

Galatians 3:23-29

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[0 : 00] My wife and I watched a movie last week.

It was the not-quite-blockbuster movie starring Owen Wilson called The Big Year, which you probably haven't seen. The main character in The Big Year, there are three main characters actually, but the main character that I want to focus on tonight is the character that Owen Wilson was in, that played, and his name is Kenny Bostick.

And Kenny Bostick's key identity, key pursuit in life is to be the reigning world champion bird watcher.

In one year, he viewed 732 distinct birds, species of birds in North America in the span of one calendar year. And in the movie, he is entering into and pursuing his next big year.

The story is all about Kenny, a man desperately committed to being the champion bird watcher in the world.

[1 : 28] It's not a hobby, he tells his wife. It's more like a calling. It's who I am. It's what I do. Sorry, I can't do Owen Wilson very well. In his pursuit of this, he ends up running over school children on the boardwalk in a nature preserve.

He ends up deceiving his competitors and sending them off on a wild goose chase to find a bird that isn't there. More tellingly, we see the effects in his relationship with his wife.

In fact, it's his third wife, who seems to be the first one who's actually okay with him being a bird watcher and flying off at the drop of a hat to try to catch the blue-footed booby, which is a bird, in case you're wondering.

And so she only asked one thing of him. She says, I want you to be home enough so that we can pursue a dream of having children together.

But as his year continues, as the pressure mounts, as freak weather patterns and rare bird sightings prompt him to, at the drop of a hat, fly off to the far reaches of North America to see the pink-footed goose, we see his life moving towards a crisis.

[3 : 00] And the crisis point is brilliantly portrayed in the movie, where you see his wife sitting in the doctor's office, having finished the fertility treatments, waiting for the final procedure where they will try to have children.

She's in a gown waiting. And he's sitting on an airplane, tapping his foot, waiting for the plane to land. She's sitting, waiting.

He's running through the airport to get to his car. She's sitting, waiting. The nurse comes in. Is your husband here yet? Do you know that there's only a certain window in which this is going to work?

He's racing out of the parking lot, down the street. He's calling his wife, honey, I'm on my way, I'm on my way. She's waiting. The nurse comes in.

Is your husband coming? Wife says, wait, wait, he's on his way. He'll be here soon. And then come back to the car and the phone rings.

[4 : 03] The snowy owl, the one that got away, the bird he's never seen. He can go see it. It would cement his victory that year as the reigning bird watching champion.

Back to the wife, sitting, waiting. And then finally, to Kenny Bostick, driving back into the airport parking lot, getting his parking ticket and running off.

Now, my guess is almost none of you. There might be one of you tonight. Almost none of you have a temptation to become the best birder in the world.

Or, right? Is that fair to say? And my guess is most of you would see his behavior as extreme. And that's probably true.

And you know what? The other thing is that, just to sort of round this out, there's nothing wrong with being a birder. I had seminary professors. I had my best friend who married me. One of my bosses.

[5 : 13] They were all birders. They were great guys. But for Kenny Bostick, his birding became more than an activity. It became an identity.

And when this identity was threatened, he became ruthless in his defense of it. He treated people as means to an end of producing and promoting this identity.

And in the end, he chose being the champion birder over loving his wife. It was no longer an activity.

It was not a title. It was who he was. And his life was devoted to building, promoting, and protecting this identity. And when we see him in this light, it's when I think we...

I don't think Kenny Bostick is as different from us as we might want to think. Because I think we have a tendency to take all sorts of good things. Woodworking.

[6 : 16] Fantasy football. Antiquing. Cross-stitch. Maybe a job. A professional course. A career. Maybe a relationship. A role.

In home or in society. We take these things and we make them our identity. Why do we do this? Why is our identity so important to us?

Because identity gives us a place of belonging. A sense of purpose. A sense of meaning in life. And you know what? When we hit a sweet spot where we're in it. Where we're living the identity that we want to live.

It's glorious. It's beautiful. It's a rush. And you know what? When we don't have it, we feel lost.

Who am I? Why am I here? Where do I belong? Why do I belong? So the question for you tonight and for me tonight is this.

[7 : 20] What identity are you building for yourself? Here's some diagnostic questions you can ask yourself to think about this. What's the first thing you want someone to know about you when you meet them?

What do you want to highlight on your resume? Where do you spend the predominant amount of your discretionary money, time, passion? Or on a more negative side, where have you sensed tension in your relationships?

Your friends? Your spouse? Your family? Over an activity or a pursuit that you're committed to? What have you felt defensive about lately?

Is there an identity behind that? Where have you found yourself even attacking others because they have threatened something about who you are?

Whether it's in your mind or in your actual words. This pursuit of building our own identity is something that I think we all do.

[8 : 33] So what are we supposed to do with this? And more importantly, what does the gospel of Jesus Christ have to say to us? This is where we turn to the Bible and we think, what does it have to say?

If you want to turn with me in the pew Bibles in front of you to page 974. We're continuing tonight and looking at the book of Galatians. And we're looking at the end of chapter 3.

And as we do this, I just want to recap. What Paul has been arguing for most centrally in this is that the core way that we are able to know God, to have a relationship with God, to be accepted by God, is to be justified by faith.

What does that mean? It means that when we believe in Jesus, he gives us a righteousness that we can't make on our own. He gives us a right standing, a right place, or maybe given what we are starting to talk about tonight, he gives us an identity that is not our own.

So that we can be acceptable to God. So that God will look at us and say, yes, you were mine. And Paul is saying this is something that we cannot do on our own.

[9 : 51] We must receive it by faith in Jesus Christ. And more specifically, if you've been here and you've, the last couple of weeks, as Pastor Nick and Greg have preached through chapter 3, you've seen the question of the law and the Old Testament law and can we be righteous by the works of the law?

No. Well, then why was the law given? Paul is arguing the law was given for lots of reasons, but it was not given so that by keeping it, we might be able to find the acceptance by God that we all crave.

Paul is saying the law could never do that. But now something has come that can. Now something greater than the law has come. Now there is real hope.

And this hope is in Christ. So why would you want to turn back? There are false teachers in Galatia who said, hey, if you really want the true identity of God's people, if you really want to be acceptable to God, you have to keep this law of Moses.

You have to do all the things, circumcision, ceremonial laws, all of it. And Paul says, no, don't go back to those things because God has given us something finally, truly, that will make us acceptable to God.

[11 : 15] And it's in Christ. So Galatians chapter 3, I'm going to start in verse 23, although tonight I'm only going to talk about verses 26 through 29, but read with me.

Starting in verse 23 of chapter 3. Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned under the coming faith that, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed.

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 Gentile.

There's neither slave nor free. There is no male and female. For you're all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring.

[12 : 19] Heirs according to the promise. Please pray with me. Lord, we thank you for your word. We thank you for the great joy that you have spoken to us and you have made yourself known to us in your word.

And I pray tonight that your word would penetrate into our hearts and our minds. Lord, I pray that you would help us to understand it. For your glory. For your name's sake.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. What I want you to see centrally tonight is that in this passage, what I believe Paul wants us to know tonight is that out of the slavery of self-built identities, we can joyfully find a transformational reality of a new identity found in Christ Jesus.

And as we explore that, I hope that you have already started to identify with Kenny Bostick and this exercise that I think we all are engaged with of saying, of building this sense of who am I?

So the focus of this passage and the rest of the message tonight is going to be about what does it mean to be in Christ? What's the significance of it? How does it give us an identity that can change us?

[13 : 48] And so I want to look at two questions. One is, what does it mean to be in Christ? And then two, what difference does it make when our identity is in Christ? So what does it mean to be in Christ?

Well, if you have the next six hours, I can tell you all about the New Testament theology of being in Christ. But I assume that most of you have places to go. So we are not going to cover this topic comprehensively by any means.

But I want you to see in verses 26 through 29 of chapter 3, how many times Paul refers to this concept of being in Christ. It's a location in space and time and relationship that Paul is referring to.

Look in verse 26. In Christ Jesus, you are all sons of God by faith. He's saying we enter into this relationship through faith. We believe it, we receive this identity in Christ Jesus.

Verse 27, for you are baptized into Christ Jesus. Baptism here is a symbol of faith. And you've put on Christ Jesus. Image is like a cloak. We put Jesus around us like a beautiful garment.

[15 : 02] Verse 28, he says, there are all these distinctions, but we are all one in Christ Jesus. Verse 29, he says, but if you are Christ's, if you are of Christ, if you are so deeply identified with and owned by Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring and heirs of a promise.

This idea of being in Christ is all over this passage. In fact, Paul doesn't actually develop the idea very much. He just kind of states it over and over again.

So how are we going to explore it? Well, I want to point out a couple of comparisons and a couple of word pictures from scripture just so that we can wrap our minds a little bit about what does it mean to be in Christ?

First, the comparisons. In the passage I read, starting verse 23, Paul gave two images about the law and he's contrasting being in Christ with being under the law.

He says, being under law was like being in a prison. Because the law showed you your sin, but had no power to free you from it.

[16 : 16] So what does it mean to be in Christ? We're no longer imprisoned by our sin. We are set free from the bondage and imprisonment of our sin.

We are now able to break free from the patterns that we fall into again and again. We are made new in Christ. And then he says, being under the law is like being under a guardian or a tutor.

The idea here is someone who is meant to oversee a youth until they come to maturity. And that overseeing includes discipline.

This tutor has a rod and he will discipline with it. Instruction. The law was meant to prepare you for maturity, prepare you for adulthood, prepare you for what was coming next.

And so he's saying, you're not under the law of a guardian anymore. You are now. To be in Christ is to finally find what you were meant to be. To finally take that place that you were always designed for.

[17 : 29] It's like a child regent who ruled on the throne under guardians. Finally taking power for themselves. And ruling in themselves.

But we don't rule in ourselves. We rule because we find our identity in Christ. We find our maturity in Christ.

So that's the contrast that Paul is setting. We're not under the law anymore. Something better has come and it's in Christ. And it gives us freedom. It gives us maturity. It gives us hope.

Hope. And then there are images, word pictures that the New Testament uses to describe what does it mean to be in Christ. The most obvious one, and you see it in our passage in verse 26 and 29, is we've been adopted.

What does it mean to be in Christ? We were once orphans. Alone in the world. No one caring for us. On our own. And on our own.

[18 : 32] In our sin. But in Christ, God has adopted us. And he has made us his sons and his daughters.

He has made us offspring of Abraham and heirs to all the promises to be God's people. And I'd love to keep going with this image because it's so rich and there's so much to say.

But then I'd be preaching Greg's sermon next week. Because if you look on in chapter 4, verses 1 through 7, it's all about this imagery of sonship. And so I'm going to put that one aside.

Come back next week. If you're really excited about that one, come back next week. It's going to be really good. There are two other images I want to bring to your attention tonight. that Paul uses to describe what does it mean to be in Christ.

The first one is citizenship. Now some of you, as I look around, are from other countries, I think. And not every country has the same rules. But there's a biblical idea of citizenship that we see that's really rich.

[19 : 39] In Ephesians 2, 19, Paul writes that we are no longer strangers and aliens, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God.

Now when you become a citizen of a country, what happens? Most fundamentally, you now belong. If you've ever traveled outside of your country, gone somewhere else, what do you have to do?

You're constantly carrying your papers, your passport. You have to worry about your visas. You have to learn the laws. You have to learn the language and the culture. You're a stranger.

Paul says that outside of Christ, we are strangers to God. But in Christ, we become citizens.

Now we belong. We don't have to carry our papers anymore because this is our home. And this is where we are meant to be. Not here in this world, but here in the kingdom of God.

[20 : 41] We become citizens of God's kingdom under Christ's rule. And now we know who we have to belong to and to belong with.

And we found our true home. Second illustration in scripture that talks about being in Christ is the image of marriage.

In Isaiah 62, it says that God will rejoice over his people as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride.

God has, in Christ, pursued his own people. And when, by faith, we take this status of being in Christ, we become his bride.

Not individually, because that's kind of weird, right? But corporately, we, as the church, are God's people. And specifically, his bride.

[21 : 44] What does that mean? It means that in Christ, God has pursued us. He has wooed us. He has showered us with his love.

He has called us into a covenantal union and an experience of intimate love. And just like marriage, it requires a forsaking.

When we marry, when we become in Christ, we forsake all others. All other lovers. All other identities. To place our identity in Christ.

We become his bride. And I know it's old-fashioned, but we take his name. We identify ourselves with him. Who are you?

Well, I'm all sorts of things. But most fundamentally, I am Christian. I am in Christ. That's what it means to be the bride of Christ. Once I was single, on my own.

[22 : 50] But now I'm married. The two have become one. And joyfully, I'm not my own. But I belong to another. I belong to Christ. And so, as we were once apart from Christ, to be justified by faith, to be brought into a saving relationship with Jesus Christ means to become in Christ.

And it gives us an identity. One of the things I want you to see is that in each of these comparisons and in each of these word pictures, there is an exchange.

We can't be dual citizens. We can't be polygamous. We can't be under the law and in Christ. We forsake one and are wholly given to the other.

And when we give ourselves to that by faith, an identity is bestowed upon us. New allegiance.

A new name. A new affiliation. We are in Christ. Friends, I haven't even begun to explain all that this means.

[24 : 04] But I hope you have tasted what great joy and freedom it is to be in Christ. There are lots of people in the world who think that being a really religious person is about learning the rules and following them and being under the yoke of an oppressive religious system.

But the biblical picture of knowing Christ and worshiping him is the exact opposite. It is great freedom. Freedom to know and to love God.

Freedom from the bondage to sin that we live in. Freedom to worship and to give ourselves to others. Because we've been given an identity that we don't have to protect.

We don't have to defend. We don't have to build. Because Christ simply gives it to us and lets us live in it. So having seen a little bit about what it means to be in Christ, what difference could it make?

Practically, what difference could it make in our life? And the key to this is verse 28. Look with me in verse 28 again. There is neither Jew nor Greek.

[25 : 18] There is neither slave nor free. There is no male and female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus. Paul's main point here, the clearest point in the flow of the argument, what he is saying here above anything else is anyone can be in Christ Jesus.

You don't have to become a Jew and be under the law to come to Jesus. You don't have to be right in the eyes of the society. Anyone and everyone who comes and by faith joins himself with Christ can be in Christ.

This new humanity that God is creating is open to all. And Paul presses his point forward by saying there are three fundamental categories of human identity.

Ones that throughout history have been some of the deepest and defining identities, not only of individuals, but of cultures and nations. And these three categories are remarkably modern.

If you think about it, if you went over to the university and talked about and went into a class on identity politics, you would see these three categories raise up.

[26 : 44] Race, class, and gender. The triumvirate of modern identity politics. But they are not modern categories. They are human categories. And Paul addresses them because of their fundamental nature.

It is likely as well that Paul brought them up because there was a prayer in the Jewish liturgy in the first century that went like this. Blessed are you, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who has not made me a foreigner.

Blessed are you, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who has not made me a slave.
Blessed are you, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who has not made me a woman.

Do you see? Do you see that the problems that we struggle with today in identity were the same things 2,000 years ago?

One of the things you see is that these fundamental categories so easily become identities that divide and identities that create conflict.

[27 : 59] Think of most of the war in the world. It's not caused by ethnic conflict. It's economic conflict. Even the, you know, sometimes male-female conflict.

That hasn't happened that much recently. But go back to Grecian history. You see that, you know, there's a big one there. But the conflict in our society, the conflict in our everyday lives, division, war, suffering, oppression, all of these flow from us putting our identity in these categories.

And Paul says, these things are no longer able to carry and have never been able to carry the weight that we put on them.

And let's connect this with the flow of thought because it'd be easy to take this and just separate it out from the... In Galatians, Paul has been saying, we have this human tendency to want to make ourselves acceptable to God by how we do things.

We create an identity of being a good law keeper. Whatever that law system is. Whether it's a Mosaic law, or whether it's the law of the academy, or whether it's the law of the family you grew up in, or the culture that you grew up in.

[29 : 21] Because we build an identity around these things. Because we want these things to give us a sense of purpose, a sense of identity, a sense of belonging, a sense of meaning.

And here's the thing. Because we want these things to carry that weight. Because we want our gender, our class, our race to be the thing that makes us acceptable.

Do you see why that creates conflict? Why that creates such turmoil in the world?
Because it becomes a zero-sum game.

If I'm building an image of men are great, and to be a man is to be acceptable in the world, like the first century prayer, then to be a woman is to be despised, and to be devalued.

And there is conflict, and there is oppression that results. When in ethnic conflict, we say, I must be the victor in this, because my race must succeed.

[30 : 39] My race must be the champion. Because that's what our identity is. There's no means of reconciliation without a loss of identity.

And so all of life becomes a competition to win the identity battles in the world. Both on a global and on an interpersonal scale. This was the battle Kenny Bostick was fighting.

And it had pretty tragic results for him. You know, it's easy to throw mud at the world and talk about how bad it is.

But I just want to talk briefly for a minute to you, to this church. I love this church because it is a crossroads place. Because it brings people in from lots of different places.

Brings people in from different ethnic groups. From different socioeconomic backgrounds. From different parts of the world. Obviously, we have men and women.

[31 : 51] And maybe even more specifically than that, let me throw out some other categories that we might be tempted to build our identity on being in this culture. Or I'm from Yale. Or I grew up in New Haven.

I'm educated. I'm not educated. I'm single. I'm married. I'm divorced. I'm a teenager. I'm a student. I'm a grad student.

I'm a postdoctoral student. I'm a fellow. So on and so on. I'm a doctor. I'm an architect. I'm a businessman. I'm a wife and a mother.

I'm a working mother. I'm homeless. I have lots of money. I'm white. I'm black. I'm Asian. I'm Asian American. I'm African.

I'm a Christian. So many things. Be so easy for us to say, this is who I am. This is my identity.

[32 : 49] And it's so easy for us to try to take these things that are true of us and exalt them to a place that then we spend all of our time defending, protecting this identity.

And Paul says to be in Christ changes everything. In fact, what he says is these distinctions, these things that are true of us become subordinate to a deeper, truer reality of being in Christ.

What does that look like? Let's talk through each of these. You guys ready? Here we go. A few minutes. We'll throw some hand grenades figuratively into our discussion here, right?

What does it look like? These three identities. Race, gender, class. First thing I want you to see is Paul does not say that these things disappear. Paul is not saying that God is trying to create a colorblind, communistic, androgynous society where there is no gender, ethnicity, or class.

He's not saying that. You don't stop becoming a man or a woman. What Paul is saying is that these continue to exist, but they are uprooted from that central place in our identity.

[34 : 21] That defining identity that gives us meaning and belonging and purpose in life. And that place is taken over by being in Christ.

And so then, by being in Christ, by being a part of this new humanity that God is creating, all of the richness of the diversity of these things become a part of a tapestry of God's creative beauty.

Let's think about this. If that's true, how are these things subordinated? What does it look like to be in Christ with regard to race?

And let me just put a caveat on the front. All three of these are incredibly thorny. There is no way. It's already late. There is no way we could cover these things with the kind of depth and care that I wish we could.

I'm going to try to give you a few ideas about directions of what it would look like to be in Christ in each of these categories. I would love to dialogue with any of you afterwards if you have questions.

[35 : 30] So let's dive in. With race, we need to start with the picture in Revelation. It pictures eternity with Christ sitting on the throne and around him people from every tongue and tribe and nation.

Every ethnic group is there represented, worshiping Christ together. And the diversity of all of those cultures and all of those languages and all of those ethnicities is a beautiful portrait of how Christ is the Lord of the whole world and the whole universe.

It adds richness and depth to the eternal worship of God. It means that we have more in common with a believer who is nothing like us than we do with someone from my own family who is not in Christ.

Okay, what about with regard to class? To slaves and masters. 1 Corinthians 7, 22 says this.

For he who is called in the Lord as a slave is a freed man in the Lord. Likewise, he who is free when called is a slave of Christ.

[37 : 02] To be in Christ in the first century meant that in the church it no longer mattered whether you were a master or a slave.

And one of the blessings of this in human history has been that the church has often, though not always, has often been at the vanguard of abolishing human slavery and trafficking.

But at its core, what it says is, it doesn't matter if you're a slave or a freed man. You come and be a part of the body of Christ together.

In fact, there were seemingly slaves who served as elders and bishops in the early church. And because those churches were so geographically defined, it's likely that there were masters who were congregants in a church that their slave was an elder in.

Now that'll change how you go back home, doesn't it? The closest analogy that I could come up with in today's world is, there are a couple, and it's all sort of economic or in some sort of hierarchical structure, it'd be like a first-year PhD student walking into a small group in church and seeing their professor, advisor, sitting in that small group with them.

[38 : 39] And having to go, this is a brother or a sister in Christ. And so when we're sitting in small group, we are in Christ together.

Now when I go to his office, right, he's my student, he's my professor, and there's appropriate roles to be played there. But in the small group, the PhD student could be the elder, and the professor could be sitting there learning from his student teaching him the scriptures.

What a radical transformation of the kind of competitive power politics that we so often see, again, both societally and interpersonally.

To be in Christ turns it on its head. With regard to gender, I feel like I'm just like increasingly stepping into fields of landmines, but I hope you all are giving me grace here.

And please, as I said, there is much more thought that I have, I'd love to teach this for hours, because there's a lot more thought behind this. But gender. God created humanity, male and female.

[40 : 00] He created them in his image. And in the beginning, there was a glorious unity, a glorious valuing of the creation of women, male and female.

There was a distinction in gender, but not a distinction in value or place.

And so you see God saying, male and female, he created them, and it is very good. He says, it's not good for Adam to be alone.

So he made Eve out of Adam to be his helpmate, his strong ally, his partner and companion in the world.

But we see that this is marred by the fall. And you see, starting in Genesis 3, that instead of partnership and companionship and a glorious equality, we see competitiveness, we see comparison, we see striving for dominance between the genders.

[41 : 11] And what Paul says is that in Christ, the original goodness is restored. There is still distinction of gender, and even, I believe, roles in the church and in the home.

But there is a radical and glorious equality of men and women in the church. This restoration of original dignity that was given to all humanity in the image of God creates this new partnership.

We are now co-laborers with Christ. Co-heirs of the riches that God has given us in Christ.

And so, Paul says, we are one. We are all one in Christ. There is, in Christ, no one whose identity is, I'm a Jew, I'm a Gentile.

There is no one whose identity anymore is, I am slave or master. There is no man or woman whose identity is in, I'm a man or I'm a woman.

[42 : 19] But their identity is in Christ. And you know, this shouldn't surprise us because this is what we see at the very heart of the gospel.

We are all one in Christ. All of humanity stands before the cross of Jesus Christ in need of forgiveness. Because we are all sinful, rebellious people who cannot make ourselves acceptable to God by building the right identity.

And we are all equally able to avail ourselves of the salvation that is in Christ. Of the righteousness that He lived out that now can be ours by faith.

The identity of being God's men and women. The bride of Christ. Citizens of heaven. God's men in Christ.

And that is all that matters. For what the gospel offers to all is identity in Christ. Freedom from our self-oriented identities that we pour our lives into.

[43 : 38] Freedom to enter into the glorious and joyous reality of significance of belonging of meaning in Christ alone. let me pray.

Lord we thank you for all that you have done for us in Christ. Thank you that this is the good news of the gospel. And Lord I pray tonight that you would help us to see where we are building our identity on things other than Christ.

Lord there may be some here tonight who have never come to Christ and put their faith in Him. Lord tonight would you help them see that in Christ there is an identity beyond all that they ever could have imagined.

Lord for all of us tonight will you help us to see how wonderful it is to be in Christ and to forsake all these other identities that we try to build and to find us find ourselves ultimately wholly fully in Him.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.