

Gospel Identity

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[0 : 00] Well, good evening to everybody. As I said at the beginning of the service, so glad that we can be here. Every week is wonderful. As we have been reminded recently, it's a miracle, and it's a provision of the Lord to be able to gather in safety like this.

Praise God for that. Praise God for this space. Praise God for this church family. We are especially excited tonight to be celebrating a baptism, which is one of the distinct markers of Christian identity. And so in preparation for that, we're going to be talking a little bit about identity this evening as we look at God's Word together. You may be familiar with the name Ralph Ellison.

He's the author who wrote the book *The Invisible Man*, a pretty well-known work of American literature. And Ralph Ellison says this. He says, the search for identity is not just one American theme.

It is the American theme. The search for identity, he says, defines American culture. And if you just take a moment and you think about your favorite and most beloved movies, you're probably going to realize that those movies contain some kind of identity quest.

[1 : 12] You have a person who's either trying to find their true identity or they're trying to slough off a false identity that's been imposed on them, or they're going through a radical transformation of identity.

But identity plays a part in many of our most beloved stories as a culture. Why do you think that personality inventories like the Enneagram or the Myers-Briggs are so wildly popular?

If not, that they help us learn a little more about who we truly are. I think we have a deep and ongoing drive to get to the heart of our own identity.

Who am I really? What is my true self? And so it's partly for that reason that we're going to look together at Galatians 2 verses 15 to 21 together.

Now, on the surface, this does not look like it has anything to do with identity. On the surface, Galatians, the ongoing debate that we've been tracing over the last few weeks, is a debate over table fellowship.

[2 : 17] If you have Jewish Christians and you have Gentile Christians, can they, should they, eat at the same table in their homes and at the Lord's table? Can they share that meal or not?

That's the surface-level debate. But my contention is this, that underneath this, the book is all about identity. The central issue is a question of identity.

Because when we talk about things like circumcision or keeping the ceremonial law, these are fundamental to Jewish identity. So that's what the book is really about. So we're going to ask two questions of this particular passage about identity.

Number one, how does the gospel impact our identity? When you come to faith in Jesus Christ, what happens to your identity? And then number two, how do we then live as a result of that impact?

So first question, how does the gospel impact our identity? Second question, how do we then live as a result of that impact? Let's pray and then we'll open God's word together. Lord, we thank you for your word.

[3 : 23] We thank you for your written word. We thank you that it ultimately is able to reveal to us your living word, Jesus Christ. And Lord, we know that he is the one in whom we find our true selves.

And so we pray that as we ask more about our own identities, that we would actually come face to face with his identity. Lord, and we pray this in his holy name. Amen. So how does the gospel impact our identity?

Let me just give you a little context of what's going on here in Galatians. At the heart of the Galatian debate is this question. As I said a moment ago, when someone becomes a Christian, when they believe and accept the gospel, what happens to that person's identity?

There were false teachers who had come into Galatia who were contradicting Paul's teaching. And they taught that the gospel, that Jesus was something that you added on to your existing identity. So you're you and you believe Jesus and that becomes something that you add on. So they would say even if you believe in Jesus, Jews are still Jews.

[4 : 34] And Gentiles are still Gentiles. They've just added Jesus. But because you're still a Jew or still a Gentile, they would say even if you're a Christian, Jews and Gentiles should not intermingle.

They should not eat or share food or even associate with one another very much because that would make the Jews unclean. Also, if the gospel is something that you simply add on to your identity, as these teachers taught, even if you believe in Jesus, the relationship that you have with God is still primarily based on your Jewishness, not your faith in Jesus Christ.

If you believe in Jesus, that's great. But God accepts you because of your Jewishness. As a result, they taught that Gentiles, if they wanted to have the kind of insider, inner circle relationship with God that the Jews had, they also had to become Jewish.

They had to take on the Jewish identity, get circumcised, keep the ceremonial law, all of those things. So this is what the false teachers were saying. But listen to what Paul says in response to this.

Verse 15. We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners. So he's saying we also were born Jews. And yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law, but through faith in Jesus Christ.

[5 : 56] So we also have believed in Christ Jesus in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law. Because by works of the law, no one will be justified.

You notice a certain word that shows up again and again and again in this little passage, the word justified. That's a very important word in the Christian faith. There's been an enormous amount of debate over the precise meaning of the word justification.

It's very central to our understanding of the gospel. In part, to be justified means that if you're someone who is in a court of law and you've been accused, if the judge justifies you, then that means the judge is pronouncing you righteous.

You are in the right. You're not guilty. You have been pronounced justified. That's justification.

You're righteous, right? So it means in part for God to declare that the vertical relationship between us and God is okay.

The barrier has been removed. You have been justified. The sin has been dealt with. But that's not all it means. It not only has a vertical dimension, it has a horizontal dimension.

[7 : 10] It has to do with our relationships with other people. Because the broader context of this passage tells us that when Paul talks about being justified, he's saying that we are being declared as members of God's family.

So not only are you justified before God, but you're justified in the sense that you are declared as being a member of God's family. So that is a statement that directly impacts our identity.

You're in the family. God is your father. All of these other people are your brothers and sisters. It's a statement about identity. So in verses 15 and 16, just to sort of put it in our own words, here's what Paul is arguing.

He says, you know, we used to think that God accepted us because of our Jewishness. Because we were born Jewish, because we were circumcised, because we kept the ceremonial law.

But now, Paul says, we've realized that holding on to our Jewishness wasn't helping us. It was actually a roadblock. Holding on to our Jewishness was actually preventing us from entering into God's family.

[8 : 20] And Paul goes on to say, you know, we've realized this. We've realized that you can't be born into God's family. And you can't earn your way into God's family.

And now that we've met and seen Jesus face to face, we've come to a life-altering realization that there's only one being in existence who is worthy enough to be called a member of the family of God.

And that's Jesus Christ. And so Paul says, we've realized that the only way to enter into God's family is through faith in Him, which means fully identifying yourself with Him, saying, I'm here

because of Him, not because of me.

I'm here on His merit, not my own. Paul says this has changed everything for us. So another way we might summarize this is by saying it this way. God does not accept us into His family on the basis of our identity.

He accepts us on the basis of Christ's identity. That's how we enter in to the family of God. So this is something that enables us to return back to our original question and understand what the answer actually is.

[9 : 39] What is the impact of the gospel on my identity? Is it something that I simply add on to my existing identity? And Paul would say, certainly not. Absolutely not. The gospel isn't something we add on to our existing identity.

The gospel is actually something that redeems and then begins to rebuild an entirely new identity in us from the ground up.

He jackhammers up even the foundation and begins to build something new from the inside out. It's a total transformation. And I think this is something that we need to hear again and again and again. If you'll bear with me a moment, let me offer you a metaphor to try to understand this. Imagine that you are a smartphone. Imagine that you're the smartphone in your pocket.

And that smartphone has an operating system on it. That's like your identity. Right? You're a smartphone and you have an operating system which is your identity.

[10 : 39] And then you have all of these things that if somebody were to ask you, who are you? What's your identity? You would tell them, well, you know, I'm from the South and I'm white and I went to this school and I care about these issues and I'm, you know, you would begin to describe all of the aspects that make you, you.

And those are like the apps on that operating system. Right? And all of those apps kind of constitute you. And the problem is most people when they hear the gospel, when they hear about Jesus and even when they put their faith in Jesus, they assume that the gospel is like another app that you add to your smartphone.

Now you have the Christianity app. You have the gospel app. You know? And so you can use different apps in different situations. So when you're at church, you use the Christian app.

You know, that's the one that's open and running on your operating system. But then maybe when you're at work tomorrow, you close down that app and you open the work person app. And that's the app that's running.

Right? And then maybe when you're with your college friends, you open the college app. And that's kind of who you are there. And then when you're with your family over the holidays, you open the me when I was a kid app.

[11 : 49] You know? And in all of these contexts, we have the right app for the situation, but it's all me because it's all running on the same operating system. And our Christian faith for many of us becomes one of those apps that we put into use when we feel like we need to.

But then we can swipe it and close it when we don't need to. But here's the problem with that way of thinking. What Paul is saying is that if you hold on to your old identity, if you try to hold on to that old operating system, it is actually going to begin to distort your entire understanding of Jesus and the gospel.

You're going to begin to see Jesus through the lens of that old identity. Right? So this is what was happening with the Jews. They were holding on to their Jewishness, and so they were trying to distort Jesus to fit into their Jewishness.

Yes, you have to be circumcised. Yes, you have to keep the ceremonial law. These things are of ultimate importance because for them, being Jewish was ultimate. That was the ultimate thing, and Jesus was added on. But right, we can do this in a number of ways.

Any aspect we can talk about. If you hold on to your racial identity, then you will distort the gospel, and you will distort Jesus through the lens of that racial identity because that is what is ultimate for you.

[13 : 09] Right? So we could pick any race, but since we're, I think, a majority white church, let's just pick being white. If you hold on to your whiteness, and the gospel is something that is added on, it will begin to distort your understanding of the gospel.

Why do you think all of those portraits from the mid-20th century of Jesus portray him as a white man with blonde hair? Isn't that weird? Nobody would argue that he's a white man with blonde hair.

We know he's Middle Eastern. But why paint a picture of Jesus as a white man with blonde hair? It's because our sense of Jesus is being distorted through that lens, right? Why did so many churches not only fail to speak up against, but actually support and uphold racist practices?

It's because it was a massive blind spot for them. Because the gospel had been added on to a racial identity that they had never even considered. Right? Why were there weird, you know, churches arguing for slavery based on the Bible, churches arguing against interracial marriage, based on a very shallow reading of the scriptures?

It's because the whiteness was never questioned. And all of the blind spots and all of the privileges and all of the biases that came along with that, it was never questioned because that was central. The gospel was an add-on.

[14:23] But see, this can happen in any sphere of our identity. If you hold on to your sexual identity and you say, this is ultimate, this is the untouchable part of me, then you're going to distort and twist the faith in ways that uphold and justify your lifestyle.

You know, if you hold on to your political identity, these are my politics and these are not changing, this is who makes me me, then you're going to begin to approach your faith in ways that support all of your pre-existing opinions.

You're going to find a church that already lines up with all of your opinions. It doesn't challenge you. Right? If you hold on to your national identity, then you're going to distort the faith in ways that support and uphold your nationalism.

Right? This is how this plays out. So here's the point, the first point we need to see. The gospel is not just an app that you add on to that operating system. The gospel is an entirely new operating system.

It's a system reboot. From the ground up, it rebuilds something entirely new in you. And just, you know, if you'll permit me, I want to push the metaphor a little further and then we'll leave it there.

[15:37] But what happens when you have to update that operating system on your smartphone? What happens to all of those apps? Well, they have to be updated too.

Because unless they're updated, they're not going to run on the old operating system. And so for a lot of your apps, the developer has to go back and they have to update the app so it'll run and you then have to update that app so it'll run on the new operating system.

And in the same way, when Christ enters in and when Christ begins to rebuild a new identity in us from the ground up, all of those aspects of your identity need to be re-examined and they need to be updated in light of the gospel.

So then you have to go back and you have to re-examine your race. You have to re-examine your politics. You have to re-examine your sexuality. You have to re-examine your ethics and your values and your priorities and your relationships and the way you think about your enemies and the way you engage various issues.

All of that needs to be updated so that it will be compatible with the gospel operating system. And every now and then you know there's an app that doesn't get updated because the operating system is so fundamentally different from what it was that that app is just simply no longer compatible and you just have to delete it because it's completely incompatible with the new system.

[16:56] And this has to happen in our lives as well. There are things that maybe were a part of your old life, things that were a part of your old identity that you say this is not compatible with the gospel. This has to be deleted. It doesn't fit anymore.

And if I try to run this app, old app, on the new operating system, it's just going to crash. It's not going to work, you know. So this is how the gospel impacts our identity.

It's not just an add-on. It completely redeems and transforms it. So then we need to ask our second question. Okay, well that gives us a preview of where we're going to go, but how does this then impact the way we live?

How does it change what we do in our day-to-day lives? This is a very important question for many reasons. Here's one that's personal to me because I think everybody in this room, if you're here and you're a Christian, and maybe if you're here and you're not a Christian, maybe you can connect with this too.

You experience a profound disconnect between the person that you want to be and the person that you are. And it can be deeply discouraging. Deeply discouraging. You know, I was thinking about this this week.

[18:02] I can wake up in the morning and I can spend the first 20 or 30 minutes sometimes in prayer. And I'll pray and I'll do morning prayer and the Book of Common Prayer. I'll simply sometimes just spend time praying.

And I'll pray and as I'm praying I feel this deep sense of connection with God growing in my heart. And I'll feel this sense of love kind of flooding in, you know, where I'll feel close to God. And I feel love for God. And then I began to feel a sense of deep love and affection for my family. And I'll sit there and I'll be upstairs and I'll be hearing little murmurings of my kids waking up and I'll think, oh, I love my boys.

You know, they're so, I haven't, you know, I feel it's been all night and I can't wait to see them. And I start thinking about how sweet they are and how funny they are and how awesome they are. And I just, I want to go downstairs and my heart is like overflowing by this point in my prayer with love and I can't wait to get downstairs and just embrace them.

And I think we're going to have such a great morning. I'm going to kiss them. I'm going to hug them. I'm going to make sure they know I love them. And then I'm going to send them off to school. It's going to be an awesome morning. And then I go downstairs and I go into their room.

[19:06] And what happens? Total chaos breaks out, right? It's insane. And I literally go in about 10 seconds from heart overflowing with love to screaming at my children. And I go, and I, you know, I'm like, you know, put your shoes on.

What's wrong with you? Stop doing it. You stop eating that. You need to eat that. That's your breakfast. Don't eat that. That's not breakfast. You know, don't hit him. Don't touch him. Don't do that. And I'm screaming and I'm like, guys, we're going to be late.

And I'm like, go, go, go. And it's like some kind of horrible boot camp, you know? And I'm like, get in the car, get in the car. And then I like drive to school and I'm in horrible traffic and I'm like, and then I get in this massive unending line to drop them off at school.

And everybody's screaming at each other and people are cutting in traffic. And then I, you know, I drop them off and I'm like, go, the teachers are leaving. You're going to be late. And I get them out of the car. I'm like, go, go and be good. And don't, don't get in trouble and do what your teachers say, you know?

And I, and they get in and then I just sit there and I'm like sweating, you know? And I'm like, oh, and I'm thinking maybe they should do aftercare today. Maybe. I don't think I want to see them until dinner, you know?

[20:06] And, and then I think what happened to the love? What happened to the affection that, what happened to them being cute? Like that wasn't cute. They're monsters, you know?

And it can happen that quickly, that quickly. And, and then it sets in, oh, maybe I'll do better tomorrow. Maybe I'll try again, you know, but after a while that just crushes you.

Maybe I'm not that person. Maybe I'll never be that person. You know, or the person struggling with addiction. You know, somebody says, I'll never use again. You know, I'll never drink again. I'll, I'll never, I'll never, I'll never look at porn again.

I know that that's horrible. It's destroying my soul. You know, they say that in the morning and then that night they stay up half their night on their computer. You know, and that extraordinarily discouraging, crushing sense of repeated failure.

fear. That disconnect that I think we all experience in different ways. What do you do with that? Right? This is why verse 20 is so important and profound.

[21:10] It's one of my favorite places in all the Bible. Verse 20, Paul says this, I have been crucified with Christ. It's no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.

In the life I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me. See, this is what it means to be a Christian.

Not that when I was 12 at summer camp I intellectually assented to the gospel, although that's important. What it means is that you have union with Jesus Christ. It is no longer I who live.

I've been crucified. I died. The old operating system has been obliterated. And now I've been raised with him and in him. And we're one in the same. So his life is your life.

His identity is your identity. They're inextricably linked. And you know, sometimes scripture talks about Christ dwelling in us. And sometimes scripture talks about us dwelling in Christ.

[22:13] And you say, well, is that a contradiction? No. These are both ways of talking about union with Christ. And as Rankin-Wilbourne, who wrote a book called Union with Christ, as he says, it's a

great book, he says that both of those are vital for understanding what it means to the Christian life. Christ in us and us in Christ. And here's why. If Jesus Christ is in us, that gives us power. That gives us spiritual power.

And if we are in Christ, that gives us assurance. Power and assurance. Right? So Christ in us gives us power.

Power to live holy lives. Power to actually expect that we can change. One of the criticisms that Paul faced from the false teachers in Galatia went like this.

They said, okay, and maybe you've heard something like this in your own life. Okay, Paul. So if we're really saved by grace, by having faith in Jesus, if that's all that we need to enter into God's family, to be justified, then why do we need to worry about sin?

[23 : 35] Why should anybody try to live a holy life? Does that mean that we can just do what we want, sin rampantly? God doesn't care because it all comes through Jesus anyway? Okay? Who cares? And so they accused Paul of encouraging and promoting sin.

They said that you're not only doing this, Paul, but you're making Jesus complicit in encouraging people to live sinful lives. You're justifying that. How dare you, Paul? You're blaspheming here. And here's Paul's response in verse 17.

He says, but if in our endeavor to be justified in Christ, we too were found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin? Because that's what they were saying. You're making Christ a servant of sin. And he says, certainly not. And I don't think that's quite strong enough to capture what he really says. For if I rebuild what I tore down, I prove myself to be a transgressor. But through the law, I died to the law so that I might live to God.

What's he saying? He's saying, even thinking that, even suggesting that means you're still operating out of the old operating system. You need to understand that I have a new operating system in me.

[24 : 44] There's an entirely new system at work, which means I'm not living for myself anymore. I'm living to God and Jesus Christ is in me right now. The spiritual power of Jesus is in me.

If you have genuinely come to faith, if you have genuinely believed the gospel, I dare you to go off and to try to do whatever you want. I dare you to try it.

You may do it for a little while, but the Holy Spirit will begin to convict you. The Holy Spirit will convict you. And you can try to deny and minimize that voice.

You can try to drink or numb yourself out from that voice, but it will convict you and it will not leave you alone. You will not escape it because the presence and the power of God himself is in you. You have a new operating system. That thing that you're doing, those choices that you're making, they're incompatible with that operating system and you're going to feel that tension. You're not going to feel okay about it.

[25 : 43] It's going to haunt you. Paul says, I'm not living for me anymore, I'm living for God. And Jesus Christ makes all of this possible. Jesus fills us with power. You know, this is the eternal word that in Genesis 1 brought order out of chaos and made a world where there can be life and flourishing and beauty and goodness.

And that same eternal word is now at work in you if you're a Christian. So Christ in us means we have power. You can strive to live a holy life.

You can practice spiritual disciplines. You can seek to cultivate self-control and all of the various virtues of character. You can seek to cultivate a deeper love for God and a deeper love for neighbor.

You can seek to become a better wife or husband. You can seek to love your kids better. You can seek to be less attached to and enslaved to the idols in your life. You can put effort into that. You know, Dallas Willard famously said, grace is not opposed to effort.

Grace is opposed to earning. Thinking you can earn favor with God. But the Holy Spirit is there to enable us to put effort into living laws of holiness that actually changes us.

[26 : 57] That's what it means to have Christ in you. But here's the other side of it. Every bit is important. We not only have Christ in us, but we are also in Christ. Meaning we not only have power, we have assurance.

Meaning you can fail again and again and again. You can blow up at your kids. You can, you can, you know, parents, it's just this constant sense of disconnect.

Here's the parent I thought I was going to be. You know, here's the parent I kind of hope I am now. And here's the parent I was today. You know, that's kind of how it feels all the time. You always feel like you're failing.

You can fail again and again. You can go back to that addiction. You can go back to porn. You can go back, you can fall back into your patterns, whatever they are. And you can do that over and over and over.

And guess what? You are in Christ, which means that that will not diminish God's love and delight in you, even one tiny fraction. That God will only ever always look at you with sheer love and delight.

[28 : 06] That God will only ever say to you, you know, we think that God, you know, we talk about this from the time, that God carries around the sense of disappointment with us. You know, that, you know, I've given so much to this person, you know, I've poured out, I've died for you, I've loved you, and I just, I keep putting up with your crap and you just keep failing, you know?

Like, you know, I imagine, you know, God is like this, you know, look at all I've done for you and you can't even call me, you know? You know, like your mom, you know?

And, and yet this tells us that that's actually heresy. The saying, God is disappointed in me is heresy. That if we believe the gospel, that we are in Christ, it means that God will only ever look at you and say, this is my beloved daughter in whom I'm well pleased, in whom I delight.

You just failed as a parent. You just feel like an abject failure. You just failed in your addiction. You just failed in your friendship. You just failed in your dating life. You just failed in your job. You just did something horrible and you say, I can't believe I did that. And God looks at you and says, this is my child in whom I'm well pleased.

I delight in you. That's the assurance that we have of being in Christ. He continually looks on at us with delight and affection.

[29 : 21] So through the power of Christ and the assurance of Christ, God renews who we are and how we live so that we come more and more to reflect the glory of His Son.

So, just to come back to the question we asked at the beginning, this question of identity, this is how the gospel helps us discover who we really are. It completely redeems and transforms our old identity.

identity. And then it gives us a way to live out of that new identity in Jesus Christ. I'll end with a little example that I love, a story that I love, and that's the story of John Newton, who, you know, many of you know, is the pastor who wrote Amazing Grace.

And John Newton, actually, in his life, experienced a profound transformation of his identity because, as some of you know, in his young life, he was a slave trader.

And he made his money off the slave trade. And then he encountered the gospel, and Jesus came into his life, and that old operating system was thrown out, and Jesus began to build a new identity in him from the ground up, and everything began to change.

[30 : 30] And so this man, who used to be a slave trader, later in his life, not only became a pastor, but he became one of the leading, most prominent abolitionists. And in his day, he saw the end of the slave trade in Britain.

And here's what John Newton says about his Christian identity. I am not what I ought to be. I am not what I want to be. I am not what I hope to be in another world.

But still, I am not what I used to be. And by the grace of God, I am who I am. Let's pray. Let's pray.