

CHAPTER 3 - Radical Makeover – A New Me

When I was a student in high school, a hypnotist came to our science class. He brought four students to the front of the room and hypnotized them together. While they were in a trance he told them that when they woke up, they would each be an animal. One boy was told that he would be a monkey. Another would wake up as a dog. One girl would be a chicken and the other a turkey. The hypnotist said, “I will count to five and snap my fingers, and when I do you will wake up.” He slowly counted to five, snapped his fingers, and they woke up like he had said.

What happened next was quite a sight. They behaved exactly like the animals they had been told they would become. One hopped around all stooped over, with his hands swinging by his sides like a monkey. He jumped up on a desk and screeched like Cheetah. The other boy started barking and running around the room like a dog. The first girl folded her hands under her arms and clucked as if she was trying to lay eggs. The other strutted around like a turkey, gobbling as loud as she could and scratching at the floor with both hands. It was a comical sight to see people act like the animals they thought they were. After a while, the hypnotist woke them up and let them come back to their real identities. You can imagine how embarrassed they were when we told them how they had behaved.

Many Christians behave in ways that they don’t understand. They want to be saints, but most of the time it seems that living like saints demands too much effort and attention. It is usually much easier

just to “be yourself.” Be yourself. That thought raises an important question. Who are you? For many years I didn’t really know who I was. I knew that I had trusted Christ when I was eight years old and that I was going to heaven. But I lived my life under an assumed identity. It was a false identity that I accepted because of the power of suggestion that came to me through the world, the flesh, and the devil. I knew that I was a Christian, but I really didn’t understand just how much my identity had changed when I was saved. Maybe you have lived with the same misconceptions.

Understanding our identity is absolutely essential to our success in living the Christian life. No person can consistently behave in a way that is inconsistent with the way he perceives himself. Next to a knowledge of God, a knowledge of who we are is by far the most important truth we can possess.¹ If we believe we are a dog, nothing can keep us from barking. If we believe we are a monkey, all the evidence in the world can’t make us behave like anything else.

Through the power of suggestion many Christians have been deceived into believing that they are something other than what God has made them to be. Jesus said, “The truth will set you free.” Our identity in Christ is one of the most liberating truths we will ever understand.

You Are a New Person!

Debra had spent the last hour reciting an inventory of deficiencies in her life. She had been overweight for most of her life and had been made to

feel ugly. Tears came to her eyes as she told how she felt like a social misfit who talked too much. Her parents had made her feel stupid from the time she was a child, even now often criticizing her “poor judgment” in taking care of matters in her home. Her husband told her that she would probably feel better about herself if she just lost some weight. It seemed that everything in her life had programmed her to believe that she was inadequate.

It didn’t take a counselor to understand why she felt that her spiritual life just didn’t measure up to God’s expectations. “I guess I’ll never be a good Christian like other people,” she said. “Deb, if ten means total acceptance, how would you rate your acceptance with God on a scale of one to ten?” I asked. “About a three,” she responded. Over the next weeks we talked together about her answer. It was an important issue. How would you answer that question?

Those who believe that they aren’t fully accepted by God will find it difficult to experience intimacy with Him. It’s not easy to warm up to somebody if you think they don’t particularly accept or approve of you. Haven’t you ever found yourself beginning to dislike a person you sensed didn’t particularly like you? Maybe they didn’t say or do anything to cause you to think they didn’t like you. You just felt it. Were you inclined to reach out to them in any way? It goes against the grain to want to develop a relationship with someone you think doesn’t care for you. The same is true when the other Person is God. One of Satan’s most effective tools is to cause Christians to feel that God frowns when He looks at them.

Most Christians seem to have a spiritual inferiority complex. In spite of the fact that God speaks very highly of His children, they have a low opinion of themselves. Their perception of their identity is that they have been forgiven for their sins and saved by God's grace, but that they are still basically just sinners who are trying with God's help to live the kind of lifestyle He wants them to live. Do you see yourself as a saved sinner who tries to serve God to the best of your ability? That's how I understood my identity for much of my Christian life. But that description of the Christian falls far short of God's perception of those who have come to Him through Christ.

What does the identity of these people have in common? Michael Jordan is an athlete. Steve Martin is a comedian. Whitney Houston is a singer. Do you see a common denominator? The public identity of all three is based on their behavior. It's not only famous people who are identified by what they do. If someone asks you today, "Who are you?" what will you answer? I'm sure you'll tell them your name. But if they then ask, "Tell me about yourself," whatever you say next will probably reveal where you gain your sense of identity. And if you're like most folks, you will tell them about things you do. We've been programmed to think of identity as inseparable from behavior. But God doesn't look at it that way. He doesn't determine identity by behavior but by birth.

A person born into the family of God receives a new identity. "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new" (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Paul says that those who have trusted Christ have become a new creation. The root of the word “creation” is “create.” The word doesn’t mean to improve something already in existence. It means to bring something out of nothing. God didn’t simply change you when you were saved. He created a new person!

Meet the New You

You aren’t the same person you were before you became a Christian. If Jesus is at the core of our existence, that gives us an identity much greater than most Christians acknowledge! The person who was born when you trusted Christ is a spiritual being.

Like God, man is a triune being. God exists in three persons, while you consist of three parts: body, soul, and spirit. Your body has a sense consciousness that responds to the five natural senses. Your soul consists of mind, will, and emotions. Another word for soul is personality. The soul is self-conscious. Your spirit was dead when you were born into this world and remained that way until the Holy Spirit gave it life through the new-birth experience. The essence of your identity rests in your spirit. Someone has said that a person is a spirit who has a soul and lives in a body.

Before you trusted Christ you had no spiritual identity. That is why unsaved people struggle so hard to make a mark in this world. They are hungry for an identity. But a satisfying identity can never be found at the level of the soul or body. Since the essence of what we are is found at the spirit level, those outside of Christ are considered dead and those in Christ

have been made alive. Paul said that God has brought to life those who were dead in their trespasses and sins (Ephesians 2:1).

What is the source that gives life to the spirit? It is nothing less than Christ Himself! When one turns to Him in repentance and faith, His Spirit comes into that person's spirit and gives life. Since it is the presence of Jesus in the spirit that gives it life, our identity is simply that we are in Christ! He becomes our life. "For in Him we live and move and have our being... 'For we are also His offspring'" (Acts 17:28).

Living, moving, having our existence — that pretty much describes life. And the Bible says that for the believer it all takes place in Him. In Colossians 3:4 we read that Christ is our life! If Jesus is at the core of our existence, that gives us an identity much greater than most Christians acknowledge!

Consider some of the thrilling family traits that you received by being born into God's family and being placed into Christ:

- **You are a saint:**

In 1 Corinthians 1:2, Paul addresses the people of the church at Corinth as saints. He certainly had to be talking about an identity that stemmed from their spiritual birth, because their behavior surely wasn't saintly. He calls them saints in chapter 1 and then spends the rest of his letter telling them to live like the saints they really are. Don't be uncomfortable with being called a saint, because that's what God calls you! That doesn't mean you live a sinless life, but that

God has set you apart and placed the nature of Christ within you.

- **You are God's work of art:**

"We are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus" (Ephesians 2:10). The word "workmanship" is the Greek word *poema*, from which we get the English word "poem." God has made you to be a heavenly piece of poetry on this earth!

- **You are righteous and holy:**

You have received the gift of righteousness (Romans 5:17). The Lord Jesus is your righteousness. When you received Him, your spirit was filled with righteousness. What you are at the spirit level determines your real identity. When you do not behave righteously, you are being inconsistent with who you are.

- **You are fully accepted by God:**

You are accepted because you are in Christ (Ephesians 1:6). Because Christ has received you and He is fully accepted by the Father, you are fully accepted as well! You don't need to change a thing about yourself for God to accept you. Your acceptance isn't based on what you do, but on who you are.

These are just the tip of the iceberg! You may be thinking, "But I don't feel like a saint. I don't think of myself as a heavenly poem. I sure don't act very righteous and holy. I don't feel accepted by God." I know how you feel. But you must decide whether you

are going to trust what you feel or what God has said in His word. Satan has caused many Christians to believe that they are not really new persons in Christ. He tells them that they should try to act like new creations because that is their Christian duty.

But that is not at all what God says. He says that you are a new creation. When you come to believe that fact by faith, you won't feel the need to act. You can just be yourself, allowing the nature of Christ within your spirit to flow through your personality and out of your life, like the river of living water that Jesus talked about that flows from one's innermost being.

Why Don't I Act like Who I Am?

Remember the people who acted like animals when they were hypnotized? They acted that way because they temporarily believed a lie about their identity. When they were brought out of the hypnotic trance and understood reality, they began to behave like the people they really were.

Why do people who are holy act unholy? Why do many Christians struggle with sins, constantly trying to overcome them? It is because they have believed a lie! Satan, the great deceiver, has caused them to believe that at the core of their being, they are nothing more than rotten sinners. That describes what they were before they were saved, but not anymore!

If the hypnotist had been able to keep those four folks believing his suggestion, they would still be barking, cackling, gobbling, and screeching! But they

did wake up to the truth. That's what needs to happen to many Christians today.

Have you been hypnotized to live under a false identity, so that you see yourself as nothing more than a saved sinner trying to serve God? Let this truth wake you up! You are not just a sinner saved by grace. You are a saint who has the life of Christ at the center of your being. A sinner saved by grace spends his time on the defensive against Satan. Someone who knows he is a saint goes on the offensive.

Author Bob George shares a great illustration of this truth. Imagine that a king decreed that a pardon would be extended to all prostitutes. Would that be good news for you if you were a prostitute? Of course, it would. You wouldn't have to worry any more about avoiding the law, or about having a criminal record. The pardon would definitely be good news to you. But it wouldn't necessarily give you the motivation to change your lifestyle.

But suppose that in addition to extending the pardon, the king came to you personally and asked you to become his wife. Would that give you a reason to change the way you live? Absolutely! Who wouldn't trade the life of a prostitute for that of a queen? Gaining a new identity as the king's wife would be your motivation to abandon prostitution.

When you became a Christian, you probably understood that all your sins were forgiven. But did that forgiveness give you sufficient motivation to change your behavior? The Bible says that we are the bride of Christ, and that relationship gives us a new identity! A proper understanding of our identity in Christ is sufficient motivation to have a totally

different attitude toward sin. Back to the four people who were hypnotized. When they woke up and realized how they had behaved, they felt pretty silly.

That pictures the attitude of Christians who wake up to their true identity in Christ. They will sometimes lapse into old patterns of living and will choose to sin. But when they do, they know that their behavior is inconsistent with who they are. Their conduct contradicts their character. And it won't be long until they open their eyes and realize, "It's ridiculous for me to behave this way!"

It is important to see yourself as God sees you. You know how a caterpillar becomes a butterfly through the process of metamorphosis. The caterpillar weaves a cocoon around itself and a short time later emerges as a butterfly. If you were to see a butterfly, it would never occur to you to say, "Hey, everybody! Come look at this good-looking converted worm!" Why not? After all, it was a worm. And it was "converted." No, now it is a new creature, and you don't think of it in terms of what it was. You see it as it is now—a butterfly.

In exactly the same way, God sees you as His new creature in Christ. Although you might not always act like a good butterfly—you might land on things you shouldn't, or forget you are a butterfly and crawl around with your old worm buddies—the truth of the matter is, you are never going to be a worm again!

It was liberating to understand just how God had made me into a butterfly. I was no longer a worm! In no way do I intend to convey the idea that understanding my identity caused me to live sinlessly. However, I have found that when I do sin now, I

soon see it as foolish because I know that a sinful attitude or action contradicts my new nature. Before understanding my identity in Christ, I experienced condemnation when I sinned. Yet the Bible says there is no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus. All the condemnation of God against our sin was poured out on Jesus. So now I don't feel condemned, but am simply made aware by the Holy Spirit of the foolishness of what I have done. I am reminded of my identity in Christ and sense a desire to forsake the sin and get on with living like who I really am—a totally forgiven, fully accepted, redeemed saint!

If you have trouble thinking of yourself as a saint, you need to renew your mind through the Word of God. Renowned preacher Harry Ironside was once talking with someone about famous people in history who had been officially recognized as saints. Ironside asked him, "Have you ever met a real saint?"

"Oh no!" he responded. "But what a thrill that would be!"

"Glad to meet you," Ironside answered, as he stuck out his hand toward the man. "I'm Saint Harry." He was right. The New Testament refers to Christians as saints 63 times. Are you going to believe that fact or reject it? You were a sinner, separated from God. But now you are a saint! Just say out loud, "I am a saint." Did your mouth draw to one side as if you were about to have a stroke? Well, keep saying it until it feels comfortable. Believe the truth of God's Word. You are a saint!

A Butterfly Who Lived like a Worm

There is a story in the Old Testament which clearly illustrates that God recognizes our identity by our spiritual birth and not by our behavior. Abraham had a nephew named Lot, who left Ur of the Chaldees along with his uncle when God led Abraham out. Young Lot was a fairly wealthy man. The Bible says that he possessed flocks, herds, and tents. As they traveled together, conflict began to develop between Abraham's herdsmen and those who tended to Lot's herds. Finally, Abraham came to Lot and suggested that they go separate ways in order to keep peace. He gave Lot the choice of location.

And Lot lifted his eyes and saw all the plain of Jordan, that it was well watered everywhere (before the LORD destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah) like the garden of the LORD, like the land of Egypt as you go toward Zoar. Then Lot chose for himself all the plain of Jordan, and Lot journeyed east. And they separated from each other (Genesis 13:10-11).

Lot took his family, herdsmen, and possessions and moved into Sodom. His decision was made purely on the basis of what he thought would benefit him financially. That was a major mistake.

Every mention of Lot living in Sodom indicates that he and his family became a part of that culture and blended right in. Lot's lifestyle certainly didn't indicate that he was anything other than a self-serving person. But in spite of his behavior, God spoke to him in Genesis 19 and told him to get his family out of Sodom because He was about to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. However, Lot's family didn't take this seriously. It seemed strange to them to hear

talk of God's judgment coming from Lot's lips. His wife and daughters had to literally be taken by the hand and pulled out of the city, just before God destroyed it with fire and brimstone. You know how Lot's wife looked back and turned into a pillar of salt.

What word would you use to describe this man? Do you know how God thinks of him? God "delivered righteous Lot, who was oppressed by the filthy conduct of the wicked (for that righteous man, dwelling among them, tormented his righteous soul from day to day by seeing and hearing their lawless deeds)" (2 Peter 2:7-8, emphasis mine).

Huh? Are we talking about the same man? There's no doubt about it. How could God call this man righteous? In the Old Testament, God responded to the faith of believers by imputing righteousness to them. In Romans 4:3 we see that God "counted" (literally imputed) righteousness to Abraham because of his faith. Righteousness was credited to Lot because God saw faith in his heart, in spite of his contradictory actions. Does this justify sinful behavior? Absolutely not! Ask Lot when you get to heaven if his sins were worth it, and I guarantee you he will tell you that his behavior was foolish! He didn't behave like the person he was.

Let's give Lot a little mercy; after all, God showed him great mercy. He did live in Old Testament times. He didn't have Christ living inside him as Christians do today. There is a big difference between Lot and believers today. God only imputed righteousness to Old Testament saints, but He imparted righteousness to you when you were saved. Imputing righteousness was a legal verdict, but

imparting righteousness is a literal event that happens to New Testament saints.

In these days of grace, Christians are literally given the righteousness of Christ. Lot had righteousness credited to him, but you had righteousness created in you when you were saved. Don't believe the lie that you are a worm. You are a butterfly. You are free to make the same kind of foolish choices that Lot made, but why would you want to do that? Remember who you are!

Your identity is determined by your birth, not your behavior. Why would a butterfly want to crawl in the mud?

When God revealed my identity in Christ to me, it absolutely thrilled me. For the first time in my Christian life, I saw myself as He saw me. Have you reached that place in your life? But if the person you are now is a new you, what happened to the old you? The answer to that is one of the most exciting parts of this story.