

Michael McGowan

Galatians 3:26—4:7 – “**Remember Who You Are**”

Preached at Trinity CRC

September 8, 2019

Galatians 3:26—4:7

²⁶ So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, ²⁷ for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸ There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹ If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.

⁴ What I am saying is that as long as an heir is underage, he is no different from a slave, although he owns the whole estate. ² The heir is subject to guardians and trustees until the time set by his father. ³ So also, when we were underage, we were in slavery under the elemental spiritual forces of the world. ⁴ But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, ⁵ to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship. ⁶ Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, “*Abba, Father.*” ⁷ So you are no longer a slave, but God’s child; and since you are his child, God has made you also an heir.

The Word of the Lord. (**Thanks be to God**)

I think it’s fair to say that all of us struggle with our identity.

At one point or another in our lives—

Maybe even right now—

We ask the question, “Who am I?”

“At my core, what gives me meaning?”

“What makes me matter as a person?”

I look back over my life and I see that my “identity” has changed over the years:

In grade 7, I was in a math class for smart kids...

But I took on the identity of class clown.

Maybe I didn’t want to be identified with that particular group...

So I separated myself by acting silly...

This is what gave me meaning.

In high school I was on the soccer team...

I ate, drank, and breathed soccer.

My life came crashing down when we lost in the state quarterfinals of my senior year...

I built my identity on soccer...

So it hit me hard when it came to an abrupt end.

I think of one of my friends who was given his identity from birth...

He was born into a prominent family in our city—

Everyone knew his last name—

So this formed who he was.

Going off to college was not easy for him because no one knew the name.

His identity—

What gave him value—

Didn't really matter...

And he was shaken at his core...

Ultimately struggling with the same question:

“Who am I?”

Paul, in our passage, is writing to two groups about their identity.

And both of these groups are going through an identity crisis.

For some of the Jewish Christians in Galatia (present-day Turkey)...

Their identity came from the Law.

They took pride in being known as “sons of Abraham.”

Sons of Abraham were God's people.

Abraham was the father of their faith...

And God said all of Abraham's descendants would be blessed through him...(Gen 12)

So being born into this family gave them their identity...

It started as an ethnic identity.

To stay in this family—

To remain sons of Abraham or God's true people—

They had to keep the law.

They prided themselves on their obedience to all of the Mosaic Laws:

The 10 Commandments that formed the heart of the law...

And the other laws that went along with them.

These were the Jewish Christians...

But Galatia was a pagan region...

Most of the people there were *not* born into the Jewish family...

Most were *not* sons of Abraham by birth.

So, the Jewish Christians said:

“You have to observe the law.”

“If you want to be a part of God's family...you have to do this, this and this.”

“You have to observe food laws and be circumcised.”

The Jewish Christians were still rooted in the law...

And as a result, they were confusing the Gentile Christians of Galatia.

Their identity came from keeping the law.

Paul is writing to these groups to help clarify why Jesus came—

He's writing to help both groups find their true identity—

Because right now where they're going for their identity is inadequate.

If we take an honest look at ourselves...

We realize that ***we* get our identity from inadequate places.**

Henri Nouwen says that there are 3 ways we seek to answer the identity question:

“Who am I?” Or “what gives me worth?” (quoted in *Sticky Faith*, 57)

1. I am what I do.
2. I am what I control.
3. I am what others say about me.

First, I am what I do.

We'll take me as an example.

I am a pastor.

If I found my identity based on what I do...

Then my identity would be a pastor.

On the surface this doesn't seem too bad—

Pastors, I think, do good work—

But if it becomes the core of who I am...

Watch out.

What happens if the church runs out of money and has to let me go?

I would no longer be a pastor...

I would no longer have my identity or that thing that gives me value.

Or, what happens if someone says, "Michael, you're not a good pastor/preacher."

That strikes at the core of who I am...

You're talking about my identity now.

I most likely would get very upset and resent that statement and that person...

My identity (core) was attacked...and I would probably respond in turn.

Or, as is more likely the case, what happens when something stands in the way of my identity?

What happens when my family needs me?

When they take me away from my work as a pastor?

I see them as a barrier to my "true-self"/identity...

And I begin to see them as a hinderance...

Maybe I even begin to resent them.

When our job becomes our identity it's easy to become a workaholic.

Our value/worth is attached to our job...

And it's easy to see everything else as a threat.

The same goes for athletic or school achievements.

If my identity comes from being a great basketball or volleyball player...

What happens when I get injured?

Or what happens when I don't get that scholarship I was hoping for?

Who am I then?

Or if my identity comes from my performance at school...

What happens when I get bad marks because of an unforeseen circumstance?

A teacher that is difficult or a family trip?

Basing our identity on what we do is inadequate...

It's unstable and will eventually leave us empty or fail us.

We also base our identity on what we control.

Parents, I think this is common.

We find our identity in our children.

If we just provide them with the right environment...

Encourage the right behaviors;

And provide the right resources...

Then they'll be "successful"...and we will have worth...

Our lives will matter.

It's not a bad thing to want them to do well...

But what if we base our worth and value on how they turn out?

If we base our identity on them...

When they fail or don't do well...our lives fall apart.

Our identity is deeply hit and we're knocked off balance.

It not only affects us...

It impacts them.

If we control them and try to influence them to make decisions that we think are right...

In order to keep our identity protected.

Eventually they'll resent us as parents and push us away.

It also impacts people around us.

"If our highest goal in life is the good of *our* family...

Then we will tend to care less for *other* families." (Jonathan Edwards)

We'll see others as a threat to the core of our identity.

The third thing we base our identity on is what others say about us.

Chap Clark shares a note from an adolescent:

“Everybody knows who I am, and they tell me all the time. My mom knows I’m a ‘good kid.’ My dad says I am lazy but a natural athlete. My teachers tell me I’m smart, but I don’t care enough to ‘live up to my potential.’ My friends think I’m funny. Girls think I’m shy. I think I’m all of those...and none of those. Who the heck am I? I’m everything to everybody, and nobody to me.” (*Sticky Faith*, 50)

That sounds exhausting!

If our worth is determined by other people—

If other people give us our identity—

Then we’re fragmented depending on who it is we’re with...

These are all inadequate and unstable places to turn to answer the question, “Who am I?”

It’s unstable for us...

And usually pits us against other people;

It divides us into people competing to have their needs met and their identities realized;

It creates separation and hostility.

We all have a need for worth...

We all want to know that we’re unique and valuable (Tim Keller)—

But finding it in these places is not just unstable and inadequate...

At its core, it is sin.

Tim Keller says that sin is...

“Seeking to establish a sense of self [identity] by making something else more central to your significance, purpose, and happiness than your relationship with God.”

Whether it’s our job, our boyfriend/girlfriend, our political party, athletic achievements, and even our family...

If we’re finding our identity in these things...

We’re putting them before God and—

At its most basic meaning—

This is sin.

BUT, Paul says, it doesn't have to be this way...

In fact, it was never meant to be this way.

In the beginning when we were created...

We were made to be in perfect relationship with God.

This is where humanity got their identity.

He was God and we were his creation.

He loved us, cared for us and provided everything that we needed.

We lacked nothing.

There was no hole inside of us begging to be filled...

We were content.

But then God's creation sinned...

Humans broke that perfect relationship.

And instead of finding meaning and worth as God's people...

We were now outcast and isolated...

Something went missing when we brought sin into the world.

And humanity ever since has been trying to substitute for that missing thing.

These two groups—

The Jewish and Gentile Christians—

Are getting their identity mixed up in the law—

They're trying to earn their way back into relationship with God—

But Paul reminds them who they are...

He answers the question for them:

“Who are you?”

You are children of God.

This is the special status that was lost when humanity sinned...

This is a position of assurance, confidence, and comfort...

Knowing that you belong to God.

God's dearly loved child!

So how did they get it back?

How is Paul able to say this of the Jews and Gentiles?

Were they born into the right family?

Were they born the right ethnicity?

Did they finally follow the law close enough?

No!

“You are all children of God *through faith in Christ Jesus.*”

Their identity was not about what *they* were doing...

But about what *God* had done through Jesus.

“God sent his Son—

Born of a woman, born under the law—

To redeem those under the law that we might receive adoption as children.” (4:5)

Christ's sacrifice on the cross—

His death and resurrection—

Allows us to be God's adopted sons and daughters.

Paul is bringing in the Roman understanding of adoption here. (Tim Keller)

A wealthy person without an heir to their estate would usually adopt someone—

A child, youth, or an adult...typically a male.

And when they were legally adopted, some things immediately changed:

All of their legal debts or obligations would be canceled;

He was given a new name and made an heir;

And the father was legally responsible for the adopted son's actions.

All of this is tied up in this language of being sons/children of God:

Our sins against God are paid for;

And we become heirs to the promises of life with God now and in the future.

And it was only as a result of what Christ did.

It was only because of Christ's work that the Jews and Gentiles were children of God.

Paul is urging both the Jewish and Gentile Christians to find their identity in Christ alone...

Nothing else will do.

Listen to the language he uses in these verses:

"...in Christ Jesus;"

"...baptized into Christ;"

"...clothed yourselves with Christ;"

"...one in Christ Jesus;"

"...belong to Christ..."

I think Paul is trying to make a point here.

Everything is rooted in Christ.

This is why Paul points them to baptism.

Baptism was *the* sign of being united with Christ in his death and resurrection.

All of the once pagan, now Gentile Christians of Galatia, would have been baptized as adults...

They would have been plunged into the waters of death with Christ...

And raised up to new life.

We don't do this now...

But with baptisms back then they would take off their old clothes.

They would symbolically remove everything that at one time gave them their identity:

Their ethnicity; gender; social status...

None of these things gave them their identity anymore—

They were removing their old way of life...

Then they would enter the waters of baptism...signifying their death;

They died to these things as identity markers...

They died with Christ to their sin.

And they would come up from the water as resurrected people;

They would put on new clothes...

Signifying their new life in Christ...

Their new identity.

This is the way they were children of God.

By being united with Christ in his death and resurrection.

“You are all children of God *through faith in Christ Jesus.*”

2,000 years later this is *our* identity:

We are children of God.

We’ve tried to claw our way back into this relationship that gives us meaning...

We try to find it in:

Sports accomplishments;

Our reputation at work or at school;

Making a lot of money;

Raising the best family;

We look far and wide and try all kinds of things...

But nothing brings us back.

It is only in Christ Jesus that we can be called children of God.

Jesus Christ gave up his life so that we could be God’s people.

Jesus unites us with him in his death and in his resurrection.

We have worth not because of what *we do*...

But because of what *Jesus did*.

So what does this look like?

How do we cultivate our identity in Christ?

Because it’s easy to say *now* that this is our identity...

But then we go back into our work and school and sports and families...

And we’re tempted back into our old way of identity formation.

First, if God gives us our identity, then connect with him.

If he is the one telling us that we're his children...

Take time to listen to him.

The way that he has chosen to reveal himself to us most often is in his Word.

Read the Bible through the Jesus lens.

Ask, what does this passage say about me and my sin?

What does it say about my need for a Savior?

Where do I need to repent and ask forgiveness?

Are there areas that it points me to where I'm trying to find my identity in unhealthy ways?

And then ask, what does this passage say about God or Jesus?

What does it say about his desire to rescue his people?

How am I assured of his love?

For these next 5 weeks we'll have a Scripture memory verse for us...

Store these words in your head and they'll work into your heart.

Take time to reflect on your day.

As you look back on the last 24 hours, what were some things that caused your emotions to react?

Times of joy and pain and anger are usually indicators of something significant...

Things that we should pay attention to and reflect on:

"Was I finding my identity in my job when I got upset that my boss offered me that criticism?"

"Was I finding my identity in my kids when I was upset with their behavior?"

Take time to reflect on your day...

And allow the Spirit of the Lord to reveal to you where you're finding your identity.

Finally, let's pay attention to the language we're using.

None of us, adults or children, are defined by what we do...what we control...or by what others say...

We're defined by who we are to God.

And in Christ, we are God's beloved children...

Sins forgiven, inheritors of all of God's good promises.

Does our language reflect that?

Are we reminding our kids who they are?

Are we reminding ourselves who we are?

Or do we define ourselves and others through the old way?

I'm no good.

I'm a mess-up.

I'm a failure.

You're a bad kid.

You're a liar...you're a cheater.

Let's take time to remind each other who we are in Christ:

We are children of God...God's beloved sons and daughters.

Brought into this relationship through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ.

Amen.