



THE FIRST WORD

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Whose Am I?

SERMON BY REV. DOUG PRATT ■ OCTOBER 20, 2019

Don't you realize that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who lives in you and was given to you by God? You do not belong to yourself, ²⁰for God bought you with a high price. So you must honor God with your body.

1 Corinthians 6:19-20 (NLT)

A Fundamental Question

In 1980, best-selling author Robert Ludlum published the first book of what became a three-part trilogy. That novel, entitled *The Bourne Identity*, and its sequels became box-office hits starting in 2002, as action-film star Matt Damon plays a man in a relentless and desperate quest to answer the fundamental question, Who am I?

The first book and film open with a man drifting unconscious in the Mediterranean just off the southern coast of France. The man has gunshot wounds and a head injury, and has apparently fallen overboard from a ship at sea. He is rescued, and when he awakens he has a profound case of amnesia. As the plot progresses, he discovers that his name (or at least his pseudonym by which he is known to others) is Jason Bourne. He realizes that he has uncanny reflexes and skills for self-defense, violence and survival. It looks at first as if he is a trained assassin; then it is discovered that he is a CIA operative. He finds that he has a Swiss bank account in his name with millions of dollars, as well as passports from multiple countries. He is pursued by shadowy stalkers and organizations who try to kill him. Through all the adventures and unexpected twists, he continues to try to fit the puzzle pieces together to answer that most urgent and profound question: Who am I?

That is the question that is at the heart of the human experience. We spend our lives trying to figure out who we really are. In each new season or age or situation we instinctively try to sort out our identity and purpose. We each have been given a name by parents, and we were born into a family and a community and a nation we didn't choose. We have our own unique bodies and brains, and we all have strengths and weaknesses. We discover something of who we are in stages: first from our parents and our extended family. What is my place in this small system? Then we try to figure out our place in our schools and our peer groups; our sense of who we are is influenced by what other people say about us and think about us. (That's why social media is having such a profound influence on the "iGeneration" of young people.) Further identity-shapers come from our careers, our marriages and the children we bear, our hobbies and social circles; later in life we have to face the profound question of who we are once our parenting roles end with the "empty nest" stage, and when our jobs end with retirement. It's only half-joking when this question is put to a recently-retired new resident of South-west Florida: "Who did you **used to be**?"

Defining One's Identity

Who am I? is not only a social question and an emotional question, but also one of the three fundamental spiritual questions mankind has been asking for as long as we have walked upright on this planet. The other great spiritual questions: **Where did I come from?** (or, Who is my Creator?) and **Why am I here?** (or, What is the purpose of my life?). For reasons that remain a mystery, we are unique among all the millions of species of life on earth in asking those questions. No other animals seem to have a self-concept or a need for meaning. But something in all of us feels a desperate need to figure these out—every bit as desperate as Jason Bourne's relentless quest to discover who he is. When we are clueless about our identity, our origin and our purpose, life becomes just a quest for momentary pleasures or the avoidance of pain. But when we are able to answer those great questions satisfactorily, it makes all the difference in our daily lives.

Who am I? is the fundamental issue raised in the recent Kendrick Brothers film, *Overcomer*. Alex Kendrick plays a high school teacher and basketball coach in a small industrial city devastated by the closure of its major employer. So many families are forced to move that he loses his team. In consolation, the principal offers him the coaching position for cross-country—and only one girl shows up for the team.

As the coach struggles with his own identity (who is a basketball coach when he has no team?), his young runner is struggling even more—from her own dysfunctional family background and also from asthma. But the film shows a breakthrough insight when the young girl decides to give her life to Christ. The teacher who leads her to faith asks her to read the first chapter of a letter from the New Testament called **Ephesians** and write down what it tells her about who she is, as a follower of Jesus and a child of God. She begins to write in her notebook: “I am blessed, I am chosen, I am blameless in God’s sight, I am loved, I am adopted into His family, I am redeemed, I am forgiven, I am hopeful.” The film ends with this memorable lesson: Only our Creator has the right to tell us who we are.

That means society and our peer group don’t have the right to define our identity. No matter what politicians and pollsters might claim, who we are is not defined by our race, our nationality, our age, our economic status or where we live. Who you are is not determined by your voting preference, nor your lifestyle choices, nor your hobbies, nor the home you live in, the car you drive, or how you look. You belong to the One who made you. And if you, like the young runner in the movie, have placed your faith in God as your Savior and Lord, then you **doubly** belong to Him—body and soul, as Paul confirms in our Scripture.

Profound Implications

Our word from the Lord today is a message the church often ignores because its implications are so radical and so profound. The Bible calls us to a completely different perspective than what our human nature prefers. Listen to these verses from 1 Corinthians 6 again:

¹⁹Don't you realize that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who lives in you and was given to you by God? ²⁰You do not belong to yourself, for God bought you with a high price. So you must honor God with your body.

This is right here in the pages of Scripture. If you believe the Bible is true—God's Word to us—and that it is intended not just to be read but followed and lived, then this simple principle has world-altering consequences. It tells me **my body doesn't belong to me**, but to God. Consider the ripple effects of embracing this truth.

- ◆ The Pro-abortion lobby (or their preferred term, "Pro-Choice") has constructed its edifice of justifications and legal rights and Planned Parenthood clinics on a clearly-stated assumption that a woman has a total, constitutional, and irrevocable right to do whatever she wants with her body. But the Bible says clearly it is NOT her body. She, and any child created within her, equally belong to God. There may be some rare exceptions where we grant the right to end a life before birth: if a child is determined to have a terrible birth defect that will result in its being "anencephalic" (without a brain); if the mother's life is clearly threatened by a tubal pregnancy or other rare complication; or because of some other unusual or tragic circumstance. But if a woman is a Christian she cannot justify terminating a pregnancy by claiming, "It's my body and I can do what I want."
- ◆ If God owns my body, and it was not given to me for my pleasure but for obedience and service to Him, then what I choose to put into my body is also a moral and spiritual issue. If I decide to slaughter brain cells with excessive alcohol or put myself at risk by swallowing opioids to buy a temporary physical high, I am destroying the temple of God. It is as unholy and defiant an act as taking a sledgehammer to an altar.
- ◆ If my mind and body belong to God, then I am accountable to my Master for what I do with the things I acquire, and with the abilities and opportunities He has given me. His Word makes it clear that, in ordinary circumstances, unless

we are physically unable to work, we are to labor to provide for our needs and our families. As we prosper beyond that, we have many options for self-enhancement and pleasure and acquisition. But we also owe back to the Lord a portion of His blessings, so that we might give to others and sustain His work in the world.

Tim Scott, the junior U.S. Senator from South Carolina and a committed believer (who is willing to work in the “swamp” of national politics while trying to keep himself spiritually uncorrupted), has experienced firsthand the confusion of the secular world’s thinking about identity. The assumptions of most in politics and the news media today have been labeled “identity politics.” It says that who you are (and, therefore, how you think and how you vote and how you live) is determined by the class of people within which you are categorized, based on such things as your ethnic or racial background, your lifestyle alternative, your geography, or your age. Pollsters and analysts love to see people as groups and make assumptions about them. Tim Scott talks openly about the pressures he has felt, as an African-American from Charleston (which has a heritage of being racially divided and the epicenter of the Southern rebellion against the Union to preserve slavery).

But Tim is a Republican, a convinced conservative. Other black politicians tell him he should think like they do. He courageously resists, convinced that God has made him as a unique individual with the freedom to think and act for himself. He refuses to let his identity be determined by anybody but his Lord and his own conscience . (As a local connection to us, Tim Scott has co-written a book with his good friend Trey Gowdy, with whom he served in Congress for several years. Trey will be with us as a Bonita Christian Forum speaker in March, and their book *Unified* is a powerful spiritual call to reconciliation and moving forward that is so timely for a divided nation.)

The Cross Changes Everything

The Christian message has been radical and upsetting to the natural instincts of man since it was first birthed into the world twenty centu-

ries ago. When Jesus died and rose again to make reconciliation with our Creator available to all, He changed everything. His sacrifice purchased our redemption. And when we receive that great blessing, from that moment on we belong to Christ. He is now our Lord. That's why Paul can write so boldly and plainly, "You do not belong to yourself, for God bought you with a high price"—namely, Christ's death on the cross for you.

The implications of this truth run deep and affect every part of our lives: the way we think and act, the way we get along with our family and friends, the way we do our jobs and live as citizens in the political arena. And it flows from deep inside, from an altered and re-discovered identity. I am who my Lord says I am. I belong to Him. I owe Him everything, for He has given me everything.

I said at the beginning of this message that one of the most fundamental questions of human existence is: Who am I? Based on our scripture text for today I will amend that statement. I believe that for a Christian the most important question to answer is: **WHOSE am I?** Who do I belong to? Who will be my Lord today, and whose will shall I choose to obey? ■