

Alive in Christ: Putting on Christ

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Preacher: Rev. Thomas Hinson

[0 : 0 0] So, this afternoon, we're going to spend a little time talking about the question of identity, which, as I bring it up, you recognize that's a hot topic these days.

It's hard to talk about identity without verging into political territory. That's not the reason that we're focusing on this topic. The reason is because we've been in a series looking at a letter in the New Testament that we call Colossians.

It's a letter that Paul wrote to the Colossian Christians. And this letter has a number of themes, but the one that we've been tracing over the last few weeks is the theme of the resurrection life.

If Jesus actually rose from death, what difference does that make for us here and now? That's the question. And that's based on this premise, that if Jesus did not actually rise, in other words, if it's a nice idea or a myth that was perpetuated by later followers, then as your pastor, I would strongly encourage you to leave Christianity behind and to go and find another religion or worldview that asks less of you, that's more convenient, that's frankly easier.

If, on the other hand, the resurrection did actually happen, somebody actually came up out of the ground. Then it changes everything. And that's what Colossians is about.

[1 : 2 6] And as we come to chapter 3, Colossians chapter 3 is all about identity. It's about the fact that the resurrection of Jesus has an enormous transformative impact on how we think about identity.

So we're going to look at this in two parts. We're going to focus primarily on Colossians chapter 3, verses 5 through 17. Part 1, the crisis of identity that we currently find ourselves in, the crisis of identity.

Part 2, the renewal of identity. What becomes possible because of the resurrection of Jesus. Let's pray. Our Father in heaven, as we are gathered here, we are cognizant of the promises that you've made over the centuries.

Perhaps the greatest promise of all is that you are Emmanuel, that you desire to be a God who dwells in our midst, that you've fulfilled that promise, that you're here now.

And because you're here, we ask that as we open these written words through your spirit, you would illuminate them for us, that we would see the living word, your son, Jesus Christ, face to face.

[2 : 3 6] And as we come to know him, we would come to know ourselves more fully and deeply. We pray this in his name. Amen. So the crisis of identity, this question of identity is fundamental.

It's a foundational question. Who am I? Who am I? It's impossible really to make decisions in our lives before we've answered that question.

Who am I? I think we're all trying to answer it. And by and large, in our culture, when it comes to questions of identity, we have adopted an approach that has come to be known as expressive individualism.

This is how we answer the question of identity. It's the idea that identity comes from looking within. I look inside and I discern my most authentic desires, my most authentic inclinations.

And then I express those to the world. The assumption being that I am what I feel, that I should embrace what I feel no matter what others might say, societies, traditions, regardless.

[3 : 45] And then we begin to construct our identity using labels, socially constructed labels, such as age or race or ethnicity or sexuality or gender.

And we construct this identity and we pick the labels that most accurately resonate with what we feel and then we present that identity to the world. That's essentially how it works.

And over time, this self-expressed identity has become a kind of unassailable absolute truth.

Perhaps for some people, the only remaining absolute truth is one's self-expressed identity. And there's something very compelling about this idea.

The highest ethic is to be true to yourself. Find this identity, express it, and then be true to it. Follow it. Don't let anybody tell you different. And I think that's very compelling.

[4 : 47] The idea that we are the sole determiners of our own identity, I think that in some ways that's a very attractive idea. Michel Foucault, who was one of the brilliant thinkers, brilliant man, one of the kind of architects of this approach, he was genuinely trying to do good in the world.

He rightly observed that when you have a society or a group of people and they assign identity, that they're actually in power over that individual.

Right? That identity can be a form of subjugation. And so he was really trying to make the world a better place. He saw the plight of the mentally ill. He saw the plight of people with same-sex attraction who in those days would often be assigned very derogatory labels or identities and then cast aside by mainstream society.

And so he was genuinely trying to bring liberation and freedom to these people. But the question we need to ask is, does it actually work?

And by that I mean, does it actually line up with our real-life day-to-day experiences? And I think if we begin to delve deeper, we see that, in fact, in the world of expressive individualistic identity construction, there's an enormous amount of confusion and disagreement.

[6 : 16] You see it in advertising, there's a commercial that I think I've mentioned it before. It was in the most recent Super Bowl. Well, Alfa Romeo has sort of reentered the American car market and they have this new ad campaign.

And it has very little to do with cars. But it says, staying true to ourselves is all that matters. Okay, great. We got it. But then it goes on and says this.

And the ability to reinvent ourselves is the most human trait of all. And I remember seeing this and thinking, there's something not quite right about that. And then I realized it's kind of a contradiction, isn't it?

I mean, if there's a self, and I need to be true to that self, but then I also need to reinvent that self. Which is it? Right? But if you go a little deeper into kind of real life scenarios, you see the debate rages on.

There's massive confusion in the world of gender identity. There's actually a fascinating debate going on right now between transgender activists and radical feminists over the nature of gender identity.

[7 : 17] Is it something that is innate? Or is it entirely socially constructed? Right? So you have a transgender rights activist who says, I'm a man, but I feel like a woman, and therefore I have a right to claim the identity of a woman because that's what I feel when I look inside.

That's the label that I want for myself. And then you have the radical feminists who are deeply offended and troubled and challenge this. Because they say, first of all, they reject the idea that there is an innate feminine brain.

They say if women are any different than men in any way, it's because society has forced us to be so. And by the way, they get very offended at the idea that a man with all of the male privilege that they have in a male-dominated society would dare to claim the identity of a woman.

You have no idea. You have not earned the right, they say. So this is a fascinating debate. And again, this is not a liberal versus conservative. This is within the most progressive liberal wing of the political world.

The debate rages on. There's also a debate between the transgender rights activists and the transracial rights activists. The whole Rachel Dolezal affair. The question being, does a white woman have the right, should she be free, to claim the identity of an African-American woman?

[8 : 40] Because that's what she feels on the inside. The questions go on and on and on. And again, I want to say, these are a lot of very well-meaning people. And listen, at the heart of these issues, there is very real suffering.

Right? Very real suffering. And everybody's looking at that and doing the absolute best they can to alleviate that suffering. But there's also a lot of confusion.

There's a lot of confusion. And I think under all of this, there's a fundamental flaw with this whole approach to identity. There's a lighthearted example of this.

I love to quote this movie because I think that it's kind of profound. There's this cartoon movie called The Incredibles about a family of superheroes. And you've probably heard it before if you've been around.

But I love the scene near the end where the bad guy, Syndrome, he has the good guy all tied up. And he used to be a mentor. And now he's turned evil. And he's sort of giving his doom speech to his former mentor.

[9 : 43] And he says at one point to Mr. Incredible, he says, You always used to tell me to be true to myself. But you never told me which part to be true to. And I think that that's a brilliant and insightful point.

That when we look inside, if you're anything like me, when I look inside, I don't see a clearly defined self coalescing around my desires and inclinations.

A self that I can just express to the world. In fact, I see all kinds of fragments and parts and pieces. And they're in constant conflict with one another. There are paradoxical desires waging war within me.

There's nothing in the way of a consistent self. I have a part of me that deeply desires to live and to be healthy and to be on this earth long enough to know my grandkids.

That is a deep conviction of mine. But my family is out of town right now. And you want to know what I've been eating lately? Well, I'll tell you, the other night I had a few people over at my house.

[10 : 46] And one of them just felt the moral obligation to point at my plate and just kind of give me a look. And she was very justified in doing that because I had two food groups on my plate.

Steak and pulled pork. And that's all I had on my plate. And she was like, is that all you're going to eat for dinner? And I said, well, yeah, I guess so. But I've ate like that all the time.

I mean, I could literally live off that and whiskey. And I would be good. Every single night. I would be great. I wouldn't live to the end of the year. But I would be very happy in that time.

So there are two pieces of me that are waging war. Which should I listen to? Which is the true self? You know, why? Maybe this isn't true for all of you. But I know for some of you.

Why in your mind you have an on-paper idea of the kind of person you should marry. This is the kind of person you should be with. This is the kind of person that will be a good parent.

[11 : 42] And make for a good spouse. And make for a good partner in life. And it all. And you say, this is the kind of person. And then there are the people you're attracted to. And why are they so different?

I know I should want this. But I'm drawn to this. I know that my parents would be happy with this. But this is what I really want. Now, where are those parts coming from? And which is the true self?

Some of you, you know, there's a part of you that is bold. And adventurous. And self-reliant. And courageous. And then there's this other part of you that just wants to be taken care of.

That actually wants to be able to be weak. What is going on there? Two parts. Diametrically opposed. What's going on?

Or if you're married and you have kids. And you have a spouse. And there's this part of you that says, I want to be with this family. I've committed to this family. I want to raise these kids. I'm committed to my spouse.

[12 : 45] And then there's this other part of you. That fantasizes about leaving. Being with somebody else. Living a different life. Finding your true love.

Right? Which is the true self? What does it mean to be true to yourself in that situation? Who should you listen to? A lot of people would say that you should leave.

Right? Have you read the book Eat, Pray, Love? Right? You've heard of it. It was written a little over a decade ago. It was heralded as one of the great romances of our decade. Elizabeth Gilbert writes this book in 2006.

Makes millions of dollars. Oprah loves it. Champions it across the Oprah sphere. She, she, Gilbert is named in 2008 one of the top 100 most influential people in the world.

In the world. Thousands of people inspired by Gilbert's story mimic it. What does Gilbert do? Well, she goes through a hard divorce.

[13 : 46] She leaves in search of being true to herself. And she travels the world and eats and prays and ultimately finds the love of her life. Her true love. A man whose real name is Jose.

And she meets him in Bali. And they get married. And it is the fairy tale ending. And so people are inspired by this. And so thousands of people leave their spouses and their kids and their jobs and their families and their friends.

And they go in search of themselves. One, one journalist talked about the town in Bali where, that is mentioned in the book where she met her love. And said, if you go there now, you will see lots of middle-aged women wearing white linen and thoughtful expressions.

Looking for this experience, right? And it applies to men too. Looking for that thing, right? There are, there are Eat, Pray, Love tours and t-shirts and tea mugs.

It's an industry. Many of those fans felt deeply betrayed last year when Gilbert over Facebook announced that she and Jose were getting a divorce.

[14 : 54] They said, that's not how it's supposed to end. That's not happily ever after. That's not part of the story. How could you let us down? And people got nasty. They felt betrayed by her.

Why? Because daylight was starting to break into the fairy tale. And that's the thing. This idea of identity, as nice as it is, as nice as it is to think about being true to myself and finding my true love, this is ultimately, at the end of the day, a fairy tale.

It's a fairy tale. Because in real life, when I look inside, when you look inside, I don't think we have just a self in there that is leading us like a will-o'-wisp in the woods.

That, in fact, we see all of these broken parts and fragments and partial selves, and they're all fighting with each other for control. And listen, some of those parts, if you follow them, will lead you toward health and flourishing.

But many of those parts, many of the voices that whisper to me in the dark watches of the night don't have my best interest in mind, don't have my family's best interest in mind, don't care about my kids.

[16 : 05] And if I followed those voices, I would follow them to my own destruction and to the harm of the people I most care about. So it doesn't work.

So the question then becomes, what does the gospel have to say about identity? What's the alternative to this approach? And that's where Colossians 3 is so tremendously helpful.

It gives us a different approach to identity. It says, don't look inside to try to find your true self. You have to actually be drawn out of yourself. You have to look beyond yourself.

And it says in the first few verses of chapter 3, set your eyes and mind and seek the things that are above. And specifically, what's it talking about?

The risen Lord Jesus Christ. The resurrected Son of God. Set your mind on that. Set your heart on that. And there you will begin to discover who you really are.

[17 : 00] Why? Because Jesus brings the renewal of our imaginations to bear into our lives. So Colossians 3.10, as we talk about the renewal of identity.

Colossians 3.10 talks about our self being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. So what's that saying? The self is renewed by the image of our creator.

So what's that saying? It's saying that we were created by a creator to bear the image of that creator. So just think about the implications of that.

What is that saying about human identity? If we're created to bear the image of another being out here, what does that say about us? It says that for us, our identity is like moonlight.

And God is the sun. That we are meant to reflect. That our identity is a reflection of the person and the character and the heart of our creator.

[18 : 07] That's what we were made for. We are moons, not suns. In other words, we don't have the capacity to generate an identity, to generate a self.

We don't have the capacity to say, I am. Only God has that power. That's what makes him God. We are moons, not suns.

We're not the projector. We're the screen. We're meant to reflect the heart of God into the world. So think about that. If that is true. If that's true.

It has serious implications. Because if it's true that we're moons and not suns, that we're screens and not projectors. If it's true that we're made to reflect identity rather than generate it.

That means that if we reject God. In other words, if we say, I don't want to reflect your image into the world. And if we live apart from God, then what happens? Well, by design, we will invariably find something else to reflect.

[19 : 07] That's what screens do. That's all they can do. And I guarantee you, if you look into your life, and if you look carefully and honestly, and prayerfully, you will begin to see the things that you are drawing identity from, and drawing meaning from, and drawing value from.

Right? And they're probably really good things. Maybe it's your career and your success. And you say, I've built this body of work. I have accomplished these great things.

This is who I am. And you're projecting that to the world. This is me. Right? Or maybe it's your kids. And you say, if nothing else, if nothing else works out, this is who I am.

Look at my kids. Look at my parenting. Look at what I've done by raising them. And look at who they are now. That's my identity. That's my work. Or it could be your spouse. It could be any number of things.

A great way to tell is simply to look and to say, what is there in my life about which I say, I cannot live without that? Right?

[20 : 16] They can take away my job. They can take away my house. They can take away my money. But I have my kids. Or I have my success.

Or I have my money. Or whatever it is. Whatever that is. That, I guarantee you, is where you're drawing your identity from. And whatever there is in our lives that is playing that role, what that results in, it doesn't matter what it is.

It results in the same thing, which is distortion. We become distorted image bearers. We're not projecting, displaying. And in other words, we become tremendously confused in our identity.

Because we're not doing what we're supposed to be doing. We're confused. We're tangled. We're muddled. We have no sense of self. Because we're meant to reflect the attributes and the character and the heart of God.

So this is why it's good news that Jesus Christ has come. And this is why the gospel is such good news when it comes to our identity. Colossians 1.15 very, very specifically says Jesus is the image of the invisible God.

[21 : 27] So if you want to know what the invisible God is like, look at Jesus. Spitting image. Icon. When you look at him and you look at his heart and you look at his character, you are seeing God in the flesh. And the gospel says that in Jesus, God actually enters into history, dies, pays for all of the sin of humanity.

And then what does he offer as a gift? Not only forgiveness, but a new identity. He offers to give us his identity.

You know, one of his greatest parables, most beloved parables, is the parable of the prodigal son. And you know, the younger brother leaves and spurns his father and says, I wish you were dead. I'm out of here. I want my inheritance.

I never want to see you again. He leaves and he goes. He spins it all. And then he hits rock bottom, realizes his folly, comes back to beg his father's mercy. What does his father do? He comes running out on the road to meet him.

He wraps him in his arms. And then what does he do? He takes off his cloak and he puts it on the boy's shoulders. He takes off his ring, puts it on his finger. Now why does he do that?

[22 : 33] Is it because he's cold? No. It's about identity. These are identity markers. He's saying, you left and you abandoned the family and you rejected me as your father, but you never stopped being my son.

And he's affirming with those symbols. You are my son and you will always be my son. And there's nothing that you can do to change that. That's who you really are.

He's affirming his true identity. And this is what Jesus does when we come and we confess our sin and we repent and we ask for his mercy. Even as the words are coming out of our mouths, he's taking his ring off.

He's taking his robes off. He's putting them on us. He's saying, I want you to have this. Have me. Have this identity. Become a child of God. Be adopted. Be a co-heir with me in the kingdom of God.

That's why I came. And from that moment on, God views us as he views his own son, Jesus. That is our true self, our truest identity.

[23 : 36] So that means, and this makes sense of verse 11, that means that all of the labels that we might use as we're constructing our identity, right? Verse 11, you know, I'm a Greek.

I'm a Jew. I'm circumcised or uncircumcised. Barbarian, Scythian, slave, free. Whatever labels. We could add white, black, gay, straight, Hispanic.

We could add all of these labels. They all become secondary. They all get pushed to the periphery. Because there's a new primary label that drops into our lives that defines us wholly and completely.

And it's the person of Jesus Christ. But here's the thing. Colossians 3, 1 through 4 says essentially that although we get that identity, although we've been raised with him, for this period of time until Jesus comes again, it is hidden.

In other words, it's not self-evident. It's not readily observable. One day it will be. One day the truth of who we are will be revealed to the world. That day has not yet come.

[24 : 45] And so for Christians, we are in this time where we are wrestling with two selves, two natures. And they're struggling. They're locked together.

Horns locked. Vying for dominance. There's the old self and the new self. And I think this makes so much more sense of our real life experience.

When I look in my heart, that is exactly what I feel. So then verses 5 through 17 are all about the renewal of our identity that comes from putting off the old self and then putting on the new self.

And we do it again and again and again. It says, put to death everything in you that does not reflect the image of God. The identity that we have in Christ.

So we're cleaning away all of the junk that is built up on the screen. We're enabling ourselves to reflect the heart of God more clearly and more brightly. Put all of that to death.

[25 : 44] Like killing weeds in your garden. Put it to death. And he focuses on two broad categories of sin. Sexual sin and sins related to anger. And I'm not entirely sure why he focuses on these categories.

But I do think that they're particularly relevant. I think he has in mind things that harm not only individuals but also break down communities. That's a part of it. But even today, I mean, look at what's going on in our hearts.

You want to know what's going on in the human heart? Look at the internet. This amazing invention that has done such good for the world. But we've given people two very powerful things.

A public voice and anonymity. And what comes spilling out when you give people those two things? When you remove the restrictions and you just let it flow.

Well, what flows out of the human heart? Sex and anger. The internet has become a repository of sexual brokenness and outrage and malice and slander.

[26 : 46] Anger. Right? So God says you have to work against that in your life. You have to put it to death. You have to extinguish it. That mars the image of God in you.

That's not the heart that you're meant to reflect. Part of Christian identity means putting these tendencies to death. And then in verses 12 through 17, Paul tells us to put on the attributes that do reflect the identity and character of God.

Put on the robe. Put on the ring. Begin to reflect and display the heart of God. So he talks about compassionate hearts and kindness and humility and meekness and patience and forgiveness.

And above all, he says love, which binds everything together. He's describing God's character. You want to know what God's like? That's what he's like. And that's the identity that we're meant to embody and reflect.

Now, I want to make this important point as we're kind of drawing all this together. This is not saying change your identity and God will love you. That's religion.

[27 : 52] That's legalism. That's the opposite of what this is saying. This is not saying get your act together, pull yourself together by your bootstraps, shape up, stop all that bad stuff, start doing the good stuff, and then you can belong to God and bear his image.

No. It's saying God loves you so much that he's already given you this identity. This is your true self. And any time you act in the ways that are being described in the first part of this passage, any time you're doing that, you're forgetting who you are.

You're forgetting your true self. Have you ever seen the movie Memento? Christopher Nolan's brilliant kind of breakout film. It's kind of an old film now. I think it came out around 2000, 2001, something like that.

But it's an amazing film. Guy Pearce plays Leonard Shelby, and Leonard Shelby has gotten a head injury. And because of that head injury, he has anterior grade amnesia, which means he can't remember anything for more than a few minutes.

Any new information, none of it sticks. And so the entire movie is Leonard's quest. He's investigating himself in search of his true identity.

[28 : 59] He's trying to figure out who he is. And he keeps forgetting and forgetting and forgetting and forgetting. And there are all these people in his life, and some of them are not very trustworthy. And everybody's trying to help him, but some people are actually taking advantage of him.

They're taking advantage of the fact that he's forgotten who he is. And the point is, I think that we're all like Leonard. I think that we all have spiritual amnesia. And I think that we're constantly forgetting who we are.

And listen, there are a lot of people out there, some of them well-meaning, some not so much, who are taking advantage of that. They're trying to convince us that we're somebody we're not.

Which is exactly what happens in the movie. We constantly forget who we are. And so we need to be reminded who we are. Paul says we need regular community and regular practices to constantly remind us that we're no longer the old self, that we are actually someone new in Jesus Christ.

And that's what verses 16 and 17 describe beautifully. He says, Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom. Scripture is one way that we are reminded who we really are.

[30 : 11] Here's my life story. Here's the story that makes sense of me. And then he goes on, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs. Corporate worship.

Coming together and singing beautiful songs together that remind us who we really are. And whatever you do in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Doing everything we do is pointing us to Jesus, the icon, who not only shows us who God is, but shows us who we are called to be. So here's the main point.

I'm going to draw this to a close here. Here's the main point. When it comes to your identity, when it comes to my identity, many people will tell you, be true to yourself.

But the gospel will say, no. Don't be true to yourself. In some cases, run from that. The gospel says, here's the good news.

[31 : 14] Jesus became like us so that we could become like him. And when you come to him, you receive a new identity. So don't be true to the old self.

Be true to the new self. The new self that we find in Jesus Christ that's given to us as a gift. And every time we forget that, God in his love and in his mercy reminds us again and again and again.

Last image I'll use comes from one of my favorite movies, Blood Diamond. I've mentioned this before, so if you've been around, you've heard this. At the end of the movie, Blood Diamond, there's a scene where Danny and Solomon are digging up the diamond.

The diamond about which the whole movie hinges. And so Danny and Solomon are there. They're digging up the diamond. And Solomon's son, Dia, is also there. Now, Dia has been earlier kidnapped by people and forced to be a child soldier.

So they've gotten him back, but Dia is not really sure who he is. He's forgotten his identity. And so as Danny and Solomon, they get the diamond. They pull the diamond up out of the ground. They say, oh, we finally found it. And they turn and they look.

[32 : 25] And Dia has picked up a gun. And he's pointing it at the two men. Is he going to kill his father? Is he going to take the diamond and go back to the bad guys?

What's going to happen? So here's what his father says. What do you think? What would a father say normally? You know, what would many fathers say? What's wrong with you?

What's your problem? Put that gun down. Stop it. Right? That's not what he says. Look. He says, Dia, what are you doing? Look at me.

What are you doing? You are Dia Vandy of the proud Mende tribe. And then Dia raises the gun, points at his father. You are a good boy who loves soccer and school.

And he begins to walk toward Dia. Your mother loves you so much. She waits by the fire making plantains and red palm oil stew. And your sister Nyanda and the new baby. And tears begin to stream down Solomon's face.

[33 : 25] The cows wait for you. And Babu, the wild dog who minds no one but you. And tears now start to stream down Dia's cheeks as well. As Solomon continues and he's walking closer and closer to his son.

He says, I know they made you do bad things. But you are not a bad boy. I am your father who loves you. And you will come home with me and be my son again.

And Dia drops the gun and Solomon embraces his son. It's the most amazing scene. The reason I love it is because that is exactly how God responds to us.

When we come to God in sin, no matter what we've done. God says, I know you've done bad things. But that is not who you are. You are my child.

And you will come home and you will live with me. And you will be my child. And he embraces us. And again and again and again. He reminds us gently, firmly.

[34 : 27] Sometimes whispering, sometimes shouting. You have forgotten who you are. You are my child. Come home with me. Arms always open. And he reminds us again and again and again.

And slowly but surely, we actually start to believe it ourselves. And that is how the renewal of identity happens. Let's pray.