

Steward the Truth as Identity in Christ Philippians 3:4b-11

⁴ If anyone else thinks that he has grounds for confidence in the flesh, I have more: ⁵ circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶ in regard to zeal, persecuting the church; in regard to the righteousness that is in the law, blameless. ⁷ But, whatever things were a profit for me, these things I have come to consider a loss because of Christ. ⁸ But even more than that, I consider everything to be a loss because of what is worth far more: knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord. For his sake, I have lost all things and consider them rubbish, so that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own, which comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness that comes from God by faith. ¹⁰ I do this so that I may know him and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings, being conformed to his death, ¹¹ in the hope that in some way I may arrive at the resurrection from the dead.

“The deep search for identity—Who am I, really?—is going on in each person, and no one should accept shallow answers.” So wrote two gentlemen in their book *Faith for Exiles*. There they explore the impact of contemporary culture and technology on the Christian life. They go on to highlight this question: *Who am I, really?* It is a question that many people don’t answer well. Either the answers are incomplete, or the question fades into the background of our entertainment and media saturated modern life.

Whether or not you have questioned who you are and what it means to be you, we’ve all been finding and forming answers to the identity question our whole lives. It starts from our earliest days of childhood. We gain a sense of self from our family. We learn our place among siblings. Middle child syndrome is real. Being the baby of the family can bring some benefits. It also means you grow up with the least say among most things. Our relationships expand into larger communities like our neighborhood, our school or town. We adopt their characteristics and learn their standards. We learn what’s appropriate behavior and what is not. We learn what aspects of our shared history are important, like the 4th of July and how we celebrate it. We learn what groups to align with and what groups we don’t. Throughout all this we’re learning about our personal interests and abilities and talents and opportunities. All of these help shape our sense of self.

And then comes adolescence where growing and forming our identity really kicks into overdrive. Things seem to get a lot more confusing than clear. What does it mean to be a man? What does it mean to be a woman? What am I going to do with my life? What choices do I have given my family’s resources? What about college or trade school or the armed forces? Will I find someone special to share my life with? Will I have a family of my own? Will I turn out like my parents? The questions go on and on.

Clearly the question of identity is important to us all. It’s part of being human. In recent years, the issue of identity has come even more into the forefront. The question of identity has taken on greater importance with the growing emphasis on individuality. Identity is often much more about one’s own personal preferences and one’s personal choices than anything else. It’s about what one feels or senses inside. Our culture stresses that idea as we define our identities. Our identities are rooted in what we feel, what we desire, what we

say about ourselves. The choices we make in life give authentic expression outwardly to our sense of self inwardly. “You do you,” “you be you” has become one of the greatest cultural truths of our day.

So why does this matter? We need to go back in time and walk along a dusty road with a man named Paul. As he made his way toward the city of Damascus, Paul had a very clear sense of self. He reflects on that here in our verses. For example, Paul comments how he was *“circumcised on the eighth day.”* Paul was raised as a Jew. That included being circumcised on the precise day after his birth that Old Testament law required. And Paul was *“of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin.”* Paul was born into the Jewish faith. He was a descendant of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He was Israel through and through. So much so that he thought of himself as a *“Hebrew of Hebrews.”* He came from Israelite parents. He was raised according to Israelite customs. On top of that, he was a Pharisee, a member of an elite group, the cream of the crop among the Jews. Paul was so committed to this identity. He had reached what he saw as the gold standard of Judaism. He even persecuted followers of Christ. That is what he was on his way to Damascus to do. He wanted to find followers of Christ and drag them off to Jerusalem to answer for it. From his ancestry to his upbringing, to how he lived his life, all formed Paul’s identity as he understood it. He was a zealous, committed follower of the true God of Israel.

But then everything changed. Suddenly. Unexpectedly. Spectacularly. Everything changed. On that dusty road Paul encountered the risen Christ. This led him to reconsider everything. Everything that had defined him: his ancestry, his upbringing, his obedience. Everything that had formed his sense of self became unstable. What he thought was so certain began to crumble. By the time he emerged from the rubble, Paul had arrived as one unavoidable conclusion: *“But whatever were gains, I now consider loss for the sake of Christ.”*

In coming to know Christ, Paul no longer valued what he once did. *“I consider them garbage,”* he says. The natural fertilizer farmers spread on their fields might be a more appropriate translation. Everything that had been worthwhile to old Paul became worthless to the new Paul. It was something to be tossed out of sight and definitely someplace downwind.

Understanding why is critical to grasping what Christ’s truth reveals about our identities today. Listen to Paul explain: *I consider them rubbish, so that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own, which comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness that comes from God by faith.* Here is the reason for the complete 180 in Paul’s life. Until now, Paul was all about making himself what he thought was good. What he thought was proper. What he thought had value. He embraced his bloodline and traditions and his outward morality. He prized his family name, his upbringing, and his respected status. He was careful to do all that what expected for a good Jew, a good Pharisee. And he looked at all of that as a resume before others but especially before God. He believed they gave him an identity worth standing before God—what he calls here righteousness.

But in coming to know Christ, Paul realized his self-made identity for what it was. It was false. A lie. Unstable and untrue. As stewards of the truth of Christ, so must we.

This series of sermons has contrasted truth with falsehood in a few different ways. We made the point that God's truth is the greatest good for human beings. That which is false, which is sin, is the opposite. It harms people. We've established the common thread of sin's mortality that runs through all of humanity, regardless of where or when we live. We saw how sin deceives and enslaves. It blinds people. It binds people. All of this comes into play as we talk about identity today. The identities we form for ourselves, the identities our society and culture encourages, those identities are embedded in the falseness that hurts people, the mortality we all share, and the deception of sin we're born into. They answer the question, "Who am I, really?" by looking inside to what we think and feel. They answer by looking to the world and what it values. So they give answers that might seem satisfying, good, or lasting. And eventually it becomes clear. "You do you, " or "you be you" that all sounds great. Then we come to a point in life where, like Paul our self-constructed identity begins to crack and crumble and fall apart.

And in those moments, Jesus invites us to find in him, as did Paul, a new identity that endures. It's an identity grounded in the truth of God. It's not only real, but it's really good. It's an identity won for us by the Son of God. He shared in our flesh and blood. He was cursed by death to free us from our fear of death. He rose again to assure us of victory and a place in God's eternal family. It's an identity that sees sin for what it is. We are set free from our slavery to sin. God invites us to let go of what we were and to "*gain Christ and be found in him*," just like Paul. There we learn the truth. What matters isn't our answer to the question of *Who am I, really?* It's God's answer. What is above all else true isn't what we say about ourselves. It's what God says about us in Christ Jesus: loved, forgiven, victorious.

That is beautiful truth. It's beautiful truth that you and I have come to know. It's beautiful truth for us. It's beautiful truth for them.

Our world today isn't all that different from Paul's. Like then, people today form their identities in the usual ways: in pride of family, in our accomplishments, our choices, our actions. Society encourages people to find their greatest truth within themselves. People are getting bad answers to that identity question. They are incomplete answers at best. More often they are outright wrong answers. They are answers that make self their personal truth that trumps all else, and therefore their god.

But we have a beautiful truth—a beautiful answer to give. Just as we have discovered, we are now called to share. Steward for others the identity that God grants in Jesus Christ. It's an identity not found by embracing self. It comes by embracing Christ for me. It's not an identity committed to what human beings say about themselves. It's what God in his mercy says about them in Jesus Christ. They are loved, forgiven, and freed. Their identity will at last prove itself true and real. When finally all who have found themselves in Christ will live out in renewed body, mind, and soul. God's glorious answer to the deep question within, "Who am I, really?" is given by Paul in these verses: *I do this so that I may know him and*

the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings, being conformed to his death, ¹¹ in the hope that in some way I may arrive at the resurrection from the dead.

That's a beautiful truth. That's a beautiful identity. Steward it wisely, for yourselves and for them.