

Sex & Identity

Well, good to be with you guys this morning. If you have your bibles, go ahead and turn with me to 2 Corinthians 5—we'll get there here in a bit. Today as we continue in our series about sex and sexuality, I want to talk about an idea that isn't explicitly *described* in the bible, but that the bible *alludes to* all over the place. It's an idea that is so essential to who we are as human beings, and because of that, it is also very essential to how we think about sex. I want to talk to you about something people often call *identity*. Our *identity* is central to how we think about ourselves, how we interact with others, and how we go about our everyday life. Identity, really, is how we choose to functionally answer the age-old question *who am I, exactly?*

But admittedly, identity can be a difficult concept to nail down. So when I thought about a way to help you grasp the idea a little more tangibly, what immediately came to my mind was the phenomenon of personality inventories. By a show of hands, how many of you have taken some sort of personality test? So Enneagram, Myers Briggs, StrengthFinders, etc.? Okay so I really enjoy personality tests, I think they can be really helpful. I'm not as into them as my wife Ana is—she's like a personality test *evangelist*. If you've talked to Ana for more than five minutes, she's brought up a personality inventory and probably made you take one. But I think they can be really helpful.

But I still remember the moment I discovered that I am an Enneagram Type 1. If you're not familiar, no worries—a Type 1 is what's called the *Reformer*. And they only called it that because "Nit-Picking Perfectionist" didn't have quite the same ring to it. So me being a Type 1 means that when I look at almost any situation, I immediately see everything that's wrong and could be better about it. Makes me an absolute *joy* to be around. Those of you that have known me for more than a year and are still my friend, *thank you*—that can't be easy for you. So I'm a Type 1. **But I remember the day I found out that I was a Type 1 and read through the description of what a Type 1 was. And I remember immediately going "oh I feel so known." "This is exactly who I am." "Someone finally understands me." Even though some of it was terrifying in some ways, I felt like I belonged. I felt so at home in my Enneagram Type 1-ness.** I'm sure many of you had a similar experience.

Okay here's my point—that feeling right there is a glimpse of what it feels like to find an *identity*. **Finding an identity means finding a place where you feel known, you feel understood, you feel at-home.** And this is a natural inclination of human beings. And really, we attempt to find identity in a lot of different places.

For instance, a lot of people find their identity in their career: what they do for a living. When we meet somebody new at a party or in a social setting of some sort, usually the first question we ask them is "what is your name," and then usually, what's the question we ask—"what do you..." *what? Do*. We ask that because a lot of people love talking about whatever it is they do for a living. And that's because for some people, it's an *identity*.

Others find their identity, not in what they *do*, but in what they *have*—in their *possessions*. So as a really extreme, *comical* example of this, a couple weeks ago I had to take my car in to get it worked on. And while I had my car in line to give them my keys, this guy rolls up in a brand new, bright orange camaro with black racing stripes all the way down it. He was like this buff, jacked dude wearing a black bro tank

and orange sunglasses—this guy *literally matched his outfit to his car*. And while he was in his car, waiting in line to leave it with the shop, he was just idling his Camaro, and every time a female would walk by, I kid you not, he would rev his engine *obnoxiously* loud. And I'm just sitting there thinking to myself, "okay, this Camaro is more than just a mode of transportation for this guy." He wasn't just looking for an affordable way to get to work, and this happened to be the one they had at the dealership that day. No, this is an *identity statement* for this guy. He wants everyone to know that he is the type of guy who drives an orange camaro with black racing stripes. To the point that he is willing to destroy everyone's hearing around him in order to make that identity statement. And whether or not it's a orange camaro, a lot of people find their identity in what they own—whether it's a car, a house, a house in a certain *neighborhood*, certain brands of clothing, all the latest tech gadgets, or nearly anything else.

We could go on and on giving examples—things like finding your identity in your political affiliation, your appearance, your race, being a mom, being an artist, being successful—the list goes on for miles. But the point is simply that we all find our identity *somewhere*. Now, **identifying yourself by any of these things isn't inherently wrong or sinful**. It's not wrong to take pride in what you do for a living. It's not wrong to be a Camaro driver—unless you rev your engine at women that walk by...then it is definitively always wrong. It's obviously not wrong to be a mom or an artist.

But the trick—and here's the important part—the goal as a follower of Jesus is to never allow those **secondary identities to replace your primary identity**. Because when we claim to follow Jesus, what we are saying is that ***the most important identity we have is the one given to us by Jesus. The one he accomplished for us through his life, death and resurrection. That's our ultimate identity now. Every other identity we have, at best, is secondary.*** Now, that's not to say other identities don't mean *anything* to us—they do. But they are not *foremost*. **They may be true things about us, but they are no longer the truest things about us.**¹

Now, even though he doesn't use the word "identity" explicitly, I think this is very much the idea Paul tries to get across in 2 Corinthians 5, when he says this:

[16] From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer. [17] Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.

He says "from now on, we regard no one according to the flesh." I read that to mean that the multitude of other identities we possess—banker, architect, mom, tanktop-wearing Camaro-driver—those things are no longer *primary* identities for us. Now, you may indeed *still be* a banker, a teacher, an mom, a Camaro-driver. Those things may still be *important* things about you. But they are no longer the *most important* things about you. Instead, **the most important thing about you is now what Paul describes in this passage as being "in Christ."** Now we're going to come back around to what exactly that means. But suffice it to say, whatever it means, it must be a *better* identity than what we had before then.

You could say that a big part of **what happens when you become a follower of Jesus is that you are given an altogether new identity**. Not one that makes the other ones *vanish*—but one that relegates them to secondary importance. So instead of simply being a "banker," you are now a follower of Jesus,

¹ "The truest thing about you" is language I borrowed from Dave Lomas' fantastic book by that title.

who happens to also work as a banker as well. Instead of your identity being a mom, you are now a follower of Jesus who happens to also be a mom. Instead of your identity being “Camaro-driver,” your identity is now a follower of Jesus, who happens to also drive a Camaro (and hopefully revs it up a little less frequently in front of women). Does that all make sense, at least in theory?

Okay, here’s how this relates to our series about sex. **Another increasingly popular source for identity in our world, is that of your sexual preference, or sexual orientation.** This identity operates from the framework, “I am defined by who I am attracted to.” The belief that *the most important thing about you is who you experience attraction towards*—in other words, whether you are straight, gay, bi, pansexual, queer—or a variety of other descriptors. In our culture, it is becoming more and more common for people to define themselves primarily by which of those categories they belong to. In other words, **some people make their sexual identity into their primary identity.**

Now, one reason this interests me as a pastor is that in the grand scheme of things, **sexual identity is a relatively new concept.** Not until very recently in human history have we created identities based on who we are attracted to. People have *always* had *attraction* to the opposite sex—that’s not new. But if you study much history or anthropology, you’ll find that very few cultures for very few years have built an *identity out of that* attraction. I know this sounds so weird to us today, but back in the day, if you were a man and you liked to have sex with other men, you wouldn’t label yourself “gay.” You would just say you were a man who had sex with men.² I know that sounds crazy to us, but that itself shows how fully we’ve embraced this new idea of sexual identity.

Because of that, I always chuckle just a little when I hear people say that “gender is a social construct.” Depending on what you mean by that statement, I might even *agree* with you: I think a lot of gender *stereotypes* we have in our culture *are absolutely* socially constructed. But I chuckle because **if we’re going to say that gender is a social construct, then sexual identity is definitely a social construct.** And a far more recent, far *less proven* one at that. Sexual identity is a relatively new, somewhat *untested*, concept in human history. That doesn’t necessarily mean it’s *wrong*. **But it does mean it can’t be a bulletproof way to understand your humanity.** Because the whole idea is really still in the beta testing phase.

Alright, let’s come up for air for just a second: **I am not trying to imply that it is somehow wrong to just state who you are attracted to.** As far as I’m concerned, that’s just you describing reality. And if you use the term “straight” or “gay” or “bi” or “same-sex attracted” or another term to simply describe that experience, so be it. That’s not really a fight I care to pick. What I’m more interested in discussing is the practice of elevating that *identity* (your *sexual* identity) over and above *all other identities* about yourself. **I’m talking about taking that one true thing about yourself and considering it the most important true thing about yourself.** *That’s* where things start to turn sour.

And here’s why: **sexual attraction is not a big enough container to hold someone’s humanity in.** It kind of baffles me that this is controversial to say, but **your personhood is way bigger than who you are sexually attracted to. Just like we would never boil a person’s humanity down to their race, or their gender, or their job, or their possessions—we also shouldn’t boil a person’s humanity down**

² Jennell Williams Paris has some great scholarship on the anthropology behind this in her book *The End of Sexual Identity*.

to their sexual preference. That's inconsistent with everything else we all believe about the beautiful complexity of human beings. And that's why it shouldn't be elevated to a primary identity.

~~As of last count, there are there are 73 different sexual and gender identities in use. I say "as of last count," because the list grows by the day. And I know that is low-hanging fruit for people to poke fun at or complain about. I personally have no interest in doing any of that. Instead, I'd love to just pose a question. Is it possible that that list continues to grow is because *sexual identities aren't adequate ways of describing people*? Might it be that every time we think we have those identities defined, they immediately seem too limiting for us? Is it possible that that list will *never* reach a satisfactory length, precisely because a sexual identity an inadequate way of describing the complexity of human beings? I'd argue that's exactly why. My simple point is that we as human beings **are more than our sexuality. Sexual attraction alone isn't capable of containing the whole of who we are.**~~

But the problem is we still try. We keep trying to make that shoe fit, even when we see time and time again that it doesn't. Now, people do this in all sorts of ways that you probably would expect me to say as a pastor: pride parades, telling people that they "hate" you if they reject your sexuality, and an LGBT+ community that functions much like a religion for many people. And all that's true. All of those are symptoms of us attempting to make our sexual identity our primary identity.

But there's something else that makes this whole conversation so complex. The problem is that often *churches* haven't offered a better solution. **At times we've been guilty of telling people in the gay community they shouldn't find their identity in their sexuality, while not providing them with an alternative.** We've told gay people to stop embracing a gay identity, while sometimes even doing things that *reinforce* that very identity.

A friend of mine who has experienced same-sex attractions his whole life was once a part of a relatively small church where he was trying to get to know the pastors on a personal level. But whenever he approached them to hang out, he was sort of brushed off. Well then, somewhere along the line they found out that he experiences same-sex attraction. And all of a sudden, these same pastors wanted to get together with him all the time to discuss his same-sex attraction. Several months later, these same leaders wanted to do a event where they discussed same-sex attraction, and they asked my friend to be there and share his story as part of the event. So there was this sense in which those pastors saw him as a valuable resource because he was gay, but not for his friendship or as a human being. Do you see how for him, things like that actually reinforce the belief that the most important thing about him is his sexuality?

There was a *straight* couple I knew several years back. One time they told me, sort of out of the blue, that they have a strict policy that no one who experiences same-sex attraction can be around their child. And my thought was, that *has* to be a very awkward policy to enforce. Just sitting out at the playground one day and when someone gets within a ten foot radius, you go "excuse me madam, are you into ladies?" But when I asked them why, they said it was because they thought it put their kid at higher risk for being abused. Now I didn't know them super well—maybe they had personal reasons for that decision, a story somewhere in their history, something like that. But it was hard for me to shake the implication being made there. The assumption it seem like was being made was if a person is attracted to the same sex, they can't be trusted at all because of that attraction. That's a really harmful assumption to make.

And assumption that actually reinforces the idea that a person's identity defines the whole of who they are.

I have countless other friends that have opened up to people in the Church about being attracted to the same sex, and are quickly told nothing other than "you aren't welcome here if you are gay." No "thanks for telling me," no "I'd love to hear more of your story sometime." Just "you're not welcome." I have other friends that are encouraged to immediately participate in prayer meetings with people they don't know as an attempt somehow make them straight. I've heard of people who are invited to *exorcisms* to try and get the demon out that people think *caused* the same-sex attraction. Others have had it suggested to them that they need to "try out" a relationship with the opposite sex because maybe they "just haven't met the right person." There are plenty of stories like these out there. But here's what I want to ask: do you see how these types of interactions actually reinforce the idea that that person *is* their sexual orientation?

When Christians hear that somebody is gay, and the first thing they think needs to happen is for them to *change their orientation*, what we're assuming there is that *the most important thing about them is their sexual orientation*. The only thing that matters is who they're sexually attracted to. Not what they think about Jesus, not what they believe about the gospel, Jesus' death and resurrection, but whether they are straight or gay.

Now, before we go any further, let me just put all my cards on the table. Because some of you have this question lingering in your mind and it's hard for you to hear anything else I say without me saying this. **I believe, and City Church as a whole believes, that the design for sexuality according to the Scriptures is one man, one woman, in a covenant marriage with each other. We believe, as we've said on many occasions, that *any sexual interaction outside of that framework is outside of God's good design for human sexuality*.** And that includes same-sex sexual interaction. I have read many of the books that make a case for why it *shouldn't* include that, honestly given them a fair reading as much as possible—and I believe that those are intelligent, well-meaning people, who just happen to be misinformed on this topic. The Scriptures are actually fairly clear on this.

So at City Church, if someone in our church is living in active contradiction to that and claims to follow Jesus, of course we're going to engage them on that. Just like if *anyone* was in obvious sin of *any other type*, they would be engaged on that sin as well. But when that isn't the situation—when someone simply *experiences* attraction to the same sex and is *submitting* that desire to Jesus—singling out them and their sexual orientation above all else is actually extremely unhelpful. If you are straight, in your interaction with people who are gay, let's remember that those people are people to be loved and not just issues to solve.³ Let's do our best to not reinforce the idea that they *are* their sexuality. **As followers of Jesus, we need to be offering people an altogether different picture of human identity, not working off the same faulty assumptions.** Does that make sense?

So let's try and drill this down into specifics. **How do we know, whether we are straight or gay, whether we have made our sexual identity, our *primary* identity?** I think there are two helpful litmus tests for spotting your primary identity. There are probably more, but here are two important ones:

³ This is obviously taken from Preston Sprinkle's fantastic book, *People to Be Loved: Why Homosexuality is More Than Just an Issue*.

Who you identify with most

The first way to discern where your primary identity lies is by *who or what groups you most easily identify with*. What group of people do you feel most “at home” around? What types of people do you most readily trust and listen to and follow?

If you’re a follower of Jesus, a good test is to see if there is any group of people you identify with *more readily* than other followers of Jesus. And this works with whatever the identity might be—not just sexual identities. If you’re a *Republican* follower of Jesus, but you relate more easily to another Republican who *doesn’t follow Jesus*, than with a Democrat who *does*? Chances are that reveals where your *primary* identity truly lies. If you are a *white* follower of Jesus, but you relate more easily to another white person who *doesn’t follow Jesus*, than with a black person who *does*? That probably reveals where *your* identity truly lies. Does that make sense?

But you can apply that to sexuality too. If you’re a follower of Jesus and attracted to the *same* sex, but you identify more with other gay people that don’t follow Jesus, than with straight people who *do*, that reveals where your primary identity lies too. And vice versa: if you’re a *straight* follower of Jesus, but relate more to other straight people, than you do to a follower of Jesus who’s gay, that reveals something about your primary identity. You can tell a lot about yourself by seeing who you identify with most. So it helps to ask the question, *who is that for me?*

Who you treat with contempt

So in Luke 18, Jesus tells a story about a Pharisee and a tax collector. The Pharisee was upright and moral, took a lot of pride in doing the right thing and obedience to God. We might say he found his “identity” in his moral performance. And one way that we know that is because the passage says Jesus told this story about those who “...trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and *treated others with contempt*.” He treated others—meaning people who *weren’t as moral as he was*—with *contempt*.

One of the best ways to see where your primary identity lies is figuring out what types of people you most naturally treat with *contempt*. Generally speaking, **if we find our primary identity in something, we will treat people on the other end of that spectrum with an low-grade disgust or contempt**. If you’re straight, and you meet a person who’s gay, do you inherently treat them with disdain? Or maybe just a low-key suspicion, even? That’s a good sign of where your primary identity lies.

So think about the prevalence of “gay jokes” among straight people—specifically among straight guys. I can’t tell you how often I hear guys especially using the word “gay” as an insult: “that’s gay.” “Stop being so gay.” Or even worse words than that that communicate the same thing. I want you to think for just a second about what you’re communicating when you say that. What’s implied there is that you, the straight person, are the norm of humanity. You and your “straightness,” however you happen to define that, is the standard. And therefore anything that seems weird, or out of place, or diverges in the least from you, is deemed *gay*. Have you ever thought about it how faulty that framework is? I think subtly, saying that sort of thing reveals that part of you has embraced “straight” as a primary identity. That would be one reason to use the word “gay” exclusively as a slight towards other people. Because it’s a subtle way of communicating “whatever I *am*, I’m definitely not *that*.”

We also see this a lot in gender *stereotypes* that are unfortunately so very common in our culture. The belief still held by an awful lot of people is that straight men enjoy things like sports, trucks, and being outside while gay men enjoy things like cooking, clothes shopping, and Broadway musicals. And it's often implied that if you start crossing from one of those categories into the other, something is wrong with you. I still remember in high school, telling somebody that I was going to the store Express at the mall to buy a nice shirt, and one of my friends said "dude, don't shop there—that's where gay guys shop." To which I said "it is?" And the response was "yeah. They only sell really nice clothes." So apparently, if you're a straight guy, good luck buying nice clothes. Only sweatpants and gym shorts forever for you. But there are more stereotypes where those came from—how about the belief that straight women have long hair and gay women have short hair? We could go on and on.

But listen, those stereotypes are coming from *somewhere*. **Those stereotypes exist because we've taken a sexual identity (*straight* or *gay*) and constructed out of it an entire, *life-encompassing* identity out of it, all the way down to hairstyles. We believe "gay people do this, and straight people do that."** And not only does that boil complex human beings down into stereotypes—it also generates this dislike and suspicion towards anything that looks like the "other group" to us.

But here's what's interesting. I've found that more and more, it's not just *straight* people that show contempt for *gay* people. It's also sometimes the other way around. Sometimes now, I'll hear the word *straight* or *hetero* roll off the tongue of a *gay* person like an insult: "typical straight people." "Oh, they're *hetero*—of course they would say that." "There's too much straightness in this room right now." But if that's you, do you see how that is contempt and scorn just the same? That's the same thing the Pharisee was doing to the tax collector. And it reveals a primary identity in one's sexual orientation. **Generally speaking, whatever we find our identity in causes us to treat people *unlike that* with disdain and contempt.**

So hopefully that gives us some identifiers to help spot anywhere where we have put our identity in something other than Jesus—whether it's from our *sexual* identity, or really anything else. But I think that then leads us to ask *what does it look like when our identity is in Jesus?* If everything we just said is how we know something is *wrong*, how do we know when things are *right*? For that, let's look back at 2 Corinthians 5. Let's read it again, this time starting a couple of verses earlier, v. 14:

[14] For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; [15] and he died for all, that those who live, might no longer live for themselves, but for him who for their sake died and was raised.

So in light of what Jesus did in dying for us all—in light of him going to the cross for us and coming back from the dead, now the love of Christ now "controls" us. Meaning that his love for us now flows through us towards others. Which looks like practically, v. 16:

[16] From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer.

"We regard no one according to the flesh" anymore. Which we said earlier means **we don't see people primarily through the lenses of their earthly identities**. Whether it's ourselves or others, we don't see

anyone primarily as banker, architect, mom, Camaro-driver, or even “gay” or “straight.” Because we now have the ability to see ourselves and others from an altogether different standpoint. And here’s what that standpoint is, v. 17:

[17] *Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.*

So in Paul’s language, what happens when we decide to follow Jesus, is that “the old passes away.” **Again, this doesn’t necessarily mean that those other things aren’t true of us at all anymore, but it does mean that they aren’t the truest things about us anymore. They are not defining for us anymore. They’re not our primary identity.** Because now, instead, we are given a *new* identity—we’re made into a “new creation” in Paul’s words. And because we now have these new identities, and other people do too, we can see one another through *those* lenses. Not “gay” or “straight” or anything else, but rather as “in Christ.” **When someone is in Christ, that is now the most important thing about them.**

And here’s why that matters: **“in Christ,” is an altogether better identity than anything else.** When you see yourself as being in Christ, you can associate with anyone and everyone, not just one particular group of people. That’s what Jesus did. Jesus was *notorious* for spending time around people who were the *polar opposite* of him. *And* when you see yourself as being “in Christ,” it also kills the contempt you might show towards other people. When you realize *you had to receive your identity by grace just like everybody else did*, contempt starts to wither away. Identity in Jesus is far better than identity in anything else, including our sexuality.

Now lastly, there might be those in the room still saying “*but isn’t homosexuality wrong? If it’s wrong, shouldn’t we tell people that it’s wrong?*” Well to answer that, let’s just take our cues from Jesus. Let’s ask how *Jesus* interacted with those in obvious, external sin. How did he treat them? When he came across the woman caught in adultery that we mentioned last week—a woman in obvious, external sin—how did he interact with her? Was it with contempt? Was it with disgust? Hatred? *Nope, none of those.* He responded to her sin with an otherworldly, jarring, *transformative* compassion towards her. That wasn’t to say he didn’t engage her on her sin, that wasn’t to say he overlooked or *condoned* her sin. But he sure didn’t treat her with *contempt because* of her sin.

When Jesus came across Zaccheus—you guys remember wee little Zaccheus from Sunday school? Zaccheus was a tax collector. Meaning he was a co-conspirator with the cruel, violent, oppressive Roman government, and was actively extorting his own people to take advantage of them financially and get rich himself. Zaccheus was in obvious, external sin. And how did Jesus interact with him? Anybody remember the first thing Jesus said to Zaccheus? He said “I’m coming over for dinner.” Eating with a person was a big deal in the ancient world—it was to associate yourself with a person. It was to say “I accept this person into relationship with me.” And Jesus says to this obvious, notorious, immoral person “let’s grab a bite to eat.”

This is a snapshot of how Jesus interacts treats those in obvious, external sin: he associates with them, and shows compassion towards them. As followers of Jesus, we take our cues from Jesus. So, it’s likely that a lot of us know *someone* who practices their sexuality in a way we disapprove of. But even in those scenarios, according to Jesus, our posture towards them should be 1) compassion

towards them, and 2) identifying with them. Not tribalism, not contempt, not scorn—but tangible, practical, jarring, otherworldly *grace*. I pray that all of us here, by the power of the Spirit, embody that posture.

Let's pray.