Live an honorable life among the Gentiles so that even though they slander you as evildoers, when they observe your noble deeds, they may glorify God on the day he visits us.

We have this innate desire to identify ourselves with something outside of ourselves that is larger than ourselves. Even people who want to give the impression of being independent and unique usually do so not by avoiding being a part of something larger than themselves, but by being a part of a something larger than themselves that is different from the things the people around them are a part of.

We like to do it with many different things. Computers—Mac or PC? Cell phones—iPhone, Android, or flip phone? Politics—Republican, Democrat, third party, or independent (which sounds unique, but is actually the largest voting group)? Military—Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, or Coast Guard? Sports—are you rooting for the Seahawks or the Patriots? Colleges—SDSU, USD, DSU, BHSU, or somewhere else? Those of you who are a little older might identify yourselves by the one-room grade school you attended growing up. We identify ourselves by favorite authors; favorite painters; favorite singers, bands, or composers; favorite activities, like fishing, hunting, or card games; or favorite brands of clothing or accessories. Sometimes we even speak about our church or synod as if it were nothing more than a club in which we hold our membership. We like to be a part of and identify with some larger community, oftentimes multiple larger communities.

But how many of those aspects of your identity actually determine the type of person you are and make you a better person? Doesn't the type of person you are usually come first and your identity second? In other words, you don't usually join a card club in the hopes that you'll become a card-player; you usually join a card club because you're already the type of person who likes to play cards. You could argue that your schools have determined the type of person you are to an extent, but chances are that you were shaped in both positive and negative ways by the schools you attended.

Only God can give us an identity that truly determines who we are and makes us better people. Only God can make us a part of something larger than ourselves that has a completely wholesome effect on ourselves. Only God can and only God does. Our God-given identity has a direct bearing on our God-glorifying activity.

**1. Our God-Given Identity**

The apostle Peter really hammers home our identity in this section with a string of striking and beautiful descriptions. He has just finished talking about unbelievers: "For you who believe, this is an honor. But for those who do not believe: 'The stone which the builders rejected has become the cornerstone,' and, 'a stone over which they stumble and a rock over which they

fall.” That’s the identity of unbelievers—if it can even be called an identity. They are those who stumble and fall over Christ.

But not you who believe, Peter says. You have an identity worth reflecting on and reveling in. “But you are a chosen people.” We all like to be chosen. I can remember my kickball days in grade school. My classmates and I always liked to be picked first, but if we weren’t picked first, then we would settle for being picked, period. The worst was if you were the last one picked, because then you weren’t really picked; you just went to one team or the other by default. To be chosen, to be picked, was to be desired.

As believers, you are a chosen people. God chose you to believe in him. God desired you. He didn’t choose everybody. Peter doesn’t tell us that we are chosen so that we can figure out why these people are in heaven or are going to heaven while those people are in hell or are going to hell, namely because these were desirable and these weren’t. No, we’ll talk more about that in a bit, but for now, Peter simply wants you to know that this is part of your identity. You are chosen by God. You are desired by him.

“But you are a chosen people, *a royal priesthood*.” There are actually two parts to your identity here. “Royal” means that you are kings and queens, and “priesthood” means that you are priests. You are kings and queens in that you determine what takes place in the world. God says that everything that happens, happens for your benefit and the benefit of all believers. And God also hears and answers your prayers; when you pray to the all-powerful God, you have his ear and stuff happens. “If we ask anything according to his will, he hears us,” John says. “The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective,” James says.

And that leads nicely into your identity as priests. Priests in the Old Testament offered sacrifices and prayers on behalf of others. But there is no special priestly class of people in the true religion any more. When Jesus died, the curtain of the temple, behind which only the high priest could go once a year, was torn in two from top to bottom. All believers are priests of God now. All of you may approach God with freedom and confidence. You can intercede on behalf of others, and God hears and answers you in his good time and way. You don’t need to offer any more sacrifices for sin, since Christ did that once and for all, but you can show that sacrifice to others by telling them about Jesus, and you can offer your bodies as living sacrifices of thanksgiving to God.

“But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, *a holy nation*.” Here Peter is not talking about the nation of Israel, the nation of the United States, or any other physical, earthly nation. He is talking about the nation of believers, no matter which earthly nation has a claim on their citizenship. Believers make up a group all their own. They are holy, set apart from sinners. Through faith in Jesus, they enjoy the reality of having their sins completely taken away by him.

“But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, *the people who are God’s own possession*.” Believers are God’s treasured possession. We are the trophy in his case, the priceless art on his wall, the treasure in his safe. We are the jewel that he turns in his hand and admires and refuses to part with.

But we aren’t just a lifeless treasure to be gawked at and admired. “You are...the people who are God’s own possession, so that you may proclaim the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.” We are a treasure with a use and purpose, yes, the highest

possible purpose, to declare the virtues of him who called us from darkness and uselessness to be all of these wonderful, amazing things, to have this wonderful identity.

We do this even with earthly things we identify with, don't we? When someone asks us what computer or phone we have, what piece of equipment we have, what car or truck we have, what shows we're watching, unless we're dissatisfied with them and looking for a replacement, we don't just answer their question, but we also tell them why we like what we have and what all its features are, in the hopes of making them converts to our group. If we identify with something, we like to tell others of its virtues.

How much more true that is with God, who has given us our highest and greatest identity! How can we not recount and declare *his* virtues?

After all, "at one time you were not a people, but now you are the people of God. At one time you were not shown mercy, but now you have been shown mercy." Really, before God gave us his identity, we had no identity. We were not a people. We were in darkness, by ourselves. After all, all of those other things we identify with—what good are they on the day we die? How will they help us on the day of judgment? Solomon once said, "Wealth is worthless in the day of wrath," and the same is true of everything else we identify with on earth. It's all fleeting and meaningless in the end.

But to be made the people of God—now *that* means something. That is an identity with eternal value. And note where this identity comes from; it comes from God's mercy. Peter adds this in case we are tempted to get any idea that God gave us this identity because we had it coming, that God desired us because we were desirable. Far from it. We were shown mercy, he says. Mercy is love shown to those who are to be pitied.

All of these identity traits harken back to Mt. Sinai, when God told his people, "Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:5–6). That was a covenant based not on mercy, but on merit. But here Peter tells us that what God would only give on the basis of merit in that covenant, he has given on the basis of mercy in the new covenant, for Jesus's sake. If this identity were based on merit, none of us would have it or enjoy it. So God sent his Son Jesus who did earn this identity on the basis of merit, and then shared the identity he won with all of us out of his mercy. All of these identity traits—chosen, king, priest, holy, treasured possession—these are identity traits that are only Jesus's traits by right. But they are also ours by right in and through Jesus, because he shares and distributes them freely to all who believe in him as their Savior.

Chosen, kings, priests, a holy nation, the treasured possession of God with the purpose of declaring his virtues, the people of God, people who have been and continue to be shown mercy—this is our God-given identity.

## **2. Our God-Glorifying Activity**

And that God-given identity has a direct bearing on our activity.

"Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and temporary residents in the world, to abstain from the desires of the sinful flesh, which war against your soul." Because we have this identity, we are but aliens, strangers, and temporary residents in the world. "Here we have no enduring city,

but we are looking for the city that is to come” (Hebrews 13:14). As the hymn says, “I’m but a stranger here; heaven is my home.”

You may have lived in the same home all your life, on the same property that is now under your name. But it is actually still just your hotel. It is not your real home. While on earth, you all have the city or town that you identify as your home, but that is not your real hometown. Because you have a God-given identity, heaven is your true home.

So since you and I are strangers and temporary residents in the world, just passing through, just staying for a while, what will our activity be? We will abstain from the desires of the sinful flesh, which war against our soul, because those desires want to take us away from our true home; those desire conflict with our true identity. When our flesh tells us, “That person did this, now you do that to get even,” we abstain from that. That doesn’t reflect our identity as God’s treasured possession that exists to declare his virtues. When our flesh tells us, “Live and let live; stop calling sin sin. That’s just how this or that person has chosen to live. Who’s to say it’s any better or worse that the way you live?”, we abstain from that. That doesn’t reflect our identity as those God has called out of precisely that darkness into his wonderful light—a light in which we are able to see sin as sin and to know it is forgiven.

In fact, we don’t just abstain from sin. We want be as above board as possible. “Live an honorable life among the Gentiles so that even though they slander you as evildoers, when they observe your noble deeds, they may glorify God on the day he visits us.” The tendency of those still in the darkness and without an identity is to say *we* are wrong for calling sin sin. But it’s awfully hard to keep on saying that we are the ones living in the dark ages when we keep on helping them out, keep on encouraging them with kind words whenever we’re able, keep on showing an interest in their lives and being willing to listen when something is weighing on their hearts, keep on wanting to tell them of the forgiving love of Jesus. They’re not getting that from others who are in the darkness along with them and are lacking a real identity like they are. It’s hard to argue with real, substantive Christian love.

They may say one thing about us in public, but in private they are thinking about the identity we have. And for some of them, it will eventually lead to them seeking out that same identity in Jesus Christ, so that ultimately, although they have maligned us so often on earth, they will glorify God on Judgment Day and will have nothing but good things to say about us then when they are rescued from eternal destruction.

God given identity and God-glorifying activity—the two go hand in hand and are never found separate from each other. Bask in the identity, that you may also take part in the activity. Amen.