

Titus 3:4-7

⁴But when the kindness and love of God our Savior toward mankind appeared, ⁵he saved us—not by righteous works that we did ourselves, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and the renewal by the Holy Spirit, ⁶whom he poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior, ⁷so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs in keeping with the hope of eternal life.

Identity in Christ

I.

They stood there in a nice, even row, like a squad of soldiers ready for inspection. As each one glanced at the others out of the corner of his eye, I wonder if he thought that he was just a little bit more special than his brothers.

It was a group of brothers assembled there. They were the sons of Jesse. The prophet Samuel had come to their town and announced that he was making a special sacrifice to the Lord. There must be something else, too, since he had a horn of oil close by. He had lined up the group of brothers, asking each in turn to step forward, closer to him and the horn of oil. They didn't know what the anointing was to be for, but someone was about to be chosen for something special.

You can almost feel the excitement growing in the other brothers as, one by one, each of the others was rejected. Yet, all those standing there were disappointed. None of them was chosen.

One brother remained. *He* hadn't even been invited to come to that special event; he had been left out in the fields to take care of the sheep. Perhaps among the group of brothers he was seen as the least impressive. To be sure, he was the youngest. By God's direction, Samuel insisted the youngest should be brought in before the sacrifice could be made.

I wonder if David had been offended by being left out in the fields with the sheep. He probably felt more comfortable there. He wasn't used to all the attention that would have come with being lined up before God's prophet. He might have figured his place was with the sheep.

As he made his way toward the prophet, David was filled in about the horn of oil and the lineup of brothers. Then, he was standing before the prophet. Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed David. "The Spirit of the LORD rushed on David with power from that day forward" (1 Samuel 16:13, EHV). For a time he remained somewhat anonymous, but David's identity was set. God intended him to become the most beloved king in Israel's history.

II.

Paul says in today's Second Reading: "[God] saved us—not by righteous works that we did ourselves" (Titus 3:5, EHV).

As they stood in the lineup, each of the Jesse-sons made comparisons between himself and the others. Each one sized himself up and came to the conclusion that his own identity was superior to the others. Taking a word from Paul, each came to the conclusion that he was pretty righteous.

It's not an uncommon conclusion. The first thing anyone does in evaluating his or her own righteousness is look at the list of sins. Take "You shall not steal," for example. Let's look at the checklist for stealing. You have never tried to break in to a bank vault, or even approached the teller window with a note, demanding that the teller put a bunch of cash

into a bag. Moving farther down the list, you find that some jurisdictions won't bother to arrest or charge a person for shoplifting a certain dollar value of goods. Even though you could have gotten away with a certain amount of theft in those circumstances, you might not ever have done such a thing. Great.

Maybe you *have* "borrowed" a pencil from a friend at school, or a tool from your neighbor, but failed to ever return it—or returned it broken. No police are going to arrive to place you in handcuffs for such things. But there is little doubt that at one time or another you *have* stolen something.

Maybe you are the rare person who never has taken anything that doesn't belong to you. But did you cross the line of coveting? Did you have a sinful desire for something that isn't yours? Maybe your covetousness is greed—you have a powerful desire for more wealth.

When you start to evaluate your own righteousness carefully, your identity doesn't look so positive. Maybe instead of eagerly wanting to step forward in the lineup and present yourself as the chosen one you would rather shrink back so you won't be noticed. Maybe you wish you would have been left in the fields with David.

III.

"But when the kindness and love of God our Savior toward mankind appeared, ⁵he saved us—not by righteous works that we did ourselves, but because of his mercy" (Titus 3:4-5, EHV).

Hundreds of years after David had been called in from the fields to face Samuel, God demonstrated his kindness and love toward mankind. We just gathered around his manger bed in awe, as God's love for us took on human flesh. Days later, our journey through the church year let us listen in as he told his mother as a 12-year-old that he must be about his Heavenly Father's business.

Today we watch as the adult Jesus makes the trek out to see John the Baptist by the Jordan River. For 30 years he had lived in obscurity. To all the others gathered on the riverbank, his was just another nameless face in the crowd. He was just an ordinary guy, like King David had been before his anointing.

A line formed of those who wished to be baptized by John. Like so many others, the ordinary man got in line. Person after person waded into the water to wait for John to dip his hand into the flowing stream and pour water over their heads. Finally, it was his turn.

The results were different from any who had lined up before him, or for any who came after, for that matter. All of a sudden: "Heaven was opened, ²²and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: 'You are my Son, whom I love. I am well pleased with you'" (Luke 3:21-22, EHV).

He was anonymous no more. The "ordinary" man, Jesus, was revealed to be anything *but* ordinary; he was the very Son of God. At his baptism it was announced that Jesus was the long-promised, long-awaited Messiah.

IV.

"[God] saved us—not by righteous works that we did ourselves" (Titus 3:5, EHV). If you stood in a lineup, looking back and forth at the others standing there, you might come to the conclusion that you're not so bad. But as we saw, your righteous works or mine aren't really all that admirable.

Dealing with sin, Paul's words show, is not something any of us could hope to accomplish. God's anger over all the sins we have committed is not easily erased. It's not just the stealing, whether large or small, that is a problem; it's everything that we have done that violates God's Word and his will in any and every way. Ours is not a small little credit

card debt, but a mountain of sin the wealth of the richest man in the history of the world couldn't hope to make any progress on.

It takes *God* to save us, not our own righteous works. How did he save us? Paul explains: "Having been justified by his grace" (Titus 3:7, EHV).

Justified means to be *declared* righteous. The righteousness isn't there, in and of ourselves. God had to *declare* us righteous, instead.

The only way we could get a declaration of righteousness is by God's grace. Grace means "undeserved love." It is the undeserved love God had for every human being that caused him to send Jesus in the first place. When God announced that he was well pleased with Jesus at the banks of the Jordan, he was anointing Jesus as the only One who could do anything about the debt of sin.

The season of Epiphany is all about Jesus being revealed to the world as the Savior he is. So it is that the First Sunday after the Epiphany tells us about Jesus' baptism in the Jordan River by John the Baptist. This was the moment God chose to reveal Jesus as the Anointed One—the One who would bring about salvation for all people by his death on the cross.

"[God] saved us—not by righteous works that we did ourselves, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and the renewal by the Holy Spirit, 'whom he poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior' (Titus 3:5-6, EHV).

We were in a lineup, like Jesse's sons. While we might have *thought* there was something about us that God, or his prophet, ought to recognize as worthiness, there really was nothing. By nature, we are nothing but lost and condemned creatures.

But we have been purchased and won by Christ's redeeming work on the cross. In baptism, we are given a new identity—an identity in Christ. We are brought into God's own family by his grace and mercy.

Now what? Paul says to the Romans: "We were ... buried with [Christ] by this baptism into his death, so that just as he was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too would also walk in a new life" (Romans 6:4, EHV).

Martin Luther used this as his proof passage when he asked, in the fourth part of his explanation of Baptism:

What does baptizing with water mean?

Baptism means that the old Adam in us should be drowned by daily contrition and repentance, and that all its evil deeds and desires be put to death. It also means that a new person should daily arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever.

That is what we want to do. Look back to your baptism every day for the strength and power you need to live as a child of God. Your baptism gave you a new identity in Christ. Start each day by remembering your baptism and asking your Savior to help you live as the child of God you are. Amen.