

“THE PRIESTHOOD OF BELIEVERS” PART 2

**HOLINESS
DR. BRUCE BICKEL
1 Peter 2:4-10
November 7, 2014**

Bruce: Good morning, men!

Men: Good morning!

Bruce: Great to be back with you! Thank you for your prayers! I’m not quite back in the saddle again, but I’m doing better than I was. I had this laser treatment on my spinal cord. I have a lot of scar tissue where my back was broken years ago, and they don’t want to do an invasive operation because of concern for infection in the spinal cord. So they did a laser treatment to try to heat out some of the scar tissue and take it away from the spinal cord, so that I don’t have the paralysis and numbness in my lower back and legs. And so I would say that I’m doing better. The pain hasn’t gone away totally. I’m in less pain, but I’m still kind of stiff. I’m still walking like I have a baseball bat up my butt. (*Laughter.*) And that may take some time. But I do appreciate your prayers, and the Lord has been very, very gracious, so thank you very much. I’ll keep you posted.

Let’s pray together and ask the Lord to go before us. Don? (*Music.*)

Gracious Lord, may Your Holy Spirit go before us, and open our eyes, that we might behold You more clearly, for Jesus’ sake. Amen.

Men: Amen.

Bruce: Let’s turn in our Bibles, please, to continue our study of the book of 1 Peter, on the general theme of holiness, our being set apart to represent God in His magnificent kingdom. Now let me greet you as a group of priests, as we have learned so far. The priesthood of believers is what we’re studying.

Let’s look at verses 4-10 of 1 Peter chapter 2. Let’s listen to the word of the Lord.

“As you come to Him, a living stone, rejected by men, but in the sight of God chosen and precious, you yourselves, like living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For it stands in Scripture, “Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious, and whoever believes in Him will not be put to shame.”” “So the honor is for you who believe, but for those who do not believe, “The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone,” and “a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense.”” “They stumble because they disobey the Word, as they were destined to do. But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for His own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people. Once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.” This is the word of the Lord.

Men: Thanks be to God.

Bruce: Amen.

Much of our theme the past year, guys, has been the theme of what it means to have a common identity of being in Christ. We talk about a Christian definition of a person who is in Christ, and much of our study in the last year has been this concept of what it means

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to be in Christ. Now that’s why we chose this book of 1 Peter, because he deals with this concept of what it means to be in Christ.

Let me just give you a litany of some things the Scripture has taught us over the years related to this, as we continue our study of understanding what it means that we are the priesthood, that we are the priests of the temple that God is building. He’s not building a material temple. He’s building a spiritual temple. But here are some insights to help us understand what it means, that everything we ever do as believers in Christ is because we are in Christ.

As it relates to our lives, you’ll see 2 Corinthians 5:17—our birth, our spiritual birth, as a result of being in Christ. “If anyone is in Christ, He is a new creature. The old is gone; the new has come.”

We see some verses dealing with our identity in Christ, dealing with our lives. 1 John chapter 4, verse 9. “He sent His one and only Son into the world, that we might live through Him.” Now you see that our spiritual life is a result of our being in Christ, our common identity, being in Christ.

Thirdly, the power that we have in life. Philippians chapter 4, verse 13. “I can do everything through Him who gives me strength.” The power of our lives is because of our identity in Christ.

So we see our spiritual birth, our spiritual life, our spiritual power, is all because of our inclusion in and our identity as being in Christ. And we see our ministry is a function of that. 2 Corinthians 4:1. It says, “Through God’s mercy we have this ministry.” Ministry is not the result of human achievement. It’s a consequence of divine mercy. It’s because you and I are in Christ that we have ministry at all, because we have something to give away. If you recall, we’ve been talking recently that ministry is giving away to someone else what God has given you. If you don’t understand what God has given you in the person and work of Christ, you have nothing to give away. And so, ministry is not the function of our human achievement. It’s the consequence of divine mercy. We are mission motivated members of a movement, motivated by mercy for ministry in the marketplace.

And then, our destiny. John chapter 3, verse 15. “... that everyone who believes in Him ... may have eternal life.”

And lastly, our inheritance, and that would be Galatians chapter 4, verse 7. “You are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God in Jesus Christ.”

Now the emphasis in life is not on what we do, but what God has done in us because of our relationship of being in Christ. It’s not what we do. It’s because of our common identity of being in Christ that God does everything. Another way of looking at it would be this: that only God is adequate, as we’ve seen in our New Testament study of 2 Corinthians chapter 4.

Now this whole passage starts with what God is doing for us, and as a result, what we are now, in verse 9, contrasted to what we once were in verse 10.

Take a look at verses 9 and 10. This whole passage of what he is dealing with in these verses, 4-10, deal with what God is doing for us and in us, and as a result of what we are now, compared with what we used to be.

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Now notice in verse 9 that this is what we are. “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for His own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.” Now that’s who you are now because of our common identity with the Person and work of Jesus Christ .

Now this is what we used to be. “Once, you were not a people, but now you are God’s people. Once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.” And the reason that there is that transition between verses 8 and 9 is because of our common identity in the Person and work of Christ.

Now there is a connection between our connection with Christ, and what Peter writes about our connection with Christ, and that’s what we’ll talk about today. Let me give you four exhortations, which flow out of our relationship with God as children begotten by Him.

First of all, go back to 1 Peter chapter 1. Everything grows out of our salvation in the Person and work of Christ, and the result of our salvation. Look at chapter 1, verse 3 of 1 Peter. “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. According to His great mercy He has caused us to be born again to a living hope, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.”

Now everything in this whole book starts with that particular verse. It’s a consequence of our having been born again as a result of our salvation, and therefore our common identity is described as being in Christ. So it all starts with chapter 1, verse 3. It goes all the way to chapter 2, verse 3. That whole thing deals with our gracious and glorious salvation that we have in the Person and work of Christ. If we don’t understand chapter 1, verse 3 to chapter 2, verse 3, we will never understand what Peter is talking about now, when he talks about us being the priesthood of God. So we need to understand that we go back to our gracious and glorious salvation. It all starts with that.

Now he gives us some other admonitions. first of all, as a result of our gracious and glorious salvation, you recall that, in verses 13-16 of chapter 1, we are instructed to be holy in our conduct. And then we go to verses 17-21 of chapter 1. We are to conduct ourselves in the fear and admonition and awe of God, to stand in awe of God, to have Him in holy reverence, respect and dignity. We have the fear of God, which is the beginning of wisdom. And then lastly, we are to keep only to His word. That would be chapter 2, verses 1-3. So, when you go to chapter 2:1-3, our motivation in life is strictly to be obedient to the word of God.

So understand, in all this, that Peter is leading up to a conclusion. He is not now making an exhortation. He is making a declaration. He is telling us who we are.

Now, brothers, the real battleground for you and me in this world is who do I believe? Do I believe what the world says about me, that my enough is never enough? You don’t have the right degree. You don’t have the right position. You don’t have the right possessions. You don’t have the right personality. You don’t have the right whatever. The best illustration of what the world thinks about you is your resume, because all a resume ever reveals is what you’ve not accomplished. It never reveals what you have accomplished. It always reveals what you haven’t done, because how does an HR person

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look at your resume? He’ll take a look at your resume and he’ll say, “Oh, he doesn’t have.” Therefore they look for somebody else. “He doesn’t have.” You see, the resume really reveals how the world looks at you by saying, “Your enough is never enough.”

But what Peter is telling us is this. Because of our gracious and glorious salvation, in chapter 1 verse 3 to chapter 2 verse 3, he’s saying, as a result of that, this is who you are now. Look at verse 9. “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for His own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.” That’s who Peter is telling us that we are. Now, do you believe that? That’s the real battleground for us. The world is always going to say, “Your enough is never enough.” But Peter is going to tell us, as he has been, as all the Scripture does, that Christ’s enough is always enough. That’s why we need to understand that our common identity is found in the Person and work of Christ, described by that phrase “in Christ.”

If you go down the streets of Pittsburgh, and ask somebody, “Are you in Christ?”, they are either going to know what you mean, or they’re going to think that you’re some sort of a zealot, because they have no concept about it. If you ask them if they’re Christians, they will give you as many reasons as the people you ask. I was born that way. I’m an American. I tithe. I do whatever I do. But if you ask somebody, “Are you in Christ?? Do you have that common identity that Peter is talking about?” You see, that is a radically different description of a person who is in Christ. It’s because of our common identity that Peter is now saying that you are “a chosen people, a royal priesthood.”

We are a kingdom of priests! You see, that is who the Scripture says that we are. We just need to act like that, and not take a back seat to what the world offers us, saying that your enough is never enough. Look, I’m part of a kingdom of priests, a royal priesthood, and that is what Peter is telling us. You once were not the people of God, but now you are. You are chosen and precious and holy in Him.

Now Peter makes a declaration, not an exhortation. Notice, in verses 4-10, that he doesn’t say, “You know, you ought to be living stones.” He doesn’t say that you should be living stones. He doesn’t say that you might become living stones. He doesn’t say, “You know, it’s your obligation to become living stones.” He says what?

Men: You are.

Bruce: You are! What verb tense is that?

Men: Present.

Bruce: Present tense reality! You see, men, that’s where it starts. Do you really view yourself as a living stone, as part of the kingdom of priests that God has made us into, because of our common identity with the Person and work of Christ?

You see, the battleground really starts with that. That’s what Paul says in Romans 12. “Do not be conformed to the system of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind!” You see, men, how you and I act is dependent upon how you and I think.

Now this does not give us a sense of pride, but humility. Humility is the one grace that, if you think you have it, you’ve lost it. If you think you have humility, then you’ve lost it. It’s the one grace that, if you think you have it, then you’ve lost it. You see, humility is basically seeing that which is perfect, and realizing that you can’t achieve it.

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Martyn Lloyd-Jones says that humility is essentially realizing my total inadequacy, and realizing God’s total adequacy. That’s humility. And when you and I think we’re humble, that’s the point where we’ve lost it.

This does not breed pride in us. It ought to breed humility, and that’s the realization of this: I see the perfect work of Christ. I realize I can’t achieve that, and we develop a humble, gracious spirit, and we stand in awe of God and His mercy. Once we did not receive mercy, but now we have.

And so Peter is now making some declarations. He’s not saying that you should become a living stone. He’s saying that you are a living stone because of your common identity with Christ. He declares that we are all in this. As a result of our relationship to Christ, we are living stones. We are the people who have a common identity with Christ because we are in Christ. That’s our phrase. We are in Christ.

Now Peter says that we are all a priesthood. Last week we saw the identity of the priesthood, last time we were together. Notice verses 6 and 7.

First of all, how do I identify the priesthood? Well, Peter says this, those who “come to Him.” And there are two ways to come to Him, by believing in Him, (verse 7), and by trusting Him (verse 6.)

Notice verses 6 and 7. “For it stands in Scripture, “Behold, I am laying in Zion a cornerstone, chosen and precious, and whoever believes in Him will not be put to shame.”” “So the honor is for those who” (trust, or) “Believe. But for those who do not believe.” That’s the warning.

So how do we know if a person has come to Christ? It’s because he trusts and he believes. Remember that the word “believe” is a very, very active word. It does not mean to give mental assent. It means to depend upon, adhere to, rely upon, and trust in. That’s the person who has come to Christ. So that is the first identity of the priesthood. Anybody who has come to Christ, Peter is saying is now part of a royal priesthood of God’s chosen people. Yes, Don?

Don: I have the New King James, Bruce.

Bruce: Uh-huh.

Don: In verse 7, it says, “Therefore, to you who believe, He is precious, but to those who are disobedient.”

Bruce: Yes. Absolutely.

Don: I think your translation says, “do not believe.”

Bruce: Correct.

Don: It’s really the same thing, isn’t it?

Bruce: It is. The greatest expression of disobedience is unbelief. The reason we disobey is because of unbelief.

Participant: It’s what I choose.

Bruce: Because we’re making a choice. And so you’re absolutely right. That’s a good translation—those who disobey. Not believing is the same thing as disobeying. That’s why the gospel is a command, folks, it’s not an option. Jesus’ first sermon was “repent and believe.” That’s in the command tense. It’s a command, saying that you must believe. Not believing is an act of disobedience. That’s why God takes it so

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seriously, because to disobey the gospel is an act of disbelief and an act of disobedience. They’re synonyms.

So, first of all, the priesthood of those who come to Him in verses 6 and 7, those who conform to Him in verses 4 and 5. Christ is a living stone. The believers become living stones. And now we have a common identity with Him.

So let’s take a look at what it means that Peter is talking about our common identity. The priesthood is identified by those who come to Him, and those who are conformed to Him, and now we have a common identity with Him. Let’s explore what that means for us in our remaining moments.

“A royal priesthood.” Peter continues his contrast with the temple in Jerusalem. The Scripture says that the Old Testament priests were the ones appointed to present offerings to God in the temple. The Old Testament priests did that. The whole system of priests and sacrifices was created to point to Christ as the One coming sole and only High Priest. Now that Christ has come, He is building His church, made up of living stones. He is not building a material church. He is building a living church made up of human beings, those who are identified as the priesthood.

No longer are some people priests, while many others are just people for whom the priests do certain things. In other words, we don’t have priests anymore, because of the one High Priest who has come to satisfy God’s demands. So there is no priesthood in that sense, other than the general term that Peter is using when he says that we are a kingdom of priests, because we have a common identity with Him. So we need to understand that very clearly.

So what do we mean by that? What are the two great characteristics of the Old Testament priesthood? They had access to God, and they also had the task of bringing other people to God. They had access to God, and it was their responsibility to bring other people to God. What do we have now, as our role in the kingdom of priests? We have access to God (Romans chapter 5; Romans chapter 8.) And what is our other responsibility? To bring people to Christ. We have worship and witness as our responsibilities. We worship God because we have access to Him, and we witness to God by bringing other people to Him. That is what Peter is referring to when he is talking about the Old Testament priesthood. They had access to God, and it was their task to bring the other people to God.

In the old system, it was the privilege of a few. But because of our common identity in Christ, it’s the privilege of anyone who is in Him, the privilege of anyone who is in Christ.

Now the Latin word for priest is *pontifex*. It means “bridge builder.” A priest is a bridge builder—a person who bridges the gap, who builds the bridge for others to come to God. That’s who you and I are now, because of our common identity. We are bridge builders. We are the ones by which other people will come to have access to God because of our worship and our witness, the two roles that the Old Testament priests participated in.

Now this is not just a privilege of a select few people called priests today in the church, but it’s a kingdom of priests that God has made us into, because, as we saw in

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verse 5, you are living stones. You are part of the church that God is building, and it is not a material church. It’s a living church made up of people who are in Christ by common identity.

Notice Revelation chapter 1, verse 6. “And He made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve God.”

Now, brothers, the reason that I’m going through this in such detail is that I want to help you to understand how God looks at you. Now this does not breed ego and pride in us. It ought to breed tremendous humility. This is how God views you. He views you now—because of your common identity, being in Christ—He views you as one of His living stones, who is part of a living church—not a materially built church, but a spiritually built church—and you are living stones who are part of this wonderful thing known as the body of Christ. And, in that, we are a kingdom of priests, and we have two things that are our responsibilities: to worship God correctly, and to witness for Him significantly, to worship and to witness for Him as a result of our holy priesthood.

The great High Priest is Christ Himself. And besides Him, no one else fulfills that office anymore. He is the great High Priest, and our common identity is that we are in Christ, and therefore what? We are His kingdom of priests.

There are ministers, certainly, and there are elders in the church. There are pastors and there are evangelists in the church, but there are no more priests in the church, except in the general sense that all of us are a kingdom of priests because of our common identity with God in the Person and work of Christ.

So why are there no priests anymore? Because the great sacrifice for sin has been offered, and there is no payment now to be made. The great sacrifice for sin has been offered once and for all, and there is no sacrifice to be offered. That’s why there are no more priests anymore, because their role was to have access to God, and to make sacrifices on behalf of sinful people. Christ has been the ultimate High Priest, and He has made that sacrifice, and therefore there are no more priests, other than what Peter described, in that we are the kingdom of priests because of our common identity with the Person and work of Christ.

Again, Revelation chapter 1, verse 5. “To Him who loves us, and has freed us from our sins by His blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve God.” That is our calling now because of our common identity in Christ. So the question is, have I come to Christ? Am I conformed to Christ, and do I have a common identity with Christ? That common identity is that we are in Christ, and therefore we are His holy priesthood, and we have those responsibilities.

Now notice that the name “priest” should never be conferred upon a minister of the gospel, and that is because there is no great sacrifice to offer anymore. The sacrifice has been offered once for all. One great blood sacrifice for the sins of the world has been offered by the Redeemer at the cross. Therefore He is the only High Priest who can make that offering. In Christ alone rests the title of Priest, except in the general sense that we see Peter describing us as a kingdom of priests, and His holy priesthood as part of the living church. All believers are called priests, because we have a common identity with Him in the Person and work of Christ.

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Now that means that, in the Roman Catholic church, and in the Protestant church, we should not be using the term “priest,” because to do so would say that there is a sacrifice that somebody must be making, because that’s what only the priestly role can do. There is only one High Priest, and that is Christ Himself. He has made the ultimate sacrifice.

Participant: Have you ever sat through one of those churches? It’s a sacrifice to be there.

Bruce: Well, let me give you just a little bit of background. We’ve got to be honest. In the Roman Catholic Mass, they are very consistent with their theology. And the reason they have priests is to be ministers of the gospel, but it’s wrong to do so, in my judgment, because the Scripture never authorizes that. They’re very consistent. They’re saying that, at the Mass, they are re-sacrificing the Person and work of Christ. Therefore, who can only do that? A priest. So they are absolutely consistent in their theology. Now, I don’t think it’s Biblical theology. It’s not correct theology, because Christ has already made the ultimate sacrifice. There is only one High Priest. But in Roman Catholic theology, they are absolutely consistent. The reason they call them priests is because at the Mass they are re-sacrificing Christ every time they have a Mass, and so, therefore, they are consistent. I have to admire them for their consistency. But they are consistently wrong, because there is no New Testament phrase that gives any reference to anybody being called a priest, because of what? There is one sacrifice that has already been made for sin, and that was made by the Person and work of Christ, the Redeemer, at the cross. It’s a once for all done deal. Yes, please?

Participant: I’ve read, too, where some say that, as husbands and fathers, that we have the role of priests in our families. What do you think about that?

Bruce: We have the role of priests in our families?

Participant: Yes.

Bruce: Well, our priesthood is not separated because we go to work and leave it at home. We’re part of Christ’s holy priesthood wherever we are in life. And so, certainly, as priests at home, that does not mean that you’ve relegated authority to abuse your family because you’re a priest. That’s not what we’re saying. We’ll get into that when we talk about submission.

When we get into chapter 3 of 1 Peter, the word “submission” literally means, as a military term, “to come under the protection of.” It means “to line up in order of.” And so, when we talk about wives being submissive to their husbands, and men being submissive to Christ, as He loves the church, it means that you line yourself up for the right protection. And we’ll get into that in some detail.

So, in one sense, yes, we are priests in our homes, but that means that we are not the ones who are doing anything but helping our wives to understand how they are loved because of the Person and work of Christ. Yes, Jay?

Jay: I was just thinking of Jesus on the cross, and He said, “It is finished.” Could you please explain the re-sacrifice that you were talking about in regard to the priests in the Roman Catholic church?

Bruce: Well, every time they have the Mass, they are essentially saying that there is a re-sacrificing of Christ. This is literally His body and literally His blood. That’s their

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theology. It’s literally His body and literally His blood, and so therefore there is a re-sacrificing that is going on. Therefore, the only person who can do that is whom? A priest. Now they are consistent in that. It’s the same thing if you believe that you can earn your salvation. Works salvation is consistent with that mentality, but it’s a wrong mentality, because Scripture does not justify that. Salvation is by grace, not by works. But if you believe that salvation is by works, then you can earn it. It’s very consistent. The issue is that we need to be consistent with our Biblical theology, and not our traditional theology. Yes, Don?

Don: If you read the canons and decrees of the Council of Trent on that subject, it says explicitly that the sacrifice of the Mass is the same as, that it is a re-enactment of the sacrifice of the cross.

Bruce: Correct.

Don: And if you don’t believe that, you’re anathema.

Bruce: That’s correct.

Don: That’s what it says.

Bruce: That’s why, in the Roman Catholic church, the priest is the only one who can offer the Mass. The common person cannot do that.

Peter is saying, “Look!” Because of your common identity with the Person and work of Christ you are in Christ. You are now a kingdom of priests, a part of this body of Christ that the Lord is building. It’s not a material church. It’s a spiritual church. And so it’s really important that we understand who God says we are.

Now the same thing applies to the Protestant church. We should not be using the name “priest” in the Protestant church any more than, in my judgment, the Catholics should be using it in the Catholic church, because the issue is the same. There is only one High Priest, and that is the Person of Christ, because His blood sacrificed at the cross by the Redeemer was the ultimate sacrifice for sin, and there is no more sacrifice.

Let me just give you some illustrations of what I mean. Let me see, where are we here? Let’s go to Hebrews chapter 7.

Now brothers, please understand my spirit. I’m not picking on people. I’m just trying to teach us what the Scripture says, because it’s the sufficiency of Scripture that must guide us, not the sufficiency of our traditions. It’s the sufficiency of Scripture.

Go to Hebrews chapter 7, please. Hebrews chapter 7, verse 26. “For it was indeed fitting that we should have such a High Priest—holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people, since He did this once for all when He offered up Himself.” That is a reference to the supreme High Priest making our sacrifice at the cross by our Redeemer, once for all. You don’t go re-sacrificing him, because it happened once.

How about going to chapter 9, verse 12? Let’s start with verse 11. “But when Christ appeared as a High Priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent not made of hands, that is, not of this creation, He entered once for all into the Holy Place, not by the means of the blood of goats and calves, but by means of His own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption.” And then go to verse 28 of chapter

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9. “For Christ, having been offered once, to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin, but to save those who are eagerly waiting for Him.”

Now notice. With Christ having been offered once, there is no more sacrifice. And that’s why you and I are referred to as a kingdom of priests, because there is no one who can perform that priestly function other than the High Priest Himself, because it was a once-for-all sacrifice at the cross.

So we just need to be very, very careful that we understand who we are in Christ, because of our common identity. Christ and His sacrifice covered up all of our imperfections, and because of our common identity with Him, we are accepted in Christ.

Now why is it that you and I are accepted in Christ? It’s because of our common identity with Him. Our sacrifices are spiritual. They are not material. God is not building a material temple, so He is not looking for material sacrifices. Notice in the Scripture that we have access to God, and we are to offer spiritual sacrifices. We offer not material sacrifices, but spiritual sacrifices. He is building a spiritual house. So what kind of a sacrifice do you think He is looking for? Spiritual sacrifices.

Now let me give you an explanation of that. These are not blood sacrifices anymore, because there is only one blood sacrifice that accomplished all the redemption from sin, and that was the Person and work of Christ. Now He is looking for sacrifices of the heart. That is what a spiritual sacrifice is, a sacrifice of the heart. Our sacrifices are spiritual because they flow out of a heart of gratitude and grace. In other words, everything that we do is a response in gratitude for God’s mercy to us. “Once you did not have mercy,” Peter says, “but now you have mercy.” That is the means by which we offer spiritual sacrifices. Spiritual sacrifices are an expression of a heart full of gratitude. It’s a gratitude attitude.

Look at verse 5 of 1 Peter, chapter 2. We worship Him. In verse 9, we witness for Him.

How about Romans chapter 12, verses 1 and 2? We present our bodies as spiritual sacrifices. That’s a sacrifice of the heart.

How about Hebrews 13:15? The praise of our lips is a sacrifice of the heart. Do you realize that? The praise of our lips is a sacrifice of the heart. It’s an expression of your heart. As Jesus tells us in the book of Matthew, “Out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks.” You see, what you and I talk about, and how we use the words we do, is an act of praise and worship to God, because it is a spiritual sacrifice. That means this, that when you want to cuss somebody out, and you don’t, you’ve just made a spiritual sacrifice, because you’re submitting yourself to the authority of Scripture. That’s a sacrifice. The praise of our lips is a sacrifice. How you talk, what you say, the subjects you use, the content of your speech, the vernacular expressions you use, are all expressions of sacrifices because of our common identity with Christ.

How about Hebrews 13:16? The good works you do for other people is a sacrifice. The good works we do for other people is a spiritual sacrifice. These are sacrifices of the heart.

Philippians 4, verses 10-20. The material wealth we share with others is a spiritual sacrifice.

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But notice. Why are they acceptable? That’s the issue. Why are they acceptable? They are acceptable solely because we are in Christ. That’s why they’re acceptable.

Do you really think that your prayers are acceptable? Do you really think that your worship is acceptable? My words don’t mean anything. What makes them acceptable is what? You’re in Christ! You’re acceptable in Christ. He accepts everything that you do, though it’s tainted. At least everything that I do is tainted. Even my prayers are tainted, because there is a degree of selfishness that creeps in, or ego, or pride, or whatever creeps in there. They are acceptable, not because I have the right words. They’re acceptable because you are in Christ. That’s why everything is acceptable to God. We’re wrapped in the robes of righteousness, as Isaiah tells us. Isaiah also tells us that our righteousness is “as filthy rags.”

You see, I used to think that if I said the right words, had the right phraseology, and I had the right theology in my prayers, that it would impress God. But I realized that even that is tainted, because of what? Pride! My ego! Look, I’ve got all this right. I’ve nailed it down theologically correct. My ego creeps in. My prayer is tainted. It’s warped. It’s acceptable not because I have the right theology and the right words. Now I’m not saying that you should not have the right theology. That’s not what I’m saying. All I’m saying, to drive the point home, is that it’s acceptable because you’re in Christ, not because you did it correctly. Yes, please?

Participant: I think that, even just what you said in regard to prayer, I was just thinking about walking by faith. We need to just ask the Lord to help us, because in that mindset, thinking that my prayers are tainted can make me not want to pray. So, in that, I’m just asking the Lord to help us to pray.

Bruce: Yes. The best thing that I can say is, “Lord, just teach me how to pray.” Isn’t that what the disciples said? “Lord, teach us to pray.” Don?

Don: And, related to that, it’s such an encouragement. Everything you said was right on. At the end of verse 16 of Hebrews 13 it says that we’re to perform such sacrifices, for with such sacrifices God is well pleased, not because of anything in us, but because we’re in Christ. But nevertheless, it’s such an encouragement to know that He is well pleased with these things.

Bruce: Why is he pleased with you? It’s not because you’re doing things right. It’s because of your common identity of being in Christ. That’s the whole point of what Peter is saying about the kingdom of priests. You’re acceptable because you have this common identity. You see, the priesthood is defined by somebody who comes to Him by trust and by faith. It’s somebody who is conformed to Him in their conduct. But it’s also because of our common identity with Him. You’re in Christ, and that is what God finds acceptable in us—our spiritual sacrifices of worship. Do you really think that your worship or my worship impresses God? I’m not sure that it does, because it’s tainted. It may be warped with my pride. But what makes it acceptable is that He knows that it’s a spiritual sacrifice that comes from your heart of gratitude. That’s why gratitude is our attitude of motivation. We are mission minded members of a movement, motivated by mercy for ministry in the marketplace. It’s an overflow of gratitude. Yes, sir?

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Participant: Dr. Bickel, in your opinion, we shouldn't have priests in the church. In my church we have priests. We also have an altar. Would you also think that we shouldn't be using the word “altar,” that you shouldn't have altars in churches?

Bruce: I would probably say so.

Participant: So, as far as my church is concerned, we're already off the wall.

Bruce: Well, if you would nail me to the wall, I would say that you shouldn't use the word “altar,” because there was only one altar that was made by the High Priest. Bishop Rodgers, do you want to add something to that, please?

Bishop Rodgers: Well, Cranmer, when he wrote the prayer book, took the word “altar” out, and put in “table.”

Bruce: He put in “table,” yes.

Bishop Rodgers: “This is the Messianic banquet, anticipated in this service.”

Bruce: Now, you say, “Bickel, you're being nit-picky.” I'm just trying to help us understand the sufficiency of Scripture. The sufficiency of Scripture has got to guide our thinking. It has got to guide our worship. It has got to guide our service. Everything comes from the sufficiency of Scripture.

There are two things that hinder harmony in the church. One would be tradition, and the other would be gimmicks. We have this idea to preserve our traditions, and foster new gimmicks. Either one of those is going to destroy harmony.

Now let me just give you an illustration—my personal bias here is coming out, so forgive me! A lot of churches will have a contemporary style of worship, and a traditional style of worship, and basically, what that is saying is that we have disharmony in the church, because the young people won't come, and the old people won't stay. That's what you're saying. The young people won't come, and the old people won't stay.

We have disharmony in the church because we're creating separations in the church, little cliques. Now my conviction is that the old and the young ought to get together and say, “Let's come up with one unified worship service that is for all of us, so we can demonstrate unity in the church.”

Men: Amen!

Bruce: Yes, Bill?

Bill: I think the problem there is that we're trying to appeal to the person's desires, beliefs and their feelings. Actually, worship is never about what we think, but what God thinks.

Bruce: Absolutely. Exactly.

Bill: So if we would form our views on worship based on obedience to what God calls us to, and what He desires, we would have a commonality of worship.

Bruce: Amen. That's a spiritual sacrifice that is pleasing to God. So all I'm saying is that when you have a traditional and a contemporary service, you're basically saying to the world, “Our young people won't come until we have the contemporary service, and the old people won't stay unless you have the traditional.”

And I'm saying, “No, no, no!” Why can't we get together and demonstrate harmony in the church?

Participant: Amen.

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Bruce: Harmony is not conformity. It’s cooperation in the midst of diversity. So why can’t we do that? Peter is going to talk about that in the next chapter, about harmony in the church.

Let me show you what I mean. Look at 1 Peter chapter 3, verse 8. “Finally,” (summary statement), “Finally, all of you, have unity of mind,”—that’s harmony!—“sympathy, brotherly love, compassion, and a humble mind.”

He gives us five things. And notice, that comes right after he has given us his instructions on submission. Basically, he’s saying that you submit as citizens. You submit as employers. You submit as servants. You submit as husbands. You submit as wives. All of you, understanding that, finally, all of you do this: live in harmony! Harmony is not conformity. Harmony is cooperation in the midst of diversity.

How is it that you can take different things and come together? You see, the critical ingredient is for the body of Christ to treat each other with harmony, and we’ll get into this in greater detail when we cover this in a couple of weeks.

But the important thing is this. I’m not trying to be nit-picky, so please forgive me. I’m not picking on anybody. I’m just trying to be Biblically correct, Biblically accurate. And may God forgive me for even trying to do that, because it’s not something I can do in my own strength, and even that is tainted. But what I’m trying to do is hopefully acceptable in Christ, because I’m in Christ. That’s my common identity.

And guys, your worship impresses God because you’re in Christ. That’s why a person who is not in Christ is not pleasing to God. Let’s take the other side of the coin. For somebody who is not pleasing to God, his worship is not acceptable. And why is that? Because they are not in Christ. The issue is, are you in Christ, or not in Christ?

Let me give you some applications. Are you tracking with me today? Am I doing okay with this?

Participants: Amen.

Bruce: All right. Let me give you some applications. First of all, I would say this. Things in the church must be done with excellence. Now what is the church?

Participant: The body of believers.

Bruce: The body of believers. It’s not a building. It means you and me. It means that whatever I do in my life must be done with excellence to honor God.

I am the church. I am a living stone. You are the living stones. You are the church. When we talk about things in the church being done with excellence, it means the people of the church, not the building. Do you understand that? The first application is because I’m in Christ, and I’m a living stone, whatever I do in my life, I need to do it and pursue it with excellence, because God’s reputation is at stake. And may He find me acceptable in my efforts to do whatever I can, and to do it excellently.

The church is made up of people, not buildings. So the church must be pursuing excellence, and that means that the people must be living excellently.

Secondly, Christianity is community. Because of the priesthood, Christianity is community. We need to get involved in each other’s lives. That is because we worship together, and we witness together. We’ve lost the sense of community in the church. It’s

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because we think the church is a building, when the church is living stones. Living stones need to be involved. An anchor chain is only as strong as its weakest link.

Let me give you an expression here. Well, I’ll save that, because it’s a future lesson.

Here are a couple of other applications that I will say, just quickly. What you expect of your pastor or your clergyman you must demand of yourself. Now that does not mean that you go preaching every time. Certainly God gives gifts in the church to certain specific people with capabilities, instruction and responsibilities. I’m not talking about that. But I’m talking about the ministry of exhortation, encouragement and visitation. Visitation is not the responsibility of the pastor. It’s the responsibility of who?

Men: Us.

Bruce: The church! Who is the church? Us! Whatever you expect of your pastor, outside of his specific assigned responsibilities by the church, are your responsibilities as church members, because you are living stones. Whatever you expect of him, you’ve got to expect the same of yourself.

Our lives should be lived as though we are priests in the temple. No man could serve at the altar, or in the Holy Place, except those born from the tribe of Levi, and consecrated to God for service. If you’re in Christ, you are born into the family of God, and have been given a spiritual house in which you are to dwell. Pursue that with excellence, because you are the living church. We are the kingdom of priests. And now, because of His once for all sacrifice, there is only one High Priest. And everything that you do, men, is acceptable if you are in Christ.

The question for you to ask yourself today is this. Have I come to Christ?

Let’s pray. Father, this is such a glorious passage! I just ask Your forgiveness if I’ve taught this incorrectly. If anything that I’ve said is inconsistent with the sufficiency of Scripture, and Your revealed will, would You be pleased to remove that from us? Father, thank You that even our meager efforts of preaching and teaching and worship and singing and playing the piano are all acceptable because we have a common identity of being in Christ. And may it be so, that we would live our lives to the degree of excellence, to call attention to the fact that we are a kingdom of priests, designed to be the ones who will worship God and witness to God for His glory. And all the Brave Men said, “Amen!”