

True Colors  
Matthew 10:32-42

What are your true colors? Do you wear red and blue and shout “Hotty Toddy” for Ole Miss? Or do you prefer maroon and white, ringing a cowbell for Mississippi State? That question isn’t just important during football season. Both schools’ baseball teams are currently ranked in the top 5 nationally, so the rivalry goes on all year long, sparking friendly jibes and sometimes, well, more heated discussion.

But of course, those aren’t the only colors you see sported among Mississippians – Southern Miss alumni wear black and gold to support their Golden Eagles, and Delta State fans wear green and white as they cheer for the only edible vegetable mascot I know – the Fighting Okra. SWAC fans either wear the blue and white of Jackson State or the purple and gold of Alcorn State, and with Deion Sanders bringing a lot of attention to the Tigers, the Braves may have a bit more difficulty dominating the Eastern Division this fall. Of course both Alcornites and Jacksonians agree that Valley doesn’t really belong in any serious football discussion, although Delta Devils alumni such as Jerry Rice would strenuously object.

Of course, when we think about the SEC and the SWAC, another sort of color distinction among Mississippians comes to mind – the question of race. Nationwide, this issue has become increasingly emotionally charged, as crowds from Portland, Oregon to Louisville, Kentucky continue to protest the death of Breonna Taylor, sometimes with shocking and destructive violence. And who can forget the riots of last summer that trashed much of downtown Minneapolis, as angry crowds reacted to the death of George Floyd?

Yes, it seems that race is the only thing many Washington politicians want to talk about these days, even as leaders from Condoleezza Rice and Colin Powell to Kamala Harris and Barack Obama illustrate just how far America has gone to remove the legal, structural barriers that long prevented racial minorities from succeeding. But unfortunately, as our Hands of Hope volunteers working in West Virginia know all too well, generational poverty is not limited to any one ethnic group.

No, it’s more likely that yet another distinction plays a much more important role in holding modern American children back from reaching their full potential – their family structure. Children who grow up in households where their mothers and fathers stay married to each other are more emotionally healthy, doing better in school and avoiding drug use and delinquency. Where it comes to lifelong success, the “haves” and “have nots” are increasingly defined not by gender, race, or class, but by their parents’ marital status.

Of course, our younger generation is quick to point out that none of these distinctions are hard and fast, and that it’s just not fair to judge anyone based on what group he or she belongs to. After all, lots of cadets came to Chamberlain-Hunt from broken homes, but many of them took the opportunity for a fresh start to achieve athletic and academic excellence, setting themselves up for future success. And anyone who thinks either that black men are doomed to go to prison or that law enforcement officers are hopelessly racist hasn’t met Sheriff Edward Goods who is making a tremendous difference in Claiborne County.

Yes, America has always been a place where people have been able to overcome the limitations imposed on them by the accident of their birth. It has also been a place where people from many cultures and ethnic groups have come together, sharing ideas and developing new folkways that are better than anything they had before. Mississippi is, of course, a prime example of this, with our

language and our food and especially our music blending the best that the Native Americans, the West Africans, the French and the British had to offer. A big part of the reason we continue to attract tourists from all over the world is because our years of living together have melded so many of our individual cultural characteristics into one big, tasty gumbo.

But of course there is one distinction that remains absolutely essential. There is one classification that continues to have eternal significance – our relationship to Jesus Christ. In fact, you might say that's the only human designation that matters to God – whether we are in Adam or in Christ.

Paul explains this further in our responsive reading from Romans chapter 5. By virtue of our birth, we all start out as children of Adam, sharing in the guilt of his sin, condemned because of his trespass. Moreover, because Adam disobeyed God by eating the forbidden fruit, we are all born sinners, and thus we all eventually participate in the same sort of rebellion against God. Regardless of how our different human cultures channel and express that sin, all who remain in Adam stand under the judgment and curse of God.

But as Paul tells us in Romans 5:8, "God shows His love for us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." The good news is thus that everyone doesn't remain in Adam. No, those who are joined to Christ by faith, trusting Him as Savior and bowing the knee to Him as Lord are reconciled to God, acquitted of our guilt, made holy and righteous in the sight of God.

And Jesus does this for us in the same way that we received Adam's guilt along with his sinful nature. As Paul explains in Romans 5:19, "For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by one man's obedience many will be made righteous." In other words, just as we became sinners solely because of the sin of Adam, we are saved solely because of the Work of Christ. If our relationship to Adam is what condemns us, our relationship to Christ is what redeems us. In short, the only thing that really matters is which group we belong to – whether we are in Adam or in Christ.

And that not only means that God really doesn't care about any of the other human categories or distinctions that seem so important to us. It means that our allegiance to Christ must be our top priority. Our loyalty to Christ must be more important to us than any college team for which we cheer, more important than any political party for which we vote, more important than any geographic or social, or ethnic group to which we belong. In fact, as Jesus makes clear in verse 37, He must be more important to us even than our closest family members. We must love Him more than our mothers or fathers, more than our sons or daughters.

Now, this is hard for us Mississippians to hear. After all, our Celtic and West African ancestors alike were intensely loyal to their extended families, and the fights and feuds between African tribes and Scottish clans are equally legendary. To this day, if you want to pick a fight around here, just try insulting someone's mama. Go ahead – and if you can stand back up, I'll drive you to the dentist.

Now don't get me wrong – Jesus loved His mama too. One of the last things He did, even while He was hanging on the cross, was to ask His disciple John to look after Mary as if she were his own mother. But why did Jesus have to do this, when Mary had other children of her own? Because to Jesus, faith in Him was more important than accident of birth. In fact, as we'll see in chapter 12, when His family tried to interrupt Him while He was preaching, He pointed to His disciples and said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother" (Matthew 12:46-50).

And so, as Jesus points out in verses 34 and 35, sometimes Christians are called to make a radical choice between loyalty to Jesus and loyalty to their families. Some Christians are in fact rejected, disowned or even physically attacked by their families when they begin to follow Jesus.

But even if our families are supportive of our Christian walk, we must nevertheless be careful not to allow any family folkways to take precedence over the will of God. We must not allow even our love for our parents, siblings or children to water down our allegiance to God. For the fact is that, when we turn to Christ, we are adopted into a much larger family, the world-wide family of faith. And the ties that bind our hearts to one another in Christian love are much stronger, deeper and longer-lasting than any biological relationship can possibly be.

Yes, Jesus must be our top priority, more important to us even than life itself. After all, in verse 38 Jesus calls all those who follow Him to take up our own crosses, which means we must die not only to our previously sinful, selfish ways, but also to our own preferences, our own agendas, and our own desires. For isn't that what Jesus did? Paul told us in our responsive reading that Christ died, not for righteous people, but for the ungodly, for sinners like us, because He loved us. And if we would follow His example, if we would live His life, if we would share the good news of His grace, if we would demonstrate His love for the sinful, broken world around us – perhaps even for those in our own families who have not yet come to Christ – well, we have to do what He did. Instead of trying to make life comfortable and happy for ourselves in this fleeting world, we all must lose our lives, all that we are and all that we have, for the sake of Christ and the gospel. It is only then that we will find true life, eternal life.

But how can we do this? How can we put aside our wants and truly express the self-sacrificial, unconditional love of Christ for others? Well, where it comes to our Christian brothers and sisters, Jesus says we can receive, we can honor those who are faithfully following Him, even if they don't happen to belong to the same alumni association or denomination or racial category that we do. One recent example of this was people from every segment of society coming together to help Rev. William Coleman as he recovers from his accident. As black folk and white folk, Baptists and Presbyterians joined together to build a wheelchair ramp for a good man who had lost a leg, they were doing what Jesus said, honoring a righteous man.

But you don't have to get involved in such a big project to show your true colors. No, Jesus says that even giving a cup of cold water to one of His disciples is a way of demonstrating our unity with Christ and with one another, a way of showing that we have left the sin and selfishness of Adam behind and are truly following Jesus.

Okay, but how do we demonstrate our loyalty to Christ to those who haven't yet trusted Him as Savior or bowed the knee to Him as Lord? In verse 32, Jesus calls all who follow Him to confess Him before men. In other words, we show our true colors by claiming the name of Christ, shining the light of His truth and love into the darkness all around us, no matter what the rebellious, self-focused followers of Adam might think about what we say or the way we live.

Yes, as Jesus warns us earlier in this chapter and as Paul reminds us in Romans chapter 5, being so open about our faith might lead us into persecution and pain. But when the unbelieving world rejects us just as it rejected Christ, Paul insists that we can rejoice in our sufferings. Because as our character is built in this way, as we endure such hatred because we follow Jesus, we can rejoice in the greatest hope of all – the hope that, as Jesus says in verse 22, we will be saved.

But we can also rejoice because of the blessings that come today from belonging to Christ. We can rejoice in the love God has shown to us on the cross of Christ, and we can rejoice in the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit God has given to all who trust in Him.

So, what are your true colors? And this week, will you show them to Christians and non-Christians alike? Will you make it clear to everyone that you belong to Jesus, following Him in truth and love, giving yourselves to one another, no matter what it costs?