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Genesis 1:26-31 – A Christian’s True Identity

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Tell me who this sounds more like, men or women: hunting, fishing, and sports; mowing lawn, cutting wood, and working on cars? Men, right? What about makeup, purses, and shopping; cooking, cleaning, and running around with the kids? Women. And speaking of kids, what about rough and tumble play and the color blue? Boys. What about playing with dolls and the color pink? Girls.

Now maybe some of you are feeling like that little exercise kind of rubbed you the wrong way, because there are lots of behaviors on that list that really shouldn’t be limited to just men or women. Maybe some men among us like to do things mentioned in the woman category, or vice versa. That’s the nature of stereotypes, isn’t it? Stereotypes are cultural norms, generalities that summarize common behaviors in certain people groups, but those generalities never cover everybody and never tell the whole story.

And that’s a real difficulty with this gender identity discussion, because it really all centers around cultural stereotypes of masculinity and femininity and how well any given person fits that picture. How do I measure up to the ideal man or woman? Who am I really, in my heart of hearts? And what makes me who I am? The world around us would say that your own feelings and choices tell you that, that you can choose to identify with whatever you want and however you feel. Subjective perspective trumps objective truth. But the problem is, our hearts and minds and choices are broken by sin, so we can’t trust that all the feelings and inclinations we have are actually truthful or good for us. No, if we want objective, trustworthy truth, we need to go to God’s Word. So who are we really? Let’s not listen to the devil-deceived world or our sin-broken hearts. A Christian’s true identity is determined by who God created us to be and who he redeemed us to be for now and eternity.

So now if we’re going to discuss issues of gender identity, you need to know a little bit about common terminology. You might have in your mind that sex and gender are synonymous terms that are just different words to mean the same thing, but that’s not the way those two words are being used anymore. *Sex* refers to the biological reality of being male or female that’s determined by your genetic code and your reproductive anatomy. *Gender* refers to the social and cultural aspects of what it *means* to be male or female. In other words, gender refers to how you express yourself as a man or woman. Well for 99% of people, those two ideas match up – your male/female sex matches your man/woman gender. However, for that last 1% of people, those realities don’t fit together. Their anatomy and their interests don’t align the way the rest of the world says they should. They feel like their mind was born in the wrong body, and they might even desire to change their body. That feeling is called gender *dysphoria*, or confusion and conflict with their sex-and-gender disconnect. And people who feel that way are commonly called *transgender*.

So what is the best way for Christians to handle this issue of gender identity? Listen and love. There are real people who genuinely struggle with this, and we shouldn’t demean them just because we don’t understand what they’re going through or how they can feel the way they do. Often times, they themselves don’t have answers to those questions, either, so what they need most of all is our gracious support and good and Godly counsel. Make no mistake, there are groups in this whole big debate that deserve our ire. Politicians and activists who mislead transgender people with lies and brainwashing and take advantage of

them for their own selfish gains. So-called scholars who want to deconstruct God-given truths about sex and gender. Doctors who treat our young people like guinea pigs with hormone treatments and sex-reassignment surgeries that can destroy their bodies and health. Even those in the church who would rather shame these people than shepherd them, like our Gospel lesson said – these are people whom God wants us to oppose in the strongest terms, just like Jesus did in his day.

But no, for those who sincerely struggle with their gender identity, and especially those who have been so misguided by the influences of pop culture and our sinful world, those are the people who need to know a Christian’s true identity, because only that can bring their lives into God-pleasing alignment with real peace and purpose and harmony. And our first lesson for today sets the foundation for who God says we are.

The first thing God said there in Genesis was, “*Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over*” the rest of creation. Who are you? You are someone made in the image of God. You aren’t just another animal formed from the dust of the ground. You are someone that God carefully shaped and fashioned and brought to life with his own breath. You were made to relate to him and have a mutual relationship of love and trust. You were made to be God’s masterpiece, God’s friend, God’s family! You are the visible representation of the invisible God in this world, someone who was made to be just like him in holiness, righteousness, and harmony with his Will.

And not only that, you were made to be someone that God entrusted with caring for and ruling over his creation. That means you have a special calling for your life that God himself planned and prepared for you, a unique purpose called a *vocation*. You are a child, a sibling, a parent, a friend, a neighbor; you have a job, you are a citizen, you are a church member; God puts you in just the right place at just the right time to serve just the right person with his truth and love in just the way they need you. That means the way God made you and the vocations he called you to weren’t a mistake. No matter what the world might try to make you think, God didn’t drop anyone into the wrong body or the wrong situation. No, your vocations might be a challenge – a BIG challenge sometimes – but when you serve him faithfully in whatever situations he’s placed you, he loves it, his people benefit from it, and his plans always prove best.

See, when God made you in his image, he gave you a sense of dignity and purpose that he never wants you to lose. When the devil tempted Adam and Eve and all the rest of us into sin, he tried to steal that away from us – and he did, to a certain extent. We aren’t holy or righteous before God on our own anymore, and that sin is what causes all the troubles and conflicts we have with our identity, our gender, and everything else. But the devil could never take away God’s Word and promises. God made you to be his partners in this world; he created you with special, valuable purposes in mind; he calls you to bear with your fellow people with sympathy and compassion, no matter their struggles; and he loves you so much that he promises to restore that image in all its fullness when he brings you to heaven some day.

So God made every human to bear his image in this world. But image-bearers can glorify God in different ways. Our first lesson goes on: “*So God created mankind in his own image... male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it.’*” Who are you? You are someone whom God created male or female.

With gender identity, the lines have been blurred with talk of dysphoria and transgenderism and transitioning. But those philosophical concepts don't change God's truth. God made every person to be male or female. And what's more, the Bible says nothing about a disconnect between biological sex and gender identity. Those are fabrications of a sin-broken world that is not grounded in Godly reality.

But now here's an important point: sex and gender distinctions are real – but the way we should define those things should be according to the Bible, not according to culture. When I rattled off all those stereotypes before, I said maybe that rubbed some of you the wrong way. Well frankly, it should have, because who ever said that's the way it has to be? Our cultural ideals of masculinity and femininity should not stand in judgment over the Biblical picture of who we are. Back in the Old Testament, Jacob liked to stay around the tents, where the women were. Deborah led an army into battle. David danced in his underwear while he worshiped the LORD and he loved to write poetry. Are those stereotypically masculine or feminine behaviors? Or an even better question: *does it matter?* No it doesn't, because overly rigid cultural standards don't have to hold sway over each Christian's preferences and practices.

The fact is that the Bible has precious little to say about behaviors that are categorically masculine or feminine, so we shouldn't make laws where God himself hasn't. All Scripture says is that God has given man the privilege and responsibility of headship and being a servant-leader in the church and family. God has given men the task of providing, protecting, and guiding for those entrusted to their care, and doing it in such a loving, considerate, selfless way that no thoughts of envy or injustice would ever enter the minds of the women in their lives. And God has given woman the privilege and responsibility of childbearing and being a servant-helper in the church and family. God has given women the task of supporting, helping, and nurturing those entrusted to their care, and doing it in such a respectful, caring, selfless way that no thoughts of insecurity or contempt would ever enter the minds of the men in their lives. Even those specific gender role distinctions are framed in terms of meaningful, blessed service, and you can see plenty of room there for freedom in different gifts, preferences, and life situations.

But even though we don't want to make spiritual prescriptions based on cultural norms, when it comes to common male/female distinctions, God does want us to stay *distinct*. For example, Moses says in Deuteronomy that a woman must not wear men's clothing, nor a man wear women's clothing (22:5); and Paul in 1 Corinthians says that sex differences should be upheld and celebrated in public worship as a way to honor God's creational intent (11:2-16). So what can we say about all this? There is lots of room for each person's own expression inside of their given sex and gender, but God does not want us to go outside of those bounds. God does not want our behavior to confuse or cast doubt on our biology. Now I'm not saying that men can't wear jewelry or that women must always wear dresses – even our culture doesn't make those kinds of gender restrictions, to say nothing of the Bible. But in each person's sanctified judgment, God wants us to honor the sexed person he made us to be, rather than intentionally obscure it. That's how we can show respect and trust for his creative work and purposes in our lives.

So we've seen now that God created you in his image, as male or female. Those are important parts of your identity! But that's true of every person. So what is it that defines a *Christian's* true identity? Well, we get a little hint of that at the end of our reading from Genesis: "*God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.*" For God himself to declare all creation very good didn't just mean it was much better than it could have been; it meant that in his eyes, it was absolutely perfect. But can God still say that about us now, after we fell into sin? Yes, but not because of *our* work – because of *his*.

See, even though we are sinners, by faith in Jesus Christ, he made us saints. Paul says in Galatians, "*in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ*" (3:26-27). We know who we are, we know our true identity, because God gave it to us in baptism. When we were baptized into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, God washed away all our sins and took us into his family. He claimed us as his very own, he put his name on us, and he made us his children and heirs of his heavenly kingdom.

And not only that, but through faith in Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit lives inside our hearts now – you are his home! Paul says in 1 Corinthians 6, "*Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit..? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies*" (6:19-20). The temple was the place where God was truly present in this world; it was a sacred place that was set apart to worship and serve him. Well that's exactly what you are now. No matter how you might feel sometimes, God is always with you. God made you, chose you, dignified you to serve his good purposes, so let's not doubt him in the way we view and use our bodies. Rather, let's honor him with our bodies.

And speaking of bodies, Jesus says that we make up *his* body in this world. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12, "*You are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it*" (12:27). We are not alone or on our own in this world. Being a part of the body of Christ means God's people are something better and something more; we have unity and fellowship and love to share, and everyone has a special part to play in service to Jesus and each other. This is our identity, this is our community! So for those who struggle with identity issues, don't let the world or your own sin-broken heart convince you that *you* don't belong or that there's something wrong with you. You are a part of the body of Christ, so you *do* belong – Jesus has made it so! You are wanted, you are forgiven, you are valued, and your faithful service even in the midst of your struggles is a beautiful tribute to your Savior.

Finally, just as God declared his creation very good at first, he will do so again at the resurrection on the Last Day. Paul says in Philippians, "*By the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, the Lord Jesus Christ will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body*" (3:21). We don't know what exactly our glorious, resurrection bodies will be like. But what we do know is that they are going to be too great for us to describe in worldly human terms. They are going to be free from all the confusions and conflicts, the difficulties and dysphorias that we experience in our lives right now. And they are going to be perfectly suited to live with Jesus in heavenly glory. So hold on and stay strong and focused, because you are someone who is going to live in resurrection perfection forever.

So what is your gender identity? Really, the so-much-more-important question for Christians is: what is your *Godly* identity? You are a baptized child of God, created in his image and redeemed to be resurrected. Yes, gender dysphoria is real, it is difficult, and for those who struggle with it, it requires lots of listening and love. But none of that changes who you really are, because you are fearfully and wonderfully made in exactly the way God wants you to be. Dear Christians, you can be sure that your *true* identity trumps whatever the world and our own fallen flesh might ever say otherwise. You are made in the image of God, to serve and represent him with dignity; you are made male or female, to honor God in the body he gave you; and you are a baptized child of God whom by faith he declares, "very good." Amen.