

## You Are Your Boundaries

August 22, 2021

Part 7 of 9 in series *Who God Says You Are*

Today we continue our series *Who God Says You Are*. It's all about identity.

Identity is an incredibly important topic, and the Bible has a lot to say about it. In fact, your identity is the most important thing about you, because it's what makes you— *you*. Your identity is *who you are*.

I began my last message with a story about an eagle who thought he was a turkey. It was only when he discovered his true identity that he could learn to soar.

That story got me thinking about another story of a bird who faced a very similar identity crisis. It's a famous fairy tale by Hans Christian Andersen. Does anyone know which fairy tale I'm referring to? Shout it out, or if you're with us online, type it into the chat if you think you know what it is...

The fairy tale I'm thinking of is *The Ugly Duckling*.

It's the story of a swan who thinks he's a duck. He was raised by ducks who treated him cruelly because he was so different from all the other ducks—so big, awkward and ugly. He leads such a hard life that eventually, he decides to end it all by throwing himself at this large flock of swans, thinking it would be better to be killed by these beautiful birds than to continue to live on in his own ugliness and misery.

But much to his surprise, the swans don't kill him. They welcome and accept him. That's when he sees his reflection and realizes he's not a duck after all. He's been a swan the whole time. Having discovered his true identity, he spreads his gorgeous large wings, and takes flight with his new family.

Have you ever felt like the ugly duckling—like you don't fit in? Maybe people have treated you like you don't belong, or have even been so cruel as to say it to you outright. Maybe you've come to believe deep in your heart that you are the person *they* say you are.

But the *real* you isn't who they say you are, or who you in your woundedness have come to believe that you are. The real you is who *God* says you are. In Jesus, he laid down his life to rescue you, and by his Spirit enables you to become who he made you to be— to become the "swan" that you really are.

And whether you're with us in-person or online today, I'm so glad you're in church, because the church is the family of God. Like the flock of swans in the fairy tale, the church is a people called by God to welcome and accept you as you are, and to help you to discover who God says you are. You see, the church, when it's working right, is a place where we can

help each other learn to spread our gorgeous large wings, and by God's grace, take flight together.

If you're new to Cornerstone—or even if you've been part of this church for years— I want to encourage you to really get connected with this family of faith, so that we can walk with you and help you to discover more of who God says you are.

An excellent opportunity for doing that is coming up in September with our [Living Into Your Identity Workshop](#). It's a 2-hour online workshop designed to help you live more fully into your identity as a beloved child of God.

There are two different workshop dates you can choose from. For more info and to sign up, check out the link you see onscreen and in the chat.

In this series, we've been looking into what the Bible has to say about a variety of factors that shape our identity. Today, we're going to look at our boundaries.

Have you ever considered how your boundaries shape your sense of identity?

I'm guessing that most of us probably haven't, but the Bible actually has quite a bit to say about it, and it's all incredibly relevant to the choices we make and the way we live our lives each day.

Why are boundaries important when it comes to how our sense of identity gets shaped? They're important because boundaries have to do with *differentiation*. That word's kind of a mouthful, isn't it? What do I mean by it?

Well, the book of Genesis tells us that one of the first things God did when he was creating the world was to create boundaries that separated the land from the sea, and day from night, *differentiating* them from each other.

God also created the boundaries between different species, and between human beings— male and female. In this way, God *differentiated* his creatures and his people from each other, giving each a distinct sense of identity.<sup>1</sup>

God even put a boundary around a single tree— the tree of the knowledge of good and evil—which was the one tree in the Garden of Eden that Adam and Eve weren't allowed to eat from. The boundary God put around this tree served to *differentiate* human beings from God, who alone was meant to possess the knowledge of good and evil.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> See Genesis 1.

<sup>2</sup> See Genesis 2:16-17

So identity gets established by this kind of differentiation—by recognizing what we are, as well as what we are not, and all of this is based on boundaries. Your boundaries distinguish you from others, and help to make you—*you*. Are you with me?

Now, according to the Bible, those of us who follow Jesus have one primary boundary marker that defines who we are above any other factor, and it governs how all the other boundaries in our life are to be set.

That primary boundary marker is what the New Testament refers to as being “in Christ.” When you decide to follow Jesus and are baptized, God places you “in Christ”— meaning you leave your old life behind, and become identified with Jesus— above all else. At the same time, you are also identified with all other people who are also “in Christ”— that worldwide family we know as the church.

The term “in Christ”— along with similar terms like *in him*, *with him* and *by him*— occur well over 100 times throughout the New Testament, and the significance of being “in Christ” cannot be overstated in terms of what it means for your identity.

To be “in Christ” is to be placed within a boundary that defines who you are, and how God calls you to live in this world.

This happens in two ways, which I’d like to unpack in the time that remains.

Being “in Christ” means there are some boundaries that get REMOVED, and there are other boundaries that get REINFORCED. Both are foundational to our identity as followers of Jesus, and to the kind of lives we’re called to live every day. So let’s start with the first one:

## **1. Boundaries that are REMOVED in Christ**

The New Testament tells the story of Jesus, of course, and it also tells the story of the birth of the Christian church.

The early Christian church would have seemed quite strange to Jews, because Jesus set aside many of the Old Testament boundaries that they had become so used to.

The removal of **location** boundaries is one example of this.

The centre of worship for Jews had always been the Temple in Jerusalem. In a similar way, the religious life of most non-Jews was usually tied to some particular location, like one of the pagan temples or shrines.

But in Christ, all boundaries of location are removed when it comes to worship. Christian worship is not centered in a particular building or geographical region. Instead, it’s

centered in the person of Jesus, and therefore by his Spirit, authentic Christian worship can take place anywhere, worldwide—in person, and now even online.

We see this theme in John’s gospel, where Jesus encounters a Samaritan woman at a well. Now Samaritans worshipped at a different location than the Jews did, and this woman asks Jesus about it. She says to him:

“So tell me, why is it that you Jews insist that Jerusalem is the only place of worship, while we Samaritans claim it is here at Mount Gerizim, where our ancestors worshiped?”

Jesus replied, “Believe me, dear woman, the time is coming when it will no longer matter whether you worship the Father on this mountain or in Jerusalem... the time is coming—indeed it’s here now—when true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth. The Father is looking for those who will worship him that way.”<sup>3</sup>

So in Christ, location boundaries are removed when it comes to worship.

Similarly, in Christ, all boundaries are removed when it comes to our obligation to extend **forgiveness** to others. In Matthew’s gospel we read:

Then Peter came to [Jesus] and asked, “Lord, how often should I forgive someone who sins against me? Seven times?”

“No, not seven times,” Jesus replied, “but seventy times seven!”<sup>4</sup>

By this, Jesus doesn’t mean that you can stop forgiving once you’ve done it 490 times. He’s using overstatement to make a point. In Christ, God’s forgiveness of you and me is without boundaries, and therefore our forgiveness of others is to be reflective of that. As the Bible says in Colossians:

Forgive as the Lord forgave you.<sup>5</sup>

Keep in mind, though, that just because you’re obligated to forgive without limits, it doesn’t follow that you’re obligated to be best friends with someone who badly hurt or abused you, or to even necessarily be in relationship with them at all. That said, even in such cases, we are still called, with God’s help, to forgive from the heart, as the Lord forgives us.

Who is God calling you to forgive today?

---

<sup>3</sup> John 4:20-21, 23 (NLT)

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 18:21-22 (NLT)

<sup>5</sup> Colossians 3:13b (NLT)

Furthermore—and this is a big one— any boundaries that can be used to exclude people on the basis of **race, ethnicity, culture, class and gender** are removed in Christ.

Some of the New Testament's most sweeping statements to this effect are found in the letters of the apostle Paul. In Galatians he writes:

In Christ's family there can be no division into Jew and non-Jew, slave and free, male and female.<sup>6</sup>

In Colossians, Paul writes:

Words like Jewish and non-Jewish, religious and irreligious, insider and outsider, uncivilized and uncouth, slave and free, mean nothing. From now on everyone is defined by Christ, everyone is included in Christ.<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, the Bible makes it clear that God is a God who in Christ delights to bring diverse peoples together in loving unity. Thus, we read in Ephesians that:

The Messiah... tore down the wall we used to keep each other at a distance... Christ brought everybody together through his death on the cross.<sup>8</sup>

It was Dr. Martin Luther King who famously said:

It is appalling that the most segregated hour of Christian America [and we can add Christian Canada to that] is eleven o'clock Sunday morning.

You see, eleven o'clock Sunday morning is the church hour.

A super-sketchy church growth principle was popular among church leaders for a few decades. The principle says that the best way to get your church to grow in attendance is to focus your efforts on reaching a single people group.

As the old saying goes, birds of a feather like to flock together, and this principle argues that Chinese churches should focus on reaching the Chinese community, Black churches the Black community, South Asian churches the South Asian community, and white suburban churches should try to reach white suburbia, and so on.

---

<sup>6</sup> Galatians 3:28 (MSG)

<sup>7</sup> Colossians 3:11 (MSG)

<sup>8</sup> Ephesians 2:14, 16 (MSG)

That principle can indeed cause a church to grow in numbers. But is it faithful to the way of Christ?

Did Jesus lay down his life so birds of a feather could flock together making Sunday mornings at 11:00am the most segregated hour of the week? Absolutely not! The Bible makes it clear that Jesus laid down his life to reconcile people to God and smash the dividing walls—the boundaries—that separate Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female, rich and poor, red, yellow, brown, black and white, uniting all believers into the one diverse and interdependent family of God.

Some of you who are new here might not know that Cornerstone has its roots in a Chinese church. We are grateful for those roots, and we believe God has a place and a purpose for ethnic churches. But this church was founded upon the deep theological conviction that there is no biblical basis for Christians to *perpetuate* their segregation from one another along racial, ethnic, cultural lines—especially in a city like Markham, the most culturally diverse city in Canada, where most of us share a common language.

Starting in 1996 with a virtually mono-ethnic group of 35 founding members God has transformed Cornerstone into a congregation that now has over 40 different countries of origin represented among us at last count. I never tire of telling that story, because it's a story of the boundary-breaking power of Christ.

How is God calling us now as a church to live even more deeply into our boundary-breaking, intercultural identity in Christ?

And how is God speaking to you personally? You see, your race, your ethnicity, your gender and so on are all very incredibly aspects of who you are, and they don't go away because you become a Christian. In fact, it's those very distinctions that make the unity-in-diversity we share in Christ all the more vibrant and beautiful, like a breathtaking mosaic.

That being said, if you are a Christian, the *ultimate* defining force in your life must be Christ, and not your race, ethnicity, culture, class or gender.

So in Christ, some boundaries—like the ones we talked about—are removed, and God calls us to live accordingly. But at the same time, there are also:

## **2. Boundaries that are REINFORCED in Christ**

One image that helps us think about the importance of boundaries is that of a river. When a river runs within its banks, it brings life to the countryside and to the communities along its banks.

But when a river—or a lake or a dam— overflows and violates the boundaries of its banks, what was once life-giving very quickly becomes destructive. For evidence of this, you need look no further than this summer’s catastrophic floods in places like India, China and Western Europe.

Or think of the pandemic. Good public health protocols are boundaries that we need to help keep ourselves and others safe, and as we see each day on the news, people neglect those boundaries to their peril.

From a biblical perspective, it’s important to understand that **the character of Christ sets the boundaries for how we live our lives.** God calls us to reinforce these boundaries for our own protection and thriving, and also so that we can be channels of the life of Christ to the world around us.

Specifically, God calls us to maintain strong boundaries between sin and virtue in our lives—boundaries that keep sin out, and that also make space for Holy Spirit space to shape us in Christ-like character.

In the New Testament, the reinforcement of such boundaries finds its focus in what are known as sin lists and virtue lists. Several of these lists can be found throughout the New Testament.

Here’s a passage from Galatians that contains both a sin list and a virtue list. Pay attention to what stirs inside you as I read this:

When you follow the desires of your sinful nature, the results are very clear: sexual immorality, impurity, lustful pleasures, idolatry, sorcery, hostility, quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambition, dissension, division, envy, drunkenness, wild parties, and other sins like these. Let me tell you again, as I have before, that anyone living that sort of life will not inherit the Kingdom of God.

But the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against these things [in other words, there are no boundaries that get put on our growth in virtue]!

Those who belong to Christ Jesus have nailed the passions and desires of their sinful nature to his cross and crucified them there. Since we are living by the Spirit, let us follow the Spirit's leading in every part of our lives. <sup>9</sup>

What stirred within your heart when you heard those divinely inspired words? Did you feel the conviction of the Holy Spirit? Did you feel the enemy's condemnation? Hopefully you sensed God's loving yet urgent invitation to reinforce the boundaries in your life between the sin that destroys, and the cultivation of Christ-like virtue that brings life, both to you, and then through you to others.

When it comes to boundaries, note verse 24 especially. It says:

Those who belong to Christ Jesus have nailed the passions and desires of their sinful nature to his cross and crucified them there. <sup>10</sup>

Talk about boundary-setting— to nail your sinful passions and desires to the cross. When you nail something down, you give it a fixed boundary, right? Something that's nailed down can't violate any boundaries because it can't move.

What is God saying to you about boundary-setting when it comes to nailing down sin and at the same time making space for God to cultivate Christ-like virtue in your life?

- Do you need to set firmer and clearer boundaries around what you watch on TV or online?
- Do you need to set firmer boundaries around the material you read?
- Do you need to set firmer boundaries around how you spend your time?
- Do you need to set firmer boundaries around the way you spend your money?
- Do you need to set firmer boundaries around who you hang out with?
- Do you need to set firmer boundaries around your speech—around the words you say? Do you need to join the psalmist in praying:

Set a guard over my mouth, Lord;  
keep watch over the door of my lips. <sup>11</sup>

I ask again, what is God saying to you about boundary-setting when it comes to shutting out sin—nailing it to the cross of Christ—and making space for God to cultivate Christ-like virtue in your life?

---

<sup>9</sup> Galatians 5:19-25 (NLT)

<sup>10</sup> Galatians 5:24 (NLT)

<sup>11</sup> Psalm 141:3 (NIV)

If you'd like some good, practical counsel to help you with that, I have a book to recommend. It's called—and this is a great title: [Licenced to Kill: A Field Manual for Mortifying Sin](#), by Brian Hedges. The author draws heavily on the timeless Christian classic *The Mortification of Sin* by John Owen, a Puritan theologian from the 1600s.

To “mortify” means to put to death. This is what Paul has in mind when he talks about nailing the passions and desires of our sinful nature to the cross of Christ where they can be crucified—killed.

Hedges does a great job of taking the powerful scriptural principles that John Owen wrote about in old English back in the 1600s, and putting them into contemporary, easy-to-understand language in a super-practical way that will strengthen your walk with Christ.

You can order this book online for under \$10, either in paperback or as an e-book. Check it out— [Licenced to Kill: A Field Manual for Mortifying Sin](#).

Really, the essence of sin is that it's a violation of the boundaries that God has set for us, and this harkens back all the way to the first sin recorded in Genesis chapter 3, when the couple violated the boundary God had set around that one forbidden tree in the garden.

Sin is either to cross a boundary God has established—or— it is to erect an illegitimate boundary that God has already removed in Christ.

We've looked at both of those angles today. We've look at boundaries that are REMOVED in Christ, as well as boundaries that are REINFORCED in Christ.

Boundaries are so vitally important, because what we let into our lives— as well as what we keep out— shapes our sense of identity.

I'd like to close today by talking about a step that God is calling some of you to take when it comes to marking out your identity in Christ. I'd like to talk for a moment about baptism.

Baptism is a matter of identity.

When Jesus was baptized in the Jordan River, the voice of God the Father could be heard from heaven. What did God the Father say to Jesus as he came up out of the waters of the Jordan that day?

“You are my dearly loved Son, and you bring me great joy.”<sup>12</sup>

When you are baptized, God declares the very same thing to you.

---

<sup>12</sup> Mark 1:11 (NLT)

You are my dearly loved son. You are my dearly loved daughter. And you bring me great joy!

In baptism you are given a new identity as a beloved child of God. Baptism is a redrawing of boundaries, where your old identity is set aside, and a new identity forms around a new defining centre—Jesus Christ.

Do you sense a tug in your heart to be baptized? If so, God's the one doing the tugging. We would love to baptize you this fall. If you're interested in being baptized, or would like to learn more before you decide, you can let us know through the webpage you see on the screen and in the chat. Just fill out the online form, and someone will connect with you.

[www.cornerstonechurch.ca/baptism](http://www.cornerstonechurch.ca/baptism)

Let's pray...