

Finding Our Identity in Christ

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[0 : 00] Now, since around about the early 1960s, psychologists have been developing a thing they call labeling theory.

The idea being that our self-identity can be determined or at very least influenced by the terms that others use to describe us, either how people describe us individually or how people describe the group that we belong to.

And it's recognized by psychologists, and I guess it's recognized by ourselves, that those labels that people put on us or on others can become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

If enough people say to a person, you are worthless, you're a nobody, then there is no aspiration. Sometimes it goes the other way, and people are determined to prove the doubters wrong.

But what's true is that the labels that we wear are incredibly powerful in terms of forming how we think about ourselves.

[1 : 06] So we attach labels to others, and sometimes we don't even realize it. We make judgments. This person is bad. This person is good. This person is ugly. This person is beautiful. This person has value to me.

This person has no value to me. And we can also apply those and other labels to ourselves. I am bad.

I am good. I am ugly. I have no value. With the result that it can be really complex to think about how do we answer that basic question of like, who am I?

What is my identity? Now, I say that because Paul is writing here to Gentile Christians. And Gentiles, non-Jewish people, were used to being labeled by Jews.

So they were sometimes labeled as dogs. Sometimes, Paul refers to this in chapter 2, labeled as Gentile sinners.

[2 : 07] And now, even as they've come to faith in the Lord Jesus, there are Jewish false teachers who are saying, well, actually, you're a second-class Christian unless you become like us, unless you take on all the Jewish ceremonial laws.

And so Paul is writing into this situation. He's writing here to answer their identity crisis. Can I trust in Jesus alone or do I need to add something else?

And what he will say to them in a variety of ways is that in Christ Jesus, you have a new identity, a new privilege, and a new status. What we have in effect are five gospel labels that are placed on us when our faith is in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Five ways to think about our identity and privilege when we are in Christ. The Christian counselor Paul Tripp reminds us of a truth that nobody talks to you about yourself more than you do.

And so here is Paul teaching this group of Christians. Here are five ways to renew your minds. Here are five truths about who you are in Christ so that you might live different because you are different.

[3 : 36] That you might live with confidence and assurance because you're trusting in Jesus. So our goal today is to help us all to answer the question, what do I see when I look in the mirror?

That we would recognize that if we are Christians, that we are redeemed, adopted, loved, and valued children of God. That that would be how we would learn to see ourselves, regardless of other labels that people might like to put on us.

So five gospel labels to define Christian identity. That's what we're going to think about this morning. And central to this is the term that Paul likes to use when he's describing Christians, talking about them as being in Christ.

You see that all through his letters, being in Christ, being with Christ, into Christ. What does that mean? It means when a person is trusting in Jesus, they are vitally connected to Jesus.

We talk about union with Christ. He becomes our representative before God. We now claim Jesus as our head, the one who represents us.

[4 : 45] We have, when we trust in Jesus, changed kingdom. And we have changed king. Jesus is our new king. So we are in him.

Our identity is bound up with him. So the gospel, the good news of Jesus, helps us to answer the who am I question, because it reminds us that Jesus gives us a new center.

He is our new identity. So let's begin at verse 26. You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus.

So here's our first personal label that we can put on ourselves if we are Christians. In Christ, I am a son of God. Now, Paul deliberately has the language of sons there.

Sometimes he'll say to the church, you are the bride of Christ. He'll use female imagery. But here he's deliberately talking about sons because in those days, it was only a son that had the right to inherit the family estate.

[5 : 47] So he's saying something profound here. He's saying you have the right to all the promises of God. And that privilege is not restricted as it was in Paul's day in society.

That privilege is open to all, to anyone who has faith in Christ. So this comes as good news for the Gentiles who are used to hearing, well, you don't have the promises of God.

You're not part of the people of God. So you're less than us. And it's good news for us because it says, regardless of who we are, where we're from, what our background is, if we trust in Jesus as Lord and Savior, then we have all these wonderful promises of God in the Bible that come to us.

That to put our faith in Jesus the Son is to make us a son of God, that the blessings promised to Abraham become ours. So back in the Old Testament, God said that the blessing to the nations would come through one of Abraham's family, would come through Jesus.

So the blessing of God comes to us. We get a great name just as Abraham got a great name. Our great name, I am a child of God. We get a great land.

[7 : 01] Abraham got Israel. We get the new heavens and the new earth if we're trusting in the Lord Jesus. That's our inheritance that we look forward to as sons of God.

So there's the first gospel label that Paul reminds us of. The second is in verse 27. For all of you who are baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.

So again, to personalize that, if I am baptized in Christ, I am clothed with Christ. What does it mean to be baptized into Christ? Well, these people had recently become Christians.

They'd recently started trusting in Jesus. And as a sign of that spiritual reality, they had been baptized with water. Paul uses this language, baptized into Christ, to talk about identification. Saying two things to us, really. That we are, if we are in Christ, we are identified with Jesus in his death. So Jesus goes to the cross and he dies for my sin.

[8 : 09] Therefore, I am dead to sin. The power of sin has no more hold on me. I have a new master whose name is Jesus. And we're also identified with Jesus in his resurrection life.

That just as Jesus rose again, so we too, if our faith is in Jesus, we're enjoying new life from him and with him. And so there's these powerful spiritual realities that tell us that believing Jesus died and rose for us changes our identity fundamentally.

And that takes us to this clothing imagery. If you're baptized into Christ, you're clothed with Christ. Let's think about that for a few moments.

First of all, clothing for us is often a marker of identity. I suppose we know that as Scots. We can think about our kilt.

If we're guys, we have a kilt as a sign of our Scottish identity. And even more than that, our kilts have also got clan tartans. That they represent the family that we belong to.

[9 : 16] So we get the idea of identity and clothing. We can also think in terms of school uniform or work uniform that represent, I belong to this school.

I belong to this organization. Here is Paul's way of saying, if you are clothed with Christ, you belong to him. He is your primary mark of identification.

It's not about our IQ. It's not about our finance. It's not about our relationships. It's about Jesus.

That's our primary identity as Christians.

Clothed with Christ also picks up that image that you find in the Bible where in Isaiah, there's the idea that our best efforts, our righteousness are like filthy rags.

So we come to God and our filthy rags means we cannot be accepted by him. But then by grace, we're clothed in the perfect righteousness of the Lord Jesus Christ.

[10:14] That by grace, we are made clean and pure and acceptable to God. So that when God looks on us, he sees Jesus in us.

And so we can be accepted and welcomed. We can think about it another way. Think about a child's dressing up box. I don't know if you like dressing up when you were younger, but often children like to dress up, maybe as a princess, maybe as a fireman.

In our nursery, there's lots of the kids liking to dress up as wild animals at the moment. And what happens is, as soon as the clothing goes on, so too goes the behavior.

So you walk into the nursery and you find kids prowling around like lions or roaring like tigers. And what is Paul saying to us? He's saying that when we are clothed with Christ, we put on the attitudes and the actions, the behavior, the patterns of life of Jesus.

He puts it another way in some of his other lectures. He says you put off the old, the sinful nature. You put off that way of life. You put on the new, like a new set of clothes.

[11:25] So as we trust in Jesus, we are more and more growing to look like Jesus because that's our identity. That's who we are.

There is another label that the gospel gives us to wear. In verse 28, we discover there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

So in Christ, we are all one. And again, this is hugely significant. You could trace every period of history. You could look at every culture and society in history and you would discover in each of them, there will inevitably be social barriers.

John highlighted that talking about doors open day. We understand that there are social barriers. Some of them are hugely significant. They determine the attitudes that we have to certain people and that certain people have towards us.

They determine our level of access to power or to education or to opportunity. Some of us, we know this in our cultures.

[12:41] This is very much tied up to our stories. It was true then and it's true now that there are by nature, because we are sinful people barriers that we put up.

But Paul here again is pointing to the power of the gospel. He's showing how the good news of Jesus tears down those barriers in his day and in ours too.

So he addresses the three big barriers in society, saying that in Christ Jesus, they do not matter within God's church. So the first of which is race.

There's neither Jew nor Greek. Now, if you were to ask the false teachers, this would be their ultimate insider outsider. We're on the inside. We've got the promises. We're God's people.

Everyone else is on the outside. But in Jesus, we discover that we are all equal. We're equal in our need. Jewish people need Jesus.

[13:40] Non-Jewish people need Jesus. We all need God's grace in our lives. And we're equal in our opportunity. This isn't a promise just for certain people, certain races.

God's grace is open to all. The invitation is extended globally. So Christianity is the one truly global religion because it's not tied to race or culture or class or any of those things.

So there is no Jew or Greek. There is neither slave nor free. Class does not matter in the gospel. We know this, that wealth and education and privilege, they're a really big deal. You have some people that have them, other people that aspire to have them. We know this in Edinburgh, in our own city, education is a huge deal, a huge point of conversation across the board.

And here we have a reminder that the gospel cuts across classism. It cuts across snobbery or elitism. It reminds us that while money does buy much, does create opportunity, God's love always comes as a free gift of grace, therefore is open to all.

[15:01] And we shouldn't have barriers based on whether we're rich or poor. And then he comes to the other big division in his day, which was gender. There is neither male nor female, for you're all one in Christ Jesus.

So this again was a massive gap. There was a real lack of rights for women in Paul's day. There was abuse and exploitation across the board.

And sadly, we see that sometimes not much changes. You watch the media, you think of the Me Too movement, and you see that there are still powerful men who would abuse women.

One of the things that people were shocked by when they watched Jesus was the amount of dignity and value that he showed to women.

He was so different to the other teachers and who he welcomed, who he spent time with. And it's a reminder that there is full rights in Jesus.

[15:59] Anyone can enjoy all of God's promises, regardless of race or class or gender. Now, Paul is not saying that these differences don't exist, because of course they do.

We see that. But he is saying these differences are not a barrier, should never be a barrier to knowing and enjoying God. And we need to be so careful that we don't construct barriers that stop certain people from coming to hear about Jesus.

And he's also saying, again, that our primary label is who we are in Christ, not those other things. That's not how we define ourselves.

We define ourselves in relation to the Lord Jesus Christ. Next up, verse 29. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed and heirs according to the promise.

Or to put it another way, in Christ, I am a child of Abraham. Because here Paul is reminding these Gentile Christians that they've been connected to the story of Abraham, to the story of Abraham, the father of faith.

[17:14] Here is a reminder to us that if we're trusting in Jesus, we are connected to a whole new family of faith, stretching from Abraham all the way through time and into eternity.

And again, this was good news for these guys, perhaps beginning to feel a sense of isolation from their family because of their faith, perhaps losing rights and privileges.

Comes as good news to us as well. Maybe you're the only Christian in your family and you can sometimes feel really isolated or lonely because of that. Maybe you're new to the city, a new student who's just arrived and you feel far from family and the church that you belong to.

Well, here is a reminder that Jesus connects us together in a family tree. And he connects us also in local church families. So let me again encourage you if you're new to the city, especially if you're a new student looking to grow and mature, then find a gospel church to plug into either here or somewhere else.

But as we take a step back and we think about what Paul has said in these few verses, notice the levels of connection that are involved. So he's saying by faith, we can say we are in Christ.

[18:30] So we belong to Jesus. We love Jesus. He loves us. I am his and he is mine. We have that vital connection to Jesus, our Savior.

But the result is that we are also connected to God as Father. We have access to God. And we'll discover down in verse 6, we're also connected to the Spirit.

And we're connected to God's church as brothers and sisters. So part of this new identity that we receive in Christ is we get these new relationships, a new sense of connection.

The last label that Paul gives to us, we're going to focus on chapter 4, those first seven verses. In Christ, I am an adopted child of God.

In this section, we really get to the high point of God's grace to us. We get to the peak. We get to the pinnacle of our privilege as Christians. We actually get to the goal of why God rescues us.

[19:36] God rescues us. God forgives us so that he might bring us into his family. Think about what happened to the people in Israel when they were released from slavery in Egypt.

They were brought to Mount Sinai to become the children of God. We are saved to be brought into God's family. And again, in this section, Paul is constantly answering that attack from the Jewish false teachers that you need to live under Jewish ceremonial law to really be saved.

Paul is going to give confidence that if your faith is in Jesus Christ alone, then you are a child of God and you are heirs along with Jesus. You don't need to keep the law in order to earn your place in the family.

So there are two different but connected pictures going on. The first is in verses 1 to 3. Let's read those. What I'm saying is that as long as the heir is a child, he's no different from a slave, although he owns the whole estate.

He is subject to guardians and trustees until the time set by his father. So also, now here's the parallel. So also when we were children, we were in slavery under the basic principles of the world.

[20:54] So the picture is this. It's a child. Think about a child of a wealthy landowner back in the Roman times. So either a young child or a teenager, even someone in their early 20s.

Paul is saying, while you had that promise of inheriting all this land, while you're still a child, you're no better off than a slave until that moment when you come of age.

So the father would say maybe around 25, okay, you can now inherit. But before that, up until mid-teens perhaps, under the control of guardians that existed to discipline and to expose failings. And then they'd come under the control of these trustees until the time of 25. And what Paul is saying, just as that was restrictive for a child waiting to inherit, just as it was temporary because that child was always looking forward to freedom.

So the law was a temporary restriction waiting for fullness and freedom in the Lord Jesus Christ. So that's why in verse 3, he can say, when we were children, we were in slavery under the basic principles of the world.

[22 : 06] And then he'll go on to say, but God sent his son to redeem. Jesus offers freedom from those basic principles. This is Paul saying life under the law was a restrictive burden.

It was a temporary restriction, restraining sin, in order to keep people longing for the promised Savior. So then when he says in verse 4, when the time had fully come, this is the picture of now is the coming of age.

That God the Father had set the timetable. At just the right time, Jesus would enter into history and usher in all of these rich promises. So the coming of Jesus marks that shift from being a child who's no better off than a slave, living under the law, to now freedom and full inheritance for those who are trusting in Jesus.

So here is Paul's way of saying, why in the world would you go back to the law? Because in Christ, you've got your inheritance by grace.

And then the picture slightly changes, but again pointing to the privileged status that we have in Christ. So if we read from verse 4, when the time had fully come, God sent his son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive the full rights of sons.

[23 : 32] That's the important phrase, the full rights of sons, literally the adoption of sons. Or again in verse 7, so you're no longer a slave, but a son. And since you're a son, God has made you also an heir.

So there was another practice to do with inheritance back in Paul's day in Roman times. So if there was a wealthy landowner who didn't have children, he had a problem.

Who's going to inherit everything when I die? So that landowner could legally adopt a slave to make him part of the family, so he had someone to pass on his inheritance to.

And here is Paul saying this is what God has done for us. That God has not just forgiven us, not just redeemed and rescued us, he's done that so that we might receive the full rights of sons.

That we are rescued by Jesus to be adopted by God the Father. In Paul's day and in our day, there is a process involved in adoption.

[24 : 44] There is a change of legal status that's involved, a change of family name. And Paul says that in the gospel, in trusting in Jesus, we get the name of God on us.

That we get a change of legal status. Now we belong to God. He is our King. He is our Father in heaven, in Christ. I am a child of God.

And the evidence for that, we find that in verse 6. The assurance of that, because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts. The Spirit who calls out, Abba, Father.

The Spirit of his Son is like our adoption papers. Here's how we know that this is true. God has placed his Spirit in our hearts. And the Spirit's work in our lives is to help us to feel and to know what is already true.

So Jesus comes and he finishes the work of redemption by dying on the cross to take away our sin, to face the penalty due to it, to forgive us, to bring us to God.

[25 : 53] And then he gives us the Spirit so that we would know that this is true. That we can be assured that God loves us, that he is for us.

Assuring us that we are in the family. And it says that at the end of verse 6, this is the Spirit who calls out, Abba, Father. This is the way that Jesus prayed.

So one of the results of our adoption is that we can pray like Jesus. We've got this access to the Father like Jesus had. So whereas before we perhaps thought of prayer as a duty or a discipline, something that we need to know to do because we know that that's what Christians do.

Now it's a joy. We come to this Father who loves us. We've got this security of knowing that we belong to him, that we can share our joys with him.

We can share our troubles with him. We can call out to him for help and know that he loves us and he is there for us. And so adoption gives us this wonderful privilege of being able to pray and have this vital, intimate connection with God our Father.

[27 : 03] And so we have in this little section a picture of God's love for us. Imagine a slave standing in a Roman marketplace in chains and unsure of what the future held for them.

And then the emperor of Rome strides into the market square and speaks to the person in charge of selling these slaves. And he pays some money and he looks over at the slave and he declares, the emperor declares, you are free to go.

And as the chains come off, he also announces, you will come and live with me and all of my vast fortune will be yours.

This is what it means to be adopted by God when we are in Christ, when our faith is in Jesus. Paul is saying knowing Jesus takes us from living lives of slavery to living on the king's family estate.

We are adopted by God's grace and it's all because we are in Christ. He tells us how it happens in verses 4 and 5.

[28 : 19] So we saw in verse 4, So here's a reminder that the process of becoming a child of God, belonging to God, being saved, is God's initiative.

God in love and mercy sends his son to rescue us by grace. And we discover that Jesus comes to be a perfect representative.

So Jesus, the son of God, is sent. And in verse 4, we're told that he's born of a woman. So in those two phrases, we're told Jesus is fully God, so he can represent God and he's fully human.

He can represent us. He embraces all the limitations and experiences the same kind of needs as us. He lives life like us, except that he never sinned.

And he did that so that he might, again in verse 4, be born under law. He might live under the obligations like us to keep God's law perfectly.

[29 : 30] So where we can't, because we fail, because we sin, Jesus can and does. Our perfect representative positively meets all the obligations of the law by perfectly obeying at every point.

And then he satisfies the demands of justice for lawbreaking as he dies on the cross. Not for anything he had done, but for the things that we have done.

And he has done that in order, verse 5, to redeem those under law that we might receive the full rights of sons.

The word redeem is the word for rescue. Jesus doesn't come to give us a helping hand. He comes to rescue us when we are slaves and unable to get to God by ourselves.

He rescues us by securing for us total forgiveness. He rescues us by gifting to us his perfect record of righteousness.

[30 : 36] He sets us free to belong to God. And so here is this wonderfully comprehensive message that Paul gives to Christians who are struggling with their identity.

Is it enough for me to believe in Jesus? Do I need to become like these people over here? He says to them in verse 7, You're no longer a slave, but a son. Since you're a son, God has made you also an heir.

This is who you are by God's grace, he says to them. Live as a son of God. Live as a daughter of God. Don't live as a slave. So he's giving us these powerful gospel labels to answer those crises of identity that we suffer from from time to time.

So the question for us as we come to our close is, will being in Christ transform how we view ourselves? Will we let that shape our sense of identity?

So that when others would want to make us feel worthless and less than, will we tell ourselves in Christ, I am a child of God and I know that he loves me.

[31 : 55] When our past comes back to haunt us or when we are troubled by guilt or shame, will we say to ourselves, I am clothed in the righteousness of Christ.

When fear would stop us sharing our faith, when we feel dreadfully insecure, will we remind ourselves, I am loved by God and he has sent his spirit to help me, to speak with me as I seek to serve my Savior.

When we look in the mirror, will rescued by Jesus, and adopted child of God be what you and I see. Let's pray.