

Don't Settle for Pseudo

Overcoming Superficial Spirituality

May 23, 2021

Today we're making sure our identity is genuinely rooted in the mercy of our Father and Savior.

How do people know you're a Christian? How do *you* choose to *demonstrate* it? This one time I was on the side of the road, taking a breathalyzer test – oh, it's okay, the cop *thought* I was *drunk!* ... You're *probably* gonna need a little *backstory*. You know that *Scripture* that says:



Do not get drunk with wine ... but be filled with the Spirit, – Ephesians 5:18 ESV



Well I don't know if anyone *else* has taken it far enough to require a sobriety test, but a few years back I drove up to Whistler with my son. I don't know what it is with *me* and *Canada*, but just as I pull into Whistler, I'm pulled over for going 14 mph over the limit. Now remember *last* Sunday when I told you about my patience-training exercises (practicing being like Jesus in short bursts)? Well not *only* was I in *full* training mode, I wanted to set an example for my son; so I'm determined to be a gracious, joyful, grateful, *actual* Christ-like believer *come* what *may*. See where this is going?

So he approaches – no nonsense – and says **“Know what you were doing?”** To which I say **“I assume I was speeding?”** But I wasn't paying *attention*, which makes it even *worse*. So I'm good with getting whatever I deserve.” And then I *smiled*. And then he leans down, sniffs, and says **“Is there alcohol in this car?”** I said “No”, and he says **“Are you sure?”** I said “You can look if you'd like, it's no problem.” He says **“Have you been drinking?!”** “No.” **“Not even a beer?”** I said “Nope.” And he said, **“I can smell it.”** I said “But I *haven't*.” And he said, **“Then you wouldn't mind taking a sobriety test.”** And I said “Not at all; I'd enjoy seeing how the process works.” So he's escorting me to his car, reciting a warning and asking me to confirm that I'm voluntarily agreeing to this test. And I say “Yes. Of course. Whatever you need.” And he turns and says **“You haven't had anything to drink?”** And I said, **“Nothin'!”** Okay, believe me, this is way funnier in hindsight. So cars are going by and I'm blowing into this device and it goes “deeeeeeeep”. And he holds it up for both of us to see. And it goes “deeeep, deeeep, deeeep,” and flashes “0.0”. *Whew!* And suddenly he was all *smiles* and *apologies* as he walked me back and wrote me up for \$113 for going 14 mph over the limit. And I sincerely thanked him for his vigilance; and told him I'd pay it with pleasure *and* pay more attention to my speedometer. And left him *dumbfounded*.

Now I can only behave like *that* in determined bursts of training ... to failure. But with my *son* being there, it gave me added incentive to keep going. Looking back, I'll bet that confused cop had never pulled over a believer who was behaving like such a ... *believer*.

Turns out, **fully displaying the fruit of the Spirit is jarring**. No wonder Jesus put so many people off. Just imagine the *joy* of His *disciples* on Pentecost when they were filled with the Spirit and everyone heard them sharing the Good News of God's mercy in their *own* language. Well ...

[Some] made fun of them and said, “They have had too much *wine*.” Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: “Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say. These men are not *drunk*, as you *suppose*. [They’re just excited to be in Whistler!] – Acts 2:13-15 NIV

For *me*, practicing *that* much Christ-likeness in *that* situation led *that* police officer to believe that *something* was up. He could *smell it*, but **that “something” was too right to recognize**. It was *too incongruous* with the ways of this *world*. He didn’t know how to *peg me* – couldn’t *identify my group*. “Unruffled. Happy. Humble. Honest. Friendly. Gotta be with the drunks.” **Can you imagine what would happen if *all of us* had training sessions like *that* and just kept *growing*?**



We saw that almost *every* conflict between the religious and Jesus was over **dietary laws, holy days, and circumcision**. Because *this* was how *they* identified as *true Jews*. So Jesus was a big threat because **He focused on true hearts over superficial expressions**. And yet the rulers agreed with Jesus regarding the Biblical *standard* by which to measure.

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. (Deut 6:5, 10:12, 30:6) ... [And] You shall love your neighbor as yourself. (Lev 19:18) On these two commandments [to *love*] depend all the Law ...” – Matthew 22:34-40 ESV

Because *this* is the *heart* of the law. They *knew* it, *believed* it, and *taught* it *as* the fundamental way to *self-assess* a true heart. So why’d they waste their energy arguing superficial spirituality?



Ready? In his commentary on Romans, James Dunn notes that in Paul’s day, the *vast* majority of rabbinical *writings* concerned these *three* areas of the law – and he goes on to explain that for the Jews, *these* were the **“boundary markers”** that set them apart from other nations. Sociologists call them **“identity markers”**: relatively **superficial, highly visible rules to categorize those inside a group from those outside**. And *every* group has ‘em! Consider the Hell’s Angels. What’s their color of clothing? *Black*. What’s their beverage of choice? *Beer*. What’s their type of women? *Biker chicks!* You see? **Superficial, highly visible, identity markers**.



And *every* gang from Hells Angels to Missouri Synod Lutherans – that’s what *I* was – has a unique set of their own. Know why? **For the self-centered security of knowing I’m included**. Whatever group we’re a part of, we want to know how to tell who’s *in* from who’s *out* – but *mostly* that *I’m* definitely *in*. Which is probably why **every group considers their markers sacred**.



Which is why *many* believers, instead of having the reassurance of a living faith, by watching Christ’s likeness slowly growing within, turn to misleading ways to measure, like: how they *vote*, or *dress*, or *drink*, or *don’t*, or *smoke*, or *don’t*, or *tithe*, or approve of *tattoos*, or *whatever*. But **we can’t stand firm on a foundation of sand**. We gotta *dig down deep* – just as Jesus says – and lay *our* foundation *on the Rock!* So that *we* can ...

Be alert and of *sober* mind ... standing *firm* in the faith, – 1 Peter 5:7-9 NIV



[Ever heard *this* Scripture?] Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. ... think of yourself with *sober* judgment, in accordance with the *measure* of faith God has given you. – Romans 12:2-3 NIV



Not with random identity-markers like **WHAT** you eat, **WHAT** you celebrate, or **WHAT'S** going on downstairs. Leave that to the *legalistic*.



You are all children of the *light* and children of the *day*. ... [So] let us be awake and *sober*. ... [For] those who get *drunk*, get drunk at night. But since we belong to the *day*, let us be sober, putting on *faith* and *love* as a breastplate, and the *hope* of salvation as a helmet. – 1 Thess. 5:5-9 NIV

You need identity markers? Try faith, hope, and love! That's the order Paul has 'em in his "love chapter". (1 Cor 13) So, **how do people know you're a Christian?** Well, here's what Jesus wants:

"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as *I* have loved *you*, that you also love one another. By *this all will know* that *you* are *My* disciples, if you have *love* for one another." – John 13:34-35 NKJ

This commandment we have from Him: whoever loves God *must also* love his brother. ... For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome. For everyone who has been born of God overcomes [bit by bit and bump by bump] the [ways of this] world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—[this is] our faith. – 1 John 4:21-5:4 ESV

If we resist the voice-bumps of the Spirit that steadily *make* us different from the ways of this world, **we'll find ways to act different, so we'll feel less guilt for not really being different.** And *that* is self-deception and pseudo transformation. And that's what's at the *core* of legalism. Rather than *allowing* God's Word to *renew* our mind, and God's Spirit to *turn* us around, **we prop ourselves up with superficial identity markers.** Because ... everyone *knows* that Christians are *supposed* to be *growing* and *maturing* in *loving* like Jesus. So when we're *not*, we need to do *something* to *distinguish* ourselves! You know, **if we can't be holy let's at least be weird.**



In so many churches the pastor could be very arrogant and resentful, but if his sermons were orthodox and conventional he'd likely keep his job. But if he lit up a cigarette in the parking lot on a Sunday morning, he'd likely be out on his ear. Now these same churches wouldn't say that smoking is worse than being filled with arrogance and resentment.

But when not-smoking becomes an identity marker, it takes on an incredibly inappropriate theological and emotional significance that goes *way* beyond health issues. And **in many religious settings, not-smoking has become sacred.** But ... "at least we're bein' weird." That's why the religion of the Pharisees was so toxic. They weren't being *transformed* by daily renewing their heading; they were just being *weird*. And to their chagrin Jesus enjoyed pointing it out: You're like *beautiful* whitewashed tombs full of *putrid rot!* (Mt 23:27) You sift out a *gnat* and then swallow a *camel!* (Mt 23:24) You pick at a speck in a *brother's* eye, with a *plank* hanging out of your *own!* (Mt 7:3, Lk 6:41) How can you not love Jesus?!

You see, **Pharisees' energies go into identities.** But **Jesus is all about our heading.** He saw everyone as either heading toward or away from loving our Father and our neighbors in ever-increasing measure. That's why He'd say to those with every religious identity marker of His day:

"I tell you the truth, the *tax collectors* and the *prostitutes* are entering the kingdom of God ahead of *you*." – Matthew 21:31 NIV

How do you suppose *that* went over? They said He's *gotta* be with the *drunks!* "He's a *drunkard* and a friend of tax collectors and sinners!" (Lk 7:34) They could *smell* it on Him! But the *true* and *humble* who'd felt a million miles from God, found a Shepherd who was *actually, genuinely, authentically, holy* without being *weird!* And He *loved* them, and *invited* them to *enter* His presence, *experience* His power, and *share* His joy. If you *must* have your markers, here you go:

Be alert and of *sober* mind ... *love* each other *deeply*, because love covers over a multitude of sins. ... Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's *grace* in its various *forms*. If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God. – 1 Peter 4:7-11 NIV

In Paul's "love chapter" (1 Cor 13) he basically says: **If I have all the markers without the love, I'm nothin' but noise.** Imagine *how* antagonistic it was for Paul to write to Jewish believers, saying:

As for those agitators, [arguing over circumcision] I wish they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves! [lit. remove their male *identity*] – Galatians 5:12 NIV

Do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ. – Colossians 2:16-17 NIV

For we are to God the fragrance of Christ among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing. To the one we are the aroma of death leading to death, [because when they smell it they judge it] and to the other the aroma of life leading to life. [Because when *they* smell it they identify it] ... For we are not, as so many, peddling the Word of God; but as of sincerity, but as from God, we speak – 2 Corinthians 2:15-17 NKJ

Jesus came along with a jarring way of distinguishing God's *true* children, by tossing out all the superficial *trash* and cleverly-crafted identity *markers*, and calling His followers to seek and find their deepest identity in our Father's mercy; and then offering them the strongest security in the love and authority of our self-sacrificing and death-conquering Savior!



For you are a chosen people. You are royal priests, a holy nation, God's very own possession. As a result, you can show others the goodness of God, for He called you out of the darkness into His wonderful light. Once you had no identity as a people; now you are God's people. [Chosen, royal, and holy.] Once you received no mercy; now you have received God's mercy. – 1 Peter 2:9-11 NLT

So ... **how do people know your true identity?** Don't settle for superficial renewal and pseudo transformation. Keep going and keep growing until you're so alert and loving and sober minded that they can smell it on you ... even if they've yet to identify exactly what *it* is. **If you stay true to your course, they'll eventually have to ask.**