

Sermon Series: “The Gospel for Life”
Who Are You?
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If you had to define who you are, what would you say? That is perhaps the most important question we can answer. In 1978 the rock group The Who came up with a song with that very title— “Who Are You”. The song, from what I have read, is about a real event in Pete Townsend’s life where he woke up drunk in the Soho part of London and a policeman allowed him to go if he could walk away, and the song ends with him wondering, “God, there’s got to be another way”. Sometimes that type of life of waste and decay is who people are— at least for the moment. Other people, especially today, answer who they are by identity politics. E.g., I have heard Dnesh D’Souza recently interviewed on his new book, *The United States of Socialism*, and he said socialism has evolved as something a bit different from its Marxist roots, where identity was based on class— the worker and the capitalist who hired the worker. Now identity has to do with such things as race, gender, feminism, and undocumented workers. Other times people identify with something more innocuous like “wife”, or “husband”, or “academic”, or “athlete”. While some of these identities are not so good, and others are good, all of them have this in common: they will all disappoint. None of them will last, and none of them will satisfy us— we will always want more— more power, more justice, more respect, more attention. So then how did our Creator desire us to answer this important question, who are you? Our passage today points to an answer.

READ John 8:21-30 (p. 101)

CONTEXT: Jesus has just said He is the light of the world, and all who come to Him will never walk in darkness but in the light of life. The Pharisees oppose Jesus—they say He is testifying about Himself, and His testimony is not true. Jesus says He and His Father testify to this truth. Now we find out further who Jesus is.

READ vv 21-23. “Jesus identifies Himself in three ways by way of contrast. First, He is the One who is from above, but the religious leaders are from below. Cf. John 3:6,13; 7:7; 8:12.” Regularly in John’s gospel we find Jesus is from above and is not someone who is of this world, of the flesh, but of the Spirit. READ John 3:6,13 and 7:7. Have you ever met someone who was from below, who was from this world? E.g., I recall when I was in college I had a Christian friend who was dating a young woman who was a Christian, and he was thinking about asking her to marry him. He went to a party around that time and he ran into a friend who was not a Christian, and he was giving my friend dating advice, and he wanted to know if my friend had sex yet. My friend said no, we are waiting for when we are married, and his secular friend said in essence that that was a bad idea—how do you know if you are compatible? My friend told me about this conversation and he shook his head at this bad advice from his secular friend who was, as Jesus would say, from below, from this world. E.g., I recall reading about a guy who had been the son of a prominent defender of Christianity, but after his father’s death he fell away from the faith and wrote books about it; he said that one day he was having lunch with someone who worked at his book publisher, and it struck him that the way he was before leaving the faith he would be thinking about sharing the gospel with this person over lunch, but now he was freed from what he now considered such nonsense. Tragically, this man had become from below, taken on the worldly point of view. That is what the religious leaders, the Pharisees, are like. But the person who follows Jesus is from above, not living in a worldly way. E.g., I recall when I was a teenager my sister

Madolyn and I met a guy we had never met before and he had on his car a sticker which was big in the early 1980s, “I found it!” It was a Christian message—meaning, the person had found Jesus. Madolyn was talking to him, and she said, “Hey, I noticed you have that bumper sticker on your car. Are you a Christian?” And I remember I was so embarrassed that she said that! From what I remember the guy said he had bought the car used and it had that bumper sticker, so it did not reflect who he was. Looking back on that conversation, Madolyn really demonstrated to me what living for Christ meant—your love for Him just flows out of you, unforced, and you can’t help but having conversations about Jesus and ultimate things. E.g., I also recall a great man at the seminary I attended, Dr. J. Christy Wilson; he had been a missionary for several years in the middle east and was teaching missions when I was there; he had the habit of taking our picture directory of all the students and praying over each study over a period of time; a friend of mine told me that one day Dr. Wilson approached him and said hello and used his name, but he had never been formally introduced to Dr. Wilson before—but Dr. Wilson had been praying for him!

READ vv 24-26,29. “Jesus does what pleases the Father, He is instructed by the Father, and the Father is with Him, but the religious leaders will die in their sins, unless they believe in Him. Cf. Isaiah 43:10 on ‘I am’; Mark 15:34; John 16:32.” Here we have a window view, in a sense, of what the relationship is like in the Trinity where the Father and Son are working together, not in competition, the Son pleasing the Father and learning from the Father and the Father with Him. The religious leaders don’t want to learn from Jesus and they don’t want to affirm His authority over their lives. Isn’t it interesting that it is the religious leaders, those who should have known better, who don’t want to learn from Jesus? E.g., I recall meeting ministers who are more intent on pleasing people rather than the Lord—these ministers think their main job is to keep the peace rather than make disciples of Jesus Christ; one pastor once told me a woman at his church came up

to him and asked him to do a ceremony where he would offer a blessing over her co-habiting relationship with her boyfriend, and I asked him what he told her, and he said he was in a quandary, because he didn't feel comfortable doing this, but he did not want to offend her, so he told her he would have to think about it, and he said around that time the Bishop was sending him to another church so he could avoid having to make a decision. Beloved, Jesus pressed His first disciples, and He presses you and me today, with this question— whom do you seek to please first? Is it God or people? We are called to follow His lead and please God first, which at times may mean people will not like us.

READ vv 27-28. “Third, Jesus is the Son of Man who will be lifted up, meaning crucified (cf. 3:14), the religious leaders are the very people responsible for this. Cf. Mark 15:38-39.” READ Mark 15:38-39. In John's gospel Jesus' crucifixion is seen as a lifting up, His time of glory. It is the time where He took the penalty for your sins and my sins and opened the way for us to have an intimate relationship with God— the temple curtain entering the Holy of Holies was torn open for us to have unlimited access to God! Have you ever met a prominent godly person and felt welcomed? E.g., I recall a few years ago Elena and I and the family were in Atlanta on vacation on a Sunday and we went to Church of the Apostles where Rev. Dr. Michael Youssef is pastor. We had heard him on the radio and really liked his ministry, and after the service I went up to talk to him and he was so very kind to me— he really took an interest in me as a United Methodist minister and some of the theological struggles in the denomination, and he said to me, “Go to the bookstore at the church and ask for this book title of a book I have written and tell cashier I said to give it to you.” I was surprised at how he welcomed me and reached out to me like that! I did get the book and read it and really found it helpful. That is what our God is like— He is a great, powerful God who is good, and He desires so much for you and me to

get to know Him that He sent His only Son to die for us to secure that relationship with us. All we have to do is say yes.

“Who are you and I?” Pete Townsend said in the song “Who Are You”, “God” — I take that as an address, a cry to God, not a blasphemous exclamation— “there’s got to be another way!” Is that where you are today? I invite you to find your identity in Him. To follow Jesus means we will be not from this world— we will think God’s way, God’s thoughts, and live that way; it means we are God pleasers, not people pleasers; it means we accept His death on the cross in our place for our sins, so we can have unlimited access to God. And through this we become God’s children, our ultimate identity! I invite us to make this identity today and accept Him as the Lord and Savior of our lives, or reaffirm this identity if we are walking with Him.