

Galatians 2:20, Colossians 3:3-4 “Defined in Christ”

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[0 : 0 0] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama.! Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.

! Father, could it really be true that here's a room full of princes and princesses, children of the King of Heaven, the God of the universe? We don't feel like that often. We often don't live like that. But God, you are the one who decrees all things as they will be. You speak and it comes to be. And so, would you make it so that we would be your children, that we would live as your children? Would you even now shape us by your Word the way you would have your children to be? We ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

That is, that's really my heart for us this morning as we open God's Word together, that we would see the wonder, the joy, even the freedom of finding our identity in union with Christ. That instead of having to go out on an exhausting search for our sense of self and worth, like nearly everyone has to do these days, that we would say, hallelujah, we are who you say we are. God, you're the one who defines us. Last week we started a summer series on this inseparable relationship, the relationship we have with God by faith in Christ. Not just admiring Jesus from afar, but so close to Him moment by moment. We said the Bible talks about union with

Christ largely as you in Christ, like being on an airplane, and also as Christ in you, like being a part of the house where God lives. And today we're going to look at multiple passages that show us that this reality is to be what defines us. What ultimately gives us our sense of self when you ask, who am I? Or your sense of worth, am I valuable? Really important questions that we find the answer to in Christ. Before we get there, I want to reflect for a few minutes on how we often define our own identities. And I just want to warn you up front, I'm so thankful that many of you will start to feel uncomfortable with how long it is taking us to get to God's Word. That's a good thing. We want to go there first. So I'm asking for you to be a little bit patient with me. It's a bit unusual for me too, how long it will take. But will you trust me that we're going there and that we will find the solution to our struggle in God's Word? Okay? When you think of other ways that we define ourselves, what am I talking about? What I'm getting at is when someone says to you, tell me a bit about yourself.

Where do you start? What's the first things you go to? Biblical writers rarely say, I'm a Christian, but they did often say, I'm someone in Christ, referencing this defining relationship that they have with God. If you asked me when I was a kid, I would have referenced baseball very quickly. When I was seven, I was a great baseball player to the extent you can be as a seven-year-old. By the time I made it to high school, I was a good baseball player. And as a freshman, when you win the state championship and you feel unbeatable, that becomes a significant part of your sense of being valuable to other people around you, especially at school, right? For those of you who are baseball fans, the rest of my career, after my freshman year, my ERA went steadily up and my batting average went steadily down. For those of you who are not baseball fans, that is the opposite direction of where you want them to head.

[4 : 46] The trajectory of my career was such that I went from great baseball player to good baseball player. And by the end of high school, colleges assured me I was not a baseball player at all. That was problematic for me. Some of you have had an experience like that, perhaps. I was a great engineer somewhere else.

I came to Huntsville, I was a good engineer. And then I got laid off. And suddenly, when I didn't even see it coming, I was not an engineer. That can be really unsettling.

Thankfully for me, I had started diversifying my investments, so to speak. I knew I was desperately sensitive that I needed to be worthwhile to others, especially to colleges and girls. I needed them to think I was worth something. I better be a smart kid or a good church kid, not just an athletic kid. I need enough options that I'll have something to hold on to. Maybe you've done something similar in an effort to be a good mother or friend or elder or volunteer. See, in my generation and those older than me, we have a tendency to find our sense of self from the roles that we fill and achieving some level of success in them. Achieving that identity. I'm a husband. I'm a pastor. I'm a father of three.

My identity is achieved. And someone loves me for what I've done. So I'm worthy. Right? You see this in movies from around the time that I was born. Chariots of Fire Olympic sprinter Harold Abrams talks about being scared before the hundred meter dash. And he says, quote, I'll have ten lonely seconds to justify my whole existence. Forever in pursuit of being worthwhile.

Not sure if even winning will secure that for him. This is the classic American perspective voiced by Rocky in a movie that I must confess I have only watched clips of. Sorry. But the night before his showdown with Apollo Creed, Rocky walks into the empty arena and he stands in the ring thinking about the match the next day. And later he says to Adrian, all I want to do is go the distance. If I can go that distance, I'm going to know for the first time in my life that I weren't just another bum from the neighborhood. Can you feel that longing to achieve an identity? I want to know I'm not just another bum from the neighborhood. I want to be somebody. I want to prove to myself and to others that I'm somebody. Now, if you're younger, you may think that's all crazy.

[8 : 04] Increasingly, you don't achieve your sense of identity that way. You do it differently. Nowadays, what our culture tells you is don't wear yourself out like Abrams or Rocky, being what other people want you to be, filling some role that they've got for you, that identity. No, no, no. No, you do you, right? I mean, live your own truth. You're free to discover, to create even your own identity.

I think the best word today may be to customize your identity. It's what we do with everything else, right? Drop a filter on that picture. Substitute a little bit of this and add some of that. And you do you. And the result will be you'll be you. You'll be somebody, right? And you'll be free is the promise. Sounds really good, doesn't it? There's actually a lot of truth there. It gets a lot right.

But what we're finding, the longer we live in it, is that it can be just as empty and just as exhausting as the classic version of achieving your own identity. I won't explain all the reasons, but many of you have experienced it. See, if you don't know who you are, then there's a lot of pressure to customize really well. And then to curate that identity that's really fragile. Because when you open up every possibility, all the choices in the world before you, where to go to school, whom to love, whether to work, it can be overwhelming. To the point that young people increasingly face crippling anxiety about their identity. How do you know when it's good enough? And even when you're sure it is, if you're the only one who told you that it was good enough, how do you keep it that way? If the good enough was only made up by you, how do you know it will be tomorrow? What are you going to feel when you wake up? We start to feel anxious. We start to feel trapped, like Elsa. Elsa wasn't the first princess to throw off the expectations of her parents and her community, but she took what Ariel and

Rapunzel and many others had started to a new level, didn't she? In a movie that I have seen, Frozen, count on me for the animated ones. Elsa tells herself, quit being the good girl that everyone tells you you always have to be. Uncover your true self and do what? Let it go. Let it go. But don't miss this. Look at the cultural honesty in this film. In that triumphant moment, she is actually building her own ice prison, isn't she? I mean, sure enough, she's got an identity, but she's distant from everyone else. She's trapped. Does anybody believe she's really going to find joy and peace there?

No, we know she's not. Increasingly, we see how putting myself at the center to achieve or to customize my own identity that I find somewhere deep within. It actually distances me often from others and consistently from God. So on top of that, we end up with young and old people asking, who am I? And looking up years later after trying to answer that question and feeling unfulfilled and exhausted. Anyone relate? Is there an alternative? Is there any other way? Wouldn't you like another option from one of those? Even if you don't like this idea at first that God's going to show us in His Word, will you listen to the difference that it may make from the struggle that you feel? Maybe the place you're still living right now. God says He defines our identity for us so that it is received, not achieved.

[12 : 40] Think back to Adam. All the way back in the garden, Adam, with no other source of validation, gets his sense of self, his sense of worth from his relationship with God, right? God who finds his identity solely in himself, gives Adam an identity as his image bearer in relationship to God. That's the design for us to find our identity in God. But starting with Adam at the fall, we've decided we're going to look for our worth in other places. We're going to find it somewhere else, longing to be more in control, to be more impressive to others. And so what happens is that in Jesus, in Christ, God moves toward us to bring us back from the idols that we've chased after to that primary identity we've received from Him. That's what He's calling us back to. That's what Galatians 2 and Colossians 3 are describing. Told you we were going to get to the Bible, okay? Here we are. In context, these passages are actually addressing our two different ways of achieving identity.

See, in Galatians, Paul's talking to people being told they need to do enough, to be good enough religiously, and Paul says, no way! Galatians 2, 20, I have been crucified with Christ. It is 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. By faith, I'm in the Son of God. United to Jesus is the only life that I have now. Gone is every achieved identity. The good enough baseball player, the good enough father, the good enough pastor. Those versions of me don't live any longer because I've died and been raised in union with Christ. See what he's saying? Christianity is not self-improvement. It's not.

It is a new self. I live in Him. If anyone is in Christ, He is a new creation, not just a little bit better version, keep trying harder, a new creation. Colossians 3 is going to say the same thing.

But there's a different situation in Colossae when Paul writes to them. Here Paul writes to people who are being told, Jesus is fine, you can have Him as a piece of your identity, that's kind of cool, maybe in some circles. But what you really need is something a bit more, something more unique, something special, something secret, if you're really going to be fulfilled. And Paul's been telling them that's not it. You have fullness in Christ, chapter 2, verse 10. You've got it. Now Colossians 3, at verse 3. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory. Your life is hidden with Christ. In fact, Christ is your life. That's very straightforward. There's no other version of you living. You died, right? The one where you customize your identity, where you sought to find worth in the uniquely curated version of yourself. It's gone. You don't need it. Christ is your life. You are hidden in Him.

That's the picture I want to give you today for union with Christ. Christ is your life. You are hidden in Him. You are hidden in Him. You are hidden in Him. You are hidden in Him. Rather than a tiger or an elephant, let's pick one we can all cheer for.

[16 : 52] Sprocket, the beloved trash panda. Okay? Imagine at the end of a long day, you drive out to the trash panda's game. You go to the dressing room, and you get in costume, in sprocket. Okay? That's your job. Just imagine that's what you do every night that there's a home game. When you do that, you pull up the outfit, you put the head on.

You are hidden in sprocket, aren't you? Nobody sees the guy who yelled at his kids earlier in the day. The guy who messed up the presentation at work, they don't know that's you.

They see the same big smile on your face, even if you don't feel like it and you're not smiling at all. Still looks the same to them. You have a new identity for the night, don't you?

You don't live anymore on your own. You are in sprocket. In fact, many people have said this who've served in roles like this. They've found themselves struggling to think that others like them and are excited to be with them, and they have this almost out-of-body experience of kid after kid running up to hug you and want to have pictures taken with you, and they wonder, is that what it's really like to be loved? This is a picture of what God wants you to experience when he unites you to Christ, covered, hidden in Christ. Your primary identity is not what you do, your performance. It's not how you feel, your passions.

It's who you are, united to Christ. Now, that is so countercultural. It is hard for us to imagine what that would really mean. Not what I do. Not what I feel that I think must define me.

[18 : 59] But it's who I am in Christ. This is how you're loved. This is where you belong. Identity received rather than achieved.

What is that identity? How are we defined in Christ? Who does God say we are? If we're going to listen to him, we're going to keep unpacking this in the weeks ahead, but we'll notice briefly three things that these verses highlight. First, you are defined permanently in Christ.

Colossians 3 says you are not merely hidden in Christ now, but at the end of time when Jesus returns, you'll still be with him. You are Christ's. You two are inseparable. You are not just hidden in Christ for one night until the game is over and you take off the costume and put your real clothes back on. No, no, no. This is your true identity. The old me is gone, Galatians 2 says, right?

So this new identity is permanent. And you're defined perfectly in Christ. Both these passages are trying to tell us how to live in right relationship with God. And they say by being in Christ. You are right with God, not through your hard work, not through your special creativity, but through the only person, whoever got it all right, whoever achieved enough, Jesus. So listen again, I hope to say this every week this summer so that we start kind of thinking what it would mean. You and Jesus are so united that whatever happens to him happens to you and vice versa. Listen to 2 Corinthians 5.

For our sake, God made him to be sin who knew no sin. That's Jesus, the one who knew no sin. So that in him we might become the righteousness of God. God made Jesus to become sin where? On the cross specifically. And we say, how is that? How can God just do that? How can God give Jesus what sin deserves when Jesus had no sin? Well, the trick is he connected Jesus to us, didn't he? So Jesus gets what our sin deserved. And then God gives us what Jesus deserved. In him, you become the righteousness of God. Perfect, pure, wearing Jesus's righteous robes. All that God requires of you to be in close relationship the way. And you become the way. And you become the way that he made you to. When you are hidden in Christ, in his son, listen, God delights in you the way those kids run up to sprocket and give him a big hug.

[22 : 06] And they don't even know you. But you're in his son. And then third, you are defined personally in Christ.

Personally in two ways that I think are really encouraging. Colossians says, Christ will appear and you will appear with him in glory. Eternally, perfectly, there will be a distinct you. You don't just meld into Christ. That's not what union with Christ means. You are never separated from Jesus, yes, but you don't become Jesus. You still live forever, personally. And then back to Galatians 2, I am in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me. Man, there's a verse to spend the rest of the rest of the day marveling at, isn't there? Who loved me and gave himself for me, for you personally, singularly, specifically. He loves you so much that he wants you in the family as a child of God. You personally are perfect permanently because you're united to Jesus. You don't have to pretend. You don't have to put on a show. You don't have to go find yourself. You don't have to.

This is who you were made to be and now it's who you always are. Could you breathe in? Take a deep, deep breath of that grace. Your identity is given to you forever.

Let me clarify one thing before we move on to the next question. Religious people can have fake masks too. The distinction, if you're confused, maybe even in your own life, is that religiosity or performance religion, just trying to live better? It's still seeking to achieve an identity. Do you see that?

Even an identity like Christian, for example, rather than to receive an identity like in Christ. I'm valuable when I do enough church things. We sometimes think, y'all, that can't be done.

[24 : 51] It's not how God made us. It's not how we're designed to do enough anything to finally be valuable. It's not what he expects from us. Identity achieving you has to die and be hidden in Christ as you receive the only mask that is the identity God designed you to have from the beginning defined in relationship with him. Think of the difference that makes, by the way. Late pastor Tim Keller says this received identity is the only one that allows us to live with appropriate confidence because it, I love how he says it, it says it, humbles you to the dust and lifts you up to the sky at the same time.

Right? Think about it. You can't take any credit for this identity, can you? Sprocket? Is that you? You didn't make yourself lovable. You yelled at your kids today, but now you're hidden and there's a humble feeling that begins to grow in your heart. Not calling attention to yourself, but also now you're so confident, aren't you? Because you're really loved.

It is really you who is in Jesus, the new you. Y'all are connected. If it's true of him, it's true of you. So you cannot say anymore, I am a failure. Why? Because Jesus is not. He's faithful.

You can't say anymore, I'm worthless. Why? Because Jesus is precious. He is worthy. You can't say anymore, no one loves me. Because Jesus is beloved of his father. So are you.

You see the confidence that it gives you? Those lies that we often believe can no longer be true, but now we have this humble confidence that's not disgustingly self-obsessed. Don't you hate people like that? And it's not disgustingly self-critical. Don't you want to live like that with that kind of joy and confidence and freedom? Well, how do you? I mean, Will, you haven't told me anything I didn't already know this morning, and I still sinfully chase after my own identity. I still hate myself when I look in the mirror. I still get anxious before the big test and depressed after I fail it.

[27 : 38] We're going to keep talking all summer, especially if you want to get practical. Stay for the discussion in the connect hour today. But let me just say it's really good to admit that our hearts still chase after idols. Idols. That's what it is when we don't receive our identity from God and live in it, right?

Everything else we're chasing after. And so how it works is there's a rhythm of repentance and renewal. Daily spend time repenting of places that you see this in your heart and life. Besetting sins, idols that you frequent, identities that you try to achieve. Repent of them and daily spend time renewing your communion with Christ. One little thing that just helps me as I sit at the beginning of each day and try to pray through my day is to say to myself, Christ lives in me. I live in Christ.

So what I've got before me this day is not what I've got, but God, what are we doing, right? Jesus and I, I'm not going anywhere or doing anything by myself. What are we doing today?

If you've often or lately struggled here, try reading this prayer every morning for a couple weeks. It will lead you in repentance and renewal. It's called continual repentance from the valley of vision.

Starts with a reminder of the gospel and a chance to confess your sins. Then let me read you a bit at the end. I have no robe to bring to cover my sins, no loom to weave my own righteousness. I am always standing clothed in filthy garments and by grace am always receiving change of raiment, new clothes.

[29 : 29] For thou dost always justify the ungodly. I'm always going into the far country and always returning home as a prodigal, always saying, Father, forgive me. And thou art always bringing forth the best robe, hiding me in Christ's righteousness. So listen, pray this way. Every morning, let me wear it.

Every evening, return in it. Go out to the day's work in it. Be married in it. Be wound in death in it. Stand before the great white throne in it. Enter heaven in it, shining as the sun.

That's your privilege in Christ. Pray, God, let me live in Christ today. Memorize these verses from Galatians 2 and Colossians 3. Repeat them through the day. Ask God to remind you that you are who he says you are. Sing that song to yourself. Keep this at the forefront of your heart and mind.

I want to answer just one last question this morning because many hearing me say this would say, I hear you and I am confident I know the problem. This is just another way of capitulating to not being enough and giving up on trying hard. And you're giving up twice. You're also giving up on having personal freedom. I know it. Well, I heard you just say, give up the things you really want and toe the line so you may feel okay, but you will never really be free.

Listen, identity in Christ accounts for both of these deeply felt concerns. I hear them a lot. But here's what it says in Christ. You still work hard, but not in order to be accepted. Rather, because you are accepted. So you have worth, purpose in Christ, getting to know the king more, laboring for his kingdom to come everywhere. You can now do almost any work and it's significant, valuable work, but it's not self-defining. It's not burdensome work.

[31 : 51] And in case you're worried that this whole idea is just submitting to the institution and losing yourself, listen, you actually find true freedom in Christ because you're not enslaved any longer to yourself, to the conflicting desires in your soul. Have you experienced that? You're not sure which one to prioritize when you look in here to customize your own identity, but there's competing desires.

You're not enslaved to unattainable standards of performance, to outside affirmation for value. You already have the affirmation of the one who knows perfection when he sees it.

God treasures you personally and permanently. Do you see that? If it were true that God were really good, that he was the maker and designer of everything, that he had the highest standards of anyone in the world, then this would be the only identity that would make sense. Do you see that?

It'd be the only one you would want to have. It's the one where he values you, where he affirms you, where he says you're who you're supposed to be. Maybe he is.

Maybe he's inviting you into the true freedom that you've been trying to demand for yourself by pushing him and others away. One commentator writes so helpfully, when the Spirit comes to us in redemption, uniting us to Jesus Christ, we do not lose our true identity.

[33 : 30] Rather, it is restored. Since we were not created to be autonomous, self-made people, but we're created to be in communion with God, when the Spirit leads us back into communion with God in Christ, we do not lose our true selves, we regain them.

To be fully human is not to be autonomous, but to be in communion with God. Amen. Listen, at some colleges at graduations, students who have spent the last year or more in costume, hidden, secret, as the team mascot for their college that whole year, they get to come out, and then in front of a huge stadium of people, take off the headgear, take off the mask, as the whole stadium cheers and celebrates a person that they have cheered with all season, all year, but never really seen and known, and they only see him now.

What a great moment. Because you are in Christ, God looks at you, and he sees Jesus, the one you're covered in.

What a wonder. He looks at you and sees Jesus, but you are not erased. When Christ, who is your life, appears, he appears?

What else? Then you also will appear with him in glory. You will be revealed with the triumphant celebration of the sons of God and all of his and your glory, fully restored to the image of his son because you're still hidden in him and you're fully and freely you.

[35 : 20] And God cheers. Heaven erupts in celebration and you get your identity, your worth, in relationship with the God who made you to find it only in him.

What a day. What a celebration you have because you are always and forever in Christ. This table is here to deepen your awareness of your union with him.

By faith, you are one with him because he came to unite himself to you, to give himself for you in your place. Jesus explained it this way.

The night he was betrayed, when he took bread and he broke it and he gave it to his disciples as I'm ministering in his name, give this bread to you. He said, take and eat.

This is my body given for you. Do this in remembrance of me. And then after supper he took the cup and said, this cup is the new covenant in my blood shed for many for the forgiveness of sins.

[36 : 27] Drink from it all of you. If you're united to Christ by faith, you don't have to be united to this specific church, just any part of his body.

You come and eat with us this morning and with him. If that's not you, if you haven't trusted Jesus, if you don't see yourself united to him and that he gave his life in your place, then he's here this morning to offer himself to you again.

To say there is an identity that will be given to you as a gift and he offers it to you in himself. Don't come today to the elements at this table.

You can come and observe. You can come. We'd love to pray with you. You're welcome to stay where you are, wherever you're comfortable. What's more important to us is that you see here the God who gives himself for you so that you can be fully free and fully his forever.

That's what he offers you and I offer to you in the name of Jesus. Let's pray and then we'll celebrate together. Jesus, what a great gift and we need it and we struggle to believe that we are actually connected to you so much so that it could be our true identity and so as bread and wine pass our lips might we feel and taste and smell the truth of it that we're loved in Christ more than we can believe.

[38 : 08] Use common elements for a holy purpose in our hearts. We need it and we ask you in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. For more information visit us online at southwood.org