

Identity in Christ

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Date: 01 March 2026

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[0 : 00] Who am I? A teenager walking into high school wonders, where will I fit? Who will I be? A successful businessman finding themselves on the early retire list at their company thinks, who am I?

Who am I? Where do I fit? A young man lying on his bed at night wondering where he fits in the universe. A widow finding her way after the loss of her husband. A 20-something looking for a job and a career wondering who or what she wants to be.

The question of our identity is one that we all think about quite a bit. And in our 21st century, it's become a little bit of a fraught conversation.

I think of the tale of Nkechi Amari Diallo. You may know her more familiarly as Rachel Dolezal. She was a woman who grew up in a family with Caucasian European roots.

But she describes in her book a pull towards black culture. So she came to identify herself as black. She wrote this in her book.

[1 : 35] Yes, my parents weren't black, but that's hardly the only way to define blackness. The culture you gravitate toward and the worldview you adopt play equally large roles.

As soon as I was able to make my exodus from the white world in which I was raised, I made a headlong dash towards the black one. And in the process, I gained enough personal agency to feel confident in defining myself in that way.

Now listen, I don't want to pick her out to disparage her. She's had a hard life from every perusal of her biography, and her story is her own story.

But did you hear what she said at the end? I gained enough personal agency to feel confident defining myself that way.

Underlying her understanding of identity was choice and self-determination. And this mirrors, I believe, a deep-seated cultural belief that is increasing in our day.

[2 : 49] That identity is something that we can choose. It's a matter of personal agency. So we choose a political party or a social cause or a hobbyist group, and we make that our identity.

We lean into some of our given identities. I am a man or a woman. I have a race or an ethnicity or a nationality or a family, and we make that our identity.

Sometimes we fall into building our identities through our work and the investment of our lives, whether it be parents making their children their identity, or social influencers who make their likes and their popularity their identity, or in our careers making our success and our achievements.

Whether we're a student thinking through our grades and how well we perform, becoming our identity. If we're an athlete or an artist, our performance on the field becomes our identity.

Now, I want to point out that this is a very modern way of thinking, I believe, because in the pre-modern world, your identity came from probably three things. It came from your family, your hometown, or the work that you were predetermined to do beforehand.

[4 : 09] So, you were known as Simon, the son of Jonah, right? That was who you were. Or you were John from Galilee. Or you were William the baker. Or, and so on and so forth.

So, this is a modern move. This is something that I think has become more so. And listen, we need to recognize that identity is complex. We have multiple layers of identities.

I am a white, married, American male. I am a part of the Coburn and the Bukock clans of northern European immigrants to America over the last 400 years.

I am a college graduate. I am a member of Trinity Baptist Church. I am an avid soccer fan. And I love Tolkien and the Lord of the Rings. And all of these are a part of who I am. We all have this kind of kaleidoscope of our identity, don't we?

But what is our core identity? Who are you? Has a more essential feel, doesn't it? If someone asked what is the most important thing about you, how would you reply?

[5 : 19] And this is what brings us to our passage in Galatians this morning. And as you may know, if you're visiting, we're doing a series in the book of Galatians. We're looking at Paul's letter to this church.

And we are in Galatians 3, starting in verse 23 this morning. And that's page 914 in your pew Bible, if you want to follow along there.

And in this passage, Paul brings us to understand a gospel response to the question of identity. And it comes in the context of first century Judaism. I was doing more research on this because I know some of you have asked questions.

I found a quote from Malka Simcovich, who is a professor of Jewish studies. And this is what she writes about first century Judaism, which is the background to a lot of this book.

She said this, the three big markers of a common Jewish identity at this time, that is the first century, were circumcision, Shabbat, and the dietary laws.

[6 : 24] Two caveats. In Judea, we'd include purity laws and holidays. And from the middle to the late second temple period, and that would be around the time of Christ and through the first century, Jews everywhere are coming together regularly to read Scripture.

This creates a common identity. Moses and David and Jerusalem and Israel.

We have these Old Testament patterns of keeping the law, circumcision, Sabbath, dietary laws.

And the question is, with the coming of Christ, then, how do Christians understand identity?

How do we understand the basis of our identity in light of the gospel? So that's what we're going to talk about this morning. Here we go. Let's read the passage together if you want to read along with me.

It will be up on the screen as well. Let's read and then ask God for help, and then we'll move ahead. Now, before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned under the coming faith, and imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed.

[7 : 39] So then the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian.

For in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek.

There is neither slave nor free. There is neither male nor female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are a Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.

I mean that the heir, as long as he is a child, is no different from a slave, though he is the owner of everything. But he is under guardians and managers until the date set by his father.

In the same way, we also, when we were children, were enslaved to the elementary principles of the world. But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.

[8 : 49] And because you are sons, God has sent the spirit of his son into our hearts, crying, Abba, Father. So, you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.

Let's pray together. Lord, we thank you for this passage. We thank you for the glorious truths that it holds. And we pray for your Holy Spirit to be at work in us this morning. Lord, we need you to help us not only hear, but understand and, Lord, internalize these truths.

We need you to search our hearts. Because, Lord, we want more than anything to know you and to know what it is that you have done for us in Christ.

Lord, I pray for your help this morning. Give me the words to speak, so that I might speak as I ought. And let us sit under your word together. We pray these things in Jesus' name.

Amen. How are we to understand our identity in light of the gospel? What we see in this passage, Paul has a pattern.

[10 : 02] There's a what used to be and what is now true. A before and an after. Before Christ came and after relating to our identity. And so, we're going to look at that rather than working sequentially through the whole passage.

We'll see that this pattern is repeated at the end of chapter 3 and at the beginning of chapter 4. So, we're going to work through it before and after. So, the before, what did it look like? Well, in verses 23 through 25 and in chapter 4, verses 1 through 3, we see the descriptions of before.

Right? And before, ultimately, the law was the controlling factor for the Jewish people of God. In verse 23, it says, we were captive to the law, imprisoned by it.

Verse 24 says, the law was our guardian. Now, what does this mean? Well, it's a great word, pedagogos, which means we get the word pedagogue from it today.

But various translations of it would be a guardian, a schoolmaster, a tutor, an escort, or a caretaker. As I thought about our words today, this is not a common word today, but the word I might use is governess.

[11:10] Someone who is hired to rule, to take care of, and to discipline, and to instruct children on behalf of parents.

A disciplinarian, a teacher, an overseer, a temporary person who plays a role for a season until those children grow up. So, that's what Paul says.

This was the situation when we were under the law. We were under this, and under means even like in prison. We were held under this kind of, what's the right word?

I didn't write this in my notes because I didn't think about it. Okay, here we go. We'll move on. So, we were under this thing for a while, under the care of a governess for a while, and that governess was the law.

Then, in verse 4, he builds on this concept again. In verse 1, he says, imagine the person, the character of a child in a household, right?

[12:15] They are under guardians and managers. And again, he's picturing bigger households that have servants or other people who would play this role. Guardians, this is a different word than pedagog, but guardians are managers.

He says, though these children are actually members of the family, they're recognized as having all the rights and privileges of children, they don't have the authority yet, right?

They have to wait until the time comes that their father has set for them to step into the full authority and freedom of their childhood, right?

It's almost like their whole lives are like a trust fund, right? We set up trust funds for children sometimes, and our kids can't access them until they become 18 or 21 or 25 or however we determine it, right?

And there's a trustee that oversees that fund on behalf of the child until they grow up. This is what Paul is saying. This is what we all are like spiritually under the law, right?

[13:15] God gave the law, but being under it was like being under this time-bound oversight where we didn't have ultimate authority. And it's interesting when you get to verse 2 of chapter 4 as well, because he says, we were like children enslaved to a predicament of being under the law, being parallel with enslaved to the elemental principles of the world.

Now, this is an interesting move because he's been talking mostly about law and Judaism, and then he brings in this concept. And we see it a little bit further down in chapter 4 and verses 9 and 10, and you could look there to see what it says.

But I think here he has an expansive view of what this means. So, one commentator said that the elemental principles is all that is associated with this fallen world, this present evil age that is under the curse that fell on creation as a result of Adam's rebellion.

So, it's not just talking narrowly about those who are under the Jewish law because they're Jewish Christians trying to figure out how that fits. But he expands his view to say this is for all people, Jews and Gentiles.

And it would include everything from our desire to justify ourselves by our works, our religious works, our good works, our performance. It also includes our human enslavement to our sinful impulses and desires.

[14:49] This is a theme we'll see developed in chapter 5, where our disobedience and selfish living results in sin. All of it is the thinking that reflects Adam and his rejection of God as sovereign, as Lord, as Father, as protector and provider, and our desire to live apart from God on our own terms, in our own way.

And so, I think Paul is making parallel this more narrow idea of living under the law in a very Jewish sense with a more broad sense. We are all under sin because we all have this impulse.

We all have this sin impulse in us that wants to somehow build our identities on our own works. And Paul argues this is not a good thing.

He said, why would you want to go back to that? Why would you want to stay in a guardianship? Why would you want to stay, and the words he uses are strong, enslaved to these things, bound to these things, these things that were meant to be temporary, not permanent, these things that were not meant to bear ultimately the weight that you are giving it by saying, this is what my identity is going to be based on.

And before we go on and look at the after, we need to ask ourselves a similar question. Why do we, too, want to go back?

[16:26] Why do we humanly want to create our own identity when it is, in fact, a terrible burden and a weight? Why do we think that it is better for us to determine it and to live on the hamster wheel of performance and of doing good works and of somehow trying to measure up to some standard when our best works fall short and our worst failures become crushing?

The good news of the gospel is that God did not leave us before, forever.

The law was given to prepare the world for the coming of Christ, to teach us of our need for salvation and for a better Savior, and the coming of Christ brings something new and something better.

So, if you're taking outlines, we just did the before. Now, here's the after. The new identity that Christ brings through faith in Him, which is a better and more permanent thing.

The key verses, again, are 24 through 26, and chapter 4, verses 4 through 5. So, let me read those just so we can hear them again.

[17:44] Chapter 3, verse 24. So then the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God through faith.

And then in chapter 4, verses 4 and 5, he says, But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.

Friends, this is the identity that God wants to bestow upon us through faith in Christ. He calls us sons of God.

Okay, we got to address this, right? Why sons, right? Why sons? That makes it feel like if you're a woman sitting in this sanctuary this morning, you're like, okay, so the men get all this stuff again, and what?

I get the drags, right? No. It comes across as gendered, and we read it that, but he is not talking about gender, but he's talking about status. Because a son in the first century would be the full heir of the blessing of the household.

[18:58] Do you remember the story in the Old Testament where Isaac was getting old, and Esau, the firstborn son, was due to receive his blessing, the blessing of the Father upon the firstborn son.

And Jacob sneaks in with Rachel's help and steals the blessing, and then it's, you know, the shenanigans are on. But the idea is that to be the Son of God is to be that one who receives those blessings, intimacy with the Father, authority, full inheritance of the riches of the Father's household, right?

And Paul here makes very clear that this is not a gendered thing, because we see in verse 28, he says, male and female both are welcomed in and receive this gift of being adopted as sons.

And in case you feel like you're being picked on, the men are called the bride of Christ. So we can talk about that later. We need to recognize that these images, right, are gendered because of their meaning in their context.

And what we need to do is take that meaning and apply it to us in the fullness of what we understand. And this is what we see, that we are all sons of God.

[20:23] And this is a beautiful identity. It is a familial identity. It doesn't mean we're merely participants in a program or a group or a club. We're not just a box that God checks off as part of like, oh, we want to save Him.

Check. We got that done. Let's move on. No, it's a restoring of an intimate relationship with God as a Father. Father. A Father who's rescued us from slavery.

A Father to whom we can run for protection and help. A Father who knows our hearts and knows our need, whom we can cry out to on our darkest days.

A Father who envelops us with the embrace and blessing. A Father who gave up His very own Son for us. Sending Him to the cross to die in our place.

So that we, the rebellious outcast, the prodigal Son, might be welcomed home. This is sonship. [21 : 31] This is the welcome. This is the identity that God gives us. And Paul tells us how wonderful it is as he unpacks these images. In verses 26 through 28, he emphasizes that it is for all people.

Right? For in Christ you are all sons of God. In verse 27, as many have been baptized, all of you, any of you who have believed. Verse 28 makes it very clear.

Neither Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, male nor female. You are all one in Christ. That's the emphasis. And you see how radical and beautiful and wonderful this is.

The greatest social divisions of our world and of our history are overcome because they have no effect on our standing in Christ.

Race and gender and wealth. None of those are a part of how we are justified with God. It is only through faith in Christ that we can be sons of God.

[22 : 37] And this becomes our most fundamental identity that we can all equally enter into.

And what God is doing is this beautiful thing where he is taking the diversity of humanity and he's saying, I'm going to make one people that reflects the entirety of what I have created.

The people made in my image from every tribe and tongue and nation. And to make one people new in Christ. Not following the Jewish law to become Jewish so that one particular ethnic group or political economic group becomes the center of my people.

But so that it would be for all people everywhere. And this is what we see in the book of Revelation, is it not? That around the throne of God worships people from every tribe and tongue and nation saying, Worthy are you to receive honor and glory and praise.

This is what God is doing. And it allows us to address all of our other identities in a beautiful way. Neither Jew nor Gentile.

[23 : 53] Here's the thing. We all have a racial identity. That's just true. A racial identity, a national identity. We don't have to deny them and say we don't have them. We do. But rather than thinking we need the right one in order to justify ourselves, we can simply say, no, I am a part of the beautiful picture of the people of God that he is bringing.

And I'm going to bring the uniqueness of my experience and my culture to add to this beautiful picture of what God is doing.

Right? Right? This is the same thing with socioeconomic status, with slaves and free, saying it doesn't matter. Nobody deserves to be in the people of God.

Rich and poor alike are poor before the cross. We have nothing to offer, and Christ gives us everything. And so he says we need to be a people that envelops everyone and doesn't treat one another according to our status.

It means we can enjoy exploring being male and female as good gifts, knowing that we are equally, radically equally loved and treasured by God.

[25 : 07] How different this was from the first century, where some Jewish men would stand up and say, I thank you, God, that I am not a Gentile, a woman, or a slave.

We can enjoy this diversity, this complementarity that God created with men and women in the people of God, and rejoice in it.

And look, if you've been at Trinity for a while, you know we believe that there are certain roles that may be assigned specifically to men and women, but our gender is not our identity.

And so we can walk into those roles joyfully and fully because there's a beauty in that complementarity. This is what God is doing as He says, here's an identity that embraces all of us equally and fully.

Now we need to acknowledge that the church has not always lived up to this calling, and that might be an understatement. Christians have often made other identities primary, and in doing so have divided over race, over gender, over socioeconomics.

[26 : 29] We have privileged some over others. But friends, this is not the gospel of Christ. This is not the teaching of Galatians 3 and 4, because He says we are all sons of God without distinction, without qualification.

We have nothing to bring, but in Christ we have everything. And so by faith in Him, we are able to receive this blessing to be the Son of God.

And this sonship, not only does it come with all of this, but it comes with an inheritance. 1 Peter says it, Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, according to His great mercy He

has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead to an inheritance which is imperishable, undefiled, and kept in heaven for you who by God's power are being guarded through faith, for a salvation ready to be revealed at the last time. Do you know what that means, friends? When we are God's children, we will be participants fully in the riches of the kingdom of God.

And we have a foretaste now, and we have a fullness that is to come that will be beyond our imagination in its glory and beauty and satisfaction.

[27 : 58] God and His household will be the best place ever, and we will rejoice that we are sons and daughters of God in there.

And part of the foretaste of that we see at the end of this passage in verses 6 and 7, the foretaste of that is that He has given us His Spirit now.

We haven't talked that much about the Holy Spirit because we're going to get there in chapter 5, but this has been a thread throughout the whole thing, hasn't it? Do you know how we know who's in the people of God? Who is justified? The Gentiles and the Jews both have been justified by Christ. How do we know this? Because they've received the Spirit of God. Because God has given us His Spirit, put it inside of us, so that we might live with this communion, so that we have the Spirit of Christ in us, so that just as Jesus was the Son of God and called the Father, Father, so we too may cry out and call the God of the universe, Abba, Father, Daddy.

This new identity comes with this new relationship that we have because of the Spirit. And so, friends, in Christ, the new has come, and it is better than the old.

[29 : 28] It is better than the identities that the first century Jews built by observing the works of the law and thinking, this is how I am. It is better than the works righteousness that our hearts bend to over and over again, our self-made identities.

God says, forsake those and come to the new and better thing that I will bestow upon you. I will adopt you into my family, you who are outside of it because of your sin.

I will adopt you in, and I will embrace you. And like the father of the prodigal son, I will look for you from afar. I will run to you, and I will envelop you in my embrace, and I will give you all of the signs of being my son, my child, my people.

Friends, can we see this? Can we take hold of it? What is the basis of your identity today? What have you looked to?

What have you leaned on? Look instead to Christ. What a glorious thing. Knowing Christ means we don't have to justify ourselves. Knowing Christ means we don't have to create anything more.

[30 : 50] He gives us a better identity than our family, than our ethnicity, than our race, than our nationality, than our sex, nor our gender, nor our sexual preference, nor our religious performance, nor our good deeds, or our marital status, or our success as parents, or our career achievement, or our academic success, or anything else.

We know that Christ calls us. His son. A son of God. And we can rest in that.

And you know what, friends? When we rest in that identity, we are resilient people, not moved by the frailties and attacks of our fallen world.

We are more grounded, because we have a security in knowing who we are, and knowing that no one can take that away from us. We become giving people, because rather than running after our identity, we know what we've already been given, and we can now give to others.

We are people who are full of joy, and praise, and thanksgiving, because we know the God of the universe is our Father, who has made us His children.

[32 : 09] We know who we are, because we know whose we are in Christ, children of God. Let's pray. Lord, thank You for this Word.

Lord, I pray now that by Your Spirit, You would be showing us where we have put our trust, and what we have looked to for our identity.

Lord, help us as we meditate on these truths today and in the days to come. Lord, would You fill us again with a renewed sense of awe and wonder, of thankfulness and joy, that through faith in Christ, we can be children of Yours.

I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.