

Identity Check

What those you disciple need to know about who they are in Christ

When I became a Christian, I was told I'd been "adopted" into God's family and was a "new person" in Christ. That sounded nice, but I didn't have a clue what it meant until much later. If I'd understood earlier, I might have been spared years of insecurity.

Now, when I disciple new believers, I begin with five biblical truths about our identity in Christ that can help them avoid self accusation, doubt, and uncertainty. Though we usually cover these truths in weekly, casual settings (over coffee, perhaps) at the start of our relationship, the same truths can be covered in a structured Bible study using the Scripture references I've provided.

Truth 1: We are God's children.

One woman I disciplined saw herself as God's unfavored foster child: The Christians with perfect faces and tidy lives were His real children. As we looked at scriptures on God's love (such as **1 John 4**) and talked about being part of a loving family--not the shattered family that had been her experience she gradually absorbed her true status as God's dearly loved child.

Romans 8:15-17 as well as Gal. 3:26-4:7 explain the theology of adoption, but I sometimes find it helpful in discipling someone to put those truths into these less complicated terms:

When we receive Jesus as Lord and Savior, we enter God's family. We are no longer orphans, slaves, beggars, strangers, or prisoners. Neither are we foster kids, distant cousins, employees, team members, or His management staff. We become permanent members of God's family in every ideal sense of the word. God delights in us just as loving earthly fathers delight in their children--only more so. He loves us not because of anything we've done, but because it's His nature to do so. We belong to Him.

Truth 2: We are heard.

"Lorraine" doubted God would hear her, let alone answer. She assumed He was too busy with other people's big problems to listen to her small concerns. Then we watched the movie *Anna and the King*.

In one moving scene, King Mongkut's young daughter, fearing something that occurred in her classroom, sought help. She raced through elaborate courtyard gardens, up the palace's marble steps, and down a gilded hall. Breathing heavily, she stopped short at the Grand Hall's entrance and peeked in. Dozens of men knelt in reverence before the enthroned king while dignitaries petitioned him with their concerns.

Undeterred, the little girl picked her way through the bowing men, scooted around the dignitaries, climbed the steps to the throne, scampered onto the king's lap, and whispered in his ear. The king dropped everything to come to her aid and calm her fears. Other matters would wait; his child needed him.

That scene helped Lorraine realize that because we are God's children, He is constantly available to us. We can climb confidently onto His lap--approach the throne of grace," as Heb. 4:16 puts it and whisper into His ear anytime, anyplace,

and in any circumstance. Just as King Mongkut joyfully responded to his daughter's cry for help, so God delights in coming to our aid. Many of the psalms reinforce this marvelous truth (see 46:1, 50:15, and 91:15).

Truth 3: We are condemnation--free.

In a world that portrays God as a stern school monitor waiting to smack our knuckles, we all need to be reminded that God meets us in grace and forgiveness. As Ro. 8:1 reminds us, "There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."

"It's too easy," said "Allison," when I told her God had forgiven her past. "With what I've done, how can I expect Him just to forgive? Don't I need to make up for my mistakes?"

I identified with Allison. For many years, I felt haunted by the need to do more. I didn't get it until someone put it this way: "So you think what Jesus did wasn't good enough for you?"

"What do you mean?" I stammered, horrified at the thought.

"By saying you have to 'do more' to make up for your bad acts, you're essentially saying Jesus' sacrifice on the cross wasn't sufficient to pay the cost of your sin."

My friend was right. According to the Scriptures, my sinful attitudes and actions did require punishment to satisfy a righteous God's justice, but Jesus' punishment paid for it all. He then gave me His spotless record to replace my criminal one, the one for which He paid. I was clean before God and no longer condemned.

When I explained the doctrine of justification to Allison in this way, she realized that God didn't condemn her anymore; neither should she condemn herself. Reading and discussing Ro. 8:1-11 is an effective way to drive home these truths with the person you're discipling.

Truth 4: We are changed but in process.

How different the world would be if every believer knew, really knew, he was a changed person in Christ (2 Cor. 5:16-17)! But explaining this change to new believers can be a challenge.

One of the most important assurances we have is of God's ongoing presence within us. His indwelling Spirit frees us to resist sin and temptation in ways we couldn't before. We don't have to stay mired in bad choices or unhealthy behaviors. The same power that enabled Jesus to rise from the dead is available for us to live by each day (Ro. 8:10-11, Eph. 1:19-20).

However, that doesn't mean our thoughts and behaviors change overnight (Ro. 7:14-8:2). I repeatedly remind those I disciple that change is a process--one choice at a time--of learning to depend on God and act more like Jesus. It's an "already but not yet" experience of being, yet becoming, princes and princesses in God's royal family. Yes, we are the King's kids, but we have to learn royal ways. We will mess up sometimes; we can count on it. That doesn't change the truth that God's Spirit permanently resides within us and possesses the power to make us new.

Truth 5: We are the recipients of God's faithfulness.

At the point of failure, all the assurances we have talked about in the first four truths can come under question. That's when we most need this last truth: God is faithful.

"Linda," just four weeks into our meeting together, called me in tears. "I swore I wouldn't lose it with my kids again, Joan. I asked God to give me patience. But I blew it big time. I screamed and screamed at Timmy until I was hoarse. Now what do I do?"

Inevitably we will respond to circumstances and people in our lives with thoughts or actions that are less than Christlike. Some days, even 25 years into the journey, I wonder if I'll ever become the woman God wants me to be. It can be discouraging when we see how much we still need to grow.

After discussing with Linda what happened and why, I prayed with her and then reminded her of the first four truths we'd already covered in our times together. I encouraged her to trust what she knew the Scriptures said about her identity in Christ over what her feelings were telling her. This review helped us gain perspective on her situation, but our greatest encouragement came from a new truth about God's faithfulness.

First Thessalonians 5:24 reminds us, "The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it." Philippians 1:6 tells us that "he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion." God promises to keep us blameless until He comes; He says He will accomplish what He started.

The God whose "compassions never fail" and are "new every morning" (Lam. 3:22-23) is *our* God. The truth that He is ever faithful, ever at work in our lives, helped Linda overcome her despair over her sinful temper, to confess her sin to her little boy and to God, and to move forward with confidence in her identity in Christ.

All of us--new believers and old--will sometimes fall in this walk of faith. We need regular assurance from the Scriptures and from each other that God loves us, hears us, refuses to condemn us, empowers us to change, and is ever faithful to us.

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