

Christian Identity (Intro)

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[0 : 00] We're going to turn back together to Ephesians 3 and 4. And over the next couple of months in our evening services, we're going to do a short series called The Christian's Identity.

We'll start it in more detail later this month. There'll be no service here next Sunday evening, and I'll be on holiday the following Sunday. So we'll start in earnest in a couple of weeks' time this week.

We are introducing this topic. And as we go on through the study, we're going to be looking at some of the key terms and concepts that are used by the New Testament to describe who we really are as Christians.

And that's crucial for us as believers. We need to know this, because this is what we are if we are followers of Jesus. And it's also crucial for anyone who's not yet a Christian, or for anyone who's not sure, or who's seeking or wondering, because this, what we're going to look at, this is what following Jesus will make you.

And it's so easy to have the wrong kind of ideas in our minds. And that's true for us as Christians, and as those who are maybe not the Christians or not sure.

[1 : 15] It's such an important topic, and we've got to have a biblical understanding of the Christian's identity. So as I said, we're introducing it tonight, and we can read again from Ephesians 3.

For this reason, I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory, he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his spirit in your inner being.

So that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

I don't think I need to persuade anybody here that the whole question of identity has become a massive issue in our society today. People talk about identity more than ever before, and they probably use that term in a way that has never been done before.

And I think in many ways, identity has become one of the most powerful concepts in our culture today.

[2 : 35] If someone uses the phrase today, I identify as whatever, then the conversation immediately reaches its conclusion.

How we identify ourselves has become the bottom line. And whatever we think of that, I think one thing that we definitely can agree on is the fact that this is just a new way of speaking.

And to say I identify as whatever it might be, that's just a change. People didn't speak like that when I was young, and I'm sure that for many of you, you don't need to be that old to still feel that this whole thing has come upon us in a whole new way.

When I was young, it was different. When you talk about identifying, you would talk about something that you did to something else. So you would identify something else. Like maybe you try to identify a type of bird, or identify a rock, or maybe identify a person, particularly you think of crimes, like somebody committed a crime, or identify them, and you think of Colombo looking for fingerprints or whatever it might be.

That was how we tended to use the term identity. And used in that sense, you could often have examples of mistaken identity. So you would watch a crime program, and they thought one person had done it, but they got it wrong because it had been a case of mistaken identity.

[4 : 03] The same whether it was you looking at a bird, you maybe thought it was one, you got it wrong, we could get our understanding of identity wrong. Mistaken identity was a perfectly common thing. Now, when we speak in terms of our own identity, and when I say I identify as whatever that might be, under no circumstances whatsoever, would you dare suggest that that identification might be mistaken.

How we identify ourselves has become incredibly powerful. It's actually become infallible.

And that shift in recent years is very fascinating, and it's not all bad, some aspects of it are positive. And I would say one thing about today that's different to when I was young is that there is a greater willingness to accept that people are different, people have different interests, people have different preferences and talents.

When I was in school, pretty much the only thing that you were safe to be interested in was football. If you were interested in something like drama or chess or garage music, then you were basically just volunteering to get bullied, because these things were unacceptable.

Now it's much better, there's more acceptance and respect for these wider interests. I think that's a really good and positive thing. But at the same time, this elevation of identity has brought many, many challenges.

[5 : 39] And I think it's fair to say that many people today face a kind of identity crisis around this whole issue. And you can see why, because there's more choice than ever today.

And the obvious example of that is all that we've seen emerging in terms of sexuality and gender. There's just a whole new level of categories in both of these areas that not that long ago we'd never even heard of.

And now there's this massive choice and people have to kind of try and find where they sit and fit in all of that, that big spectrum of categories.

But it's not just in those areas, many others as well. Whatever your views are on a given topic, whether it's your views on climate change, on oil, on strikes, on immigration, on Brexit, all of these carry labels and associations that are very powerful in terms of how we view ourselves, in terms of how we're viewed by other people.

So there's more choice than ever. There's also, I think, more pressure than ever. All of these categories, communities, causes that are emerging in our society today, all these powerful voices that we're hearing around us, they create an environment where there's huge pressure to make a choice.

[7 : 03] There's pressure to conform to the right kind of language. And there's pressure to reach this point where you have this kind of clear, unshakable certainty about who you really are.

And if you don't really know who you are, then in some way you're kind of a wee bit incomplete as a person. And so there's more pressure than ever. And I think all of that results in the fact that there's actually now more confusion than ever.

There's confusion in the sense that so many people feel lost in all that's happening. Some people, often it's older people, will look on at all of this and think, what is going on?

I cannot get my head round what's happening. And other people, often younger ones, see all this going on and they feel bewildered and disorientated as they try to make sense of who they are supposed to be.

And coupled to that is the fact that there's also just confusion in terms of the way the whole thing gets spoken about, and the whole philosophy behind much of what we see in our culture just now can become very muddled.

[8 : 18] I want to give you a typical phrase that you might hear today. Sometimes you can look online and you see people who maybe have different views about how to approach these kind of topics, and they get into an argument and they start, you know, it gets more and more heated.

And then you hear a phrase like this. You are quite straight and middle class, how dare you impose your categories on me? You're quite straight and middle class, how dare you impose your categories on me?

Now, is there anything wrong with that statement? Well, the thing that's wrong with that statement is that it's imposing categories. It's doing the very thing that it's protesting against.

Now, that does not mean for one second that quite straight middle class people have never behaved badly very often they have. But the point is, I'm not trying to defend one particular kind of group at all, at all, at all.

It's just to highlight the fact that all of this is spoken about in a way that's very inconsistent and very, very confusing. And so all that's going on in the society around us, and the whole thing becomes more and more muddled, but it can affect us as Christians as well.

[9 : 31] And I think it's very important that we recognize that as Christians we can also face an identity crisis. And that can happen in lots of different ways.

I want to give you four examples as to how that can happen. And to give you the four examples, I'm going to just put a wee diagram on the screen. I have to warn you tonight that tonight's a night of diagrams.

I've split the screen into four parts. It's divided into affirming at the top, denying at the bottom. So affirming, that's stuff we believe, denying, that's stuff that we ignore.

So we can quite often find ourselves affirming positive things about us that are false. So that's this box here, we affirm positive things that are false.

And so I think of my own Christian life, I think to myself, well I would like to always think that as I go into this week I am always ready and willing to share the Gospel with someone.

[10 : 38] That's what I want to think, that's what I want to affirm. It's not actually true. I don't always feel ready.

In fact, I hardly ever feel ready. So we can affirm positive things that are false. We can also deny negative things that are true.

So I would like to look at myself and think that I never get jealous. I would love to be able to think that.

The trouble is, it's actually the truth. I do get jealous sometimes. And so sometimes we want to deny negative things, but things that are actually true.

Then we move to the other side. Sometimes we can think of it in a different way and we want to affirm things that are negative, but were actually false.

[11 : 42] I will often think of myself as a disappointment to God. And so I often affirm that in my mind, but it's actually false.

It's not true. And then the last alternative is where we deny things that are positive but true.

So I often think that, you know, I struggle to think that God would be delighted to hear me pray. That it really is a pleasure for God to hear my prayers.

I often think that's not true. It is true. And so all of these traps are ones that we can fall into. We can sometimes affirm positive things that are false.

Sometimes we can deny negative things that are true. If we do that, we are in danger of being deluded. But at the same time, we can fall into the trap of affirming negative things that are false, denying positive things that are true.

[12 : 46] If we do that, we end up despairing. On this side of the diagram, we're overly positive about ourselves in an unrealistic way.

On this side of the diagram, we're far too negative about ourselves in a way that contradicts biblical teaching. And the key point is that all of these have a massive impact on how we view ourselves as Christians.

In other words, they have a massive influence on our sense of identity as Christians. And we can all find ourselves at different points. It's not that one person is in here and one person is in there.

The truth is we're in it. We're in different places at different times. Every day this week, you'll go to various points in this diagram. All of the time, though, is shifting us away from the truth that God is revealing to us in Scripture.

And so we can easily face this kind of identity crisis as Christians. And you know it's true. And I'm pretty sure that this is probably the box that most of you are in most of the time, where you think something very, very negative about how God views you.

[14 : 04] But it's not actually true. And as we think about all of this and our sense of identity, there's two massive but possibly controversial claims that lie at the heart of this series.

Two big claims that lie at the heart of our series. One, it is possible for your understanding of your identity to be wrong.

Now that's something that the culture around us would not want to agree with or affirm. So that's why it's maybe slightly controversial, because we're saying it's possible for your understanding of your identity to be wrong.

That's the first claim. The second claim is even worse. It's highly likely that your understanding of your identity is wrong.

So it's possible that it's wrong. It's actually highly likely for it to be wrong. And I hope we'll see that. I hope I'll be able to prove that. And we'll put it later on in the sermon.

[15 : 11] All of this is showing us that as we introduce this whole issue of identity, we need to think a little bit more about the right way to understand this topic, the right way to understand our identity.

And as we do that tonight, I don't have two points. Instead, I've got two diagrams, the wrong one and the right one. And we'll just look at them briefly together.

When we were talking about identity, at a basic level, we can start by saying that we're thinking about how we understand and perceive ourselves, and we're thinking about how we are understood and perceived by others.

And those are key components into how our identity works. So our identity is shaped by what we think of ourselves, and it's shaped by what others think of us.

Now, these are all related. And I know that what I'm about to say is an oversimplification, but I still think it's largely true. Sometimes, in terms of that diagram, the arrows go from what others think to what we think.

[16 : 19] You can see it there, the arrows are pointing in this direction. And in that situation, basically what happens is other people's opinions have a huge influence on our sense of identity.

Now, that can work positively. And so when we are loved by a husband or a wife or by parents, when we are respected and admired by colleagues, when we are appreciated by friends, all of that has a key part in building our sense of identity.

We think, I'm a husband, I'm a child, I'm a friend. And so it can work positively, but it can equally work negatively. And so if we fall in love with somebody but they don't feel the same about us, we feel rejected and worthless.

If we don't achieve what we thought we would achieve in school or in our careers, we feel useless. And if we're overlooked by friends or if we're even hurt by people, then our self-confidence evaporates.

We feel rubbish about ourselves. And in both those situations, whether it's positively or negatively, what others think is having a massive influence on how we think our identity should be understood.

[17 : 40] But at other times, the arrows go the other way. They can go in this direction. And this, I think, is the emerging mindset of the culture around us. How we identify ourselves is the controlling factor.

And others need to comply with that. And again, in some ways, that's been a good thing. And it's been especially good for people who have felt a long time that they've had to hide who they are or time be something different in front of other people.

And very often, that's not been a healthy situation for people to have to face. But often today, this approach where what we think about ourselves is the dominant factor in how other people should view us, it very often and very quickly leads to confrontation.

Especially when people feel like they're not being recognized or respected enough. And I think the question maybe arises when you have this massive sort of direction of influence going from us to others, sometimes I do wonder whether at the root of that lies just a deep seat of thirst for power in the human heart.

Where by what we think has got to be complied with by others. And so, all of these things can have a huge shape in terms of how we understand our sense of identity.

[19 : 09] And at its worst, the top diagram here can lead to the situation where we feel just that kind of crushing burden of desperately needing to impress the people around us.

Desperately needing to get their approval in order to feel any sense of worth. And the bottom one at its worst can lead to a very harsh, arrogant, maybe even brutal mindset where we expect everybody else to just comply with us and no one can ever dare question me.

And maybe you've experienced both of these. Maybe you look at the bottom one and you think, well, yeah, I've been on the receiving end of that. I've seen people very much wanting to impose their sense of opinion on others.

Or maybe you look at that and think, maybe I've done that at times. Or maybe, and probably more likely, you identify with the top one and you find yourself so often, you're on a crest of a wave when people are nice to you.

Or you're crushed under a landslide of shame when people are horrible to you. I think we've probably experienced them all because it's so easy for our sense of identity to be shaped by these factors.

[20 : 42] The key point is that all of this is the wrong diagram. Because the Gospel gives us a different way to think about this.

And what the Gospel does is it takes this predominantly two-part diagram and it turns it into a three-part diagram, whereby it's not just about what we think, it's not just about what others think.

It's actually first and foremost about what God thinks. And the big claim of the Gospel is that it is God's opinion that actually defines our identity.

It is God's opinion that defines our identity. But for that to happen, the crucial thing that we have to see here is that the arrows between these various parts of the diagram have got to go the right way.

The arrows have got to point in the right direction. What God thinks of us is the controlling factor. And from Him should come what we think of ourselves.

[21 : 57] And from that should come what others see in us and how they should view us. The arrows have got to go in the right direction. And I want to really press this point home hard because we can so easily get that wrong.

And we can make a massive mistake as Christians or as those who are maybe seeking the Lord or thinking about Christianity. We can make a massive mistake because we get the arrows the wrong way round in that diagram.

And the big danger of that is that if the arrows are the wrong way round, then what it means is that what we think about ourselves or what other people think about us or a combination of them both is going to shape our understanding of God.

And it's so easy to fall into that trap. We can do it in two ways. We can allow what we think to become the controlling factor.

We can send the arrows from us towards others and towards God. And for some people that can come from a posture, I don't know if this is the nicest word to use, but I think it's true.

[23 : 14] For some people that can come from a posture of delusion where you'll hear people say, you know, well, I'm a good person. I've done my best. I'm sure everything's fine. You know, God, he's going to be happy. It'll be fine. I'm good.

All is good. And that leaves us with a God that we don't really need to bother much about because we just think, well, he'll be quite happy with me in the end because I'm quite happy with myself.

And it's a posture that just minimizes any sense of sin and refuses to even contemplate any idea of objective guilt before our holy God.

And so some people can do this with a posture of delusion. Far more likely for the people sitting in here and for the people watching at home, I think this kind of thing comes from a posture of despair.

We feel so frustrated and disappointed with ourselves. And we think that God thinks exactly the same way.

[24 : 19] We look at the things that we've done in life that we've regret all the ways in which we have stuffed up and we cannot forget our mistakes and we think God's not going to forget them either.

We feel like when it comes to God, we belong at arm's length. And so that's exactly where he's going to keep us. It's so easy to think like that.

And it all comes from sending the arrows the wrong way. But we can also make the opposite mistake. We can send the arrows this way where we allow what other people think to become the controlling factor, not just in how we understand ourselves, but in terms of how we understand God.

Now, again, in a sort of positive sense, the mistake lies in the fact that we can think that we... you know, that just as we impress other people and they like us, if we impress God, he'll like us.

Easy to think like that. It's not the gospel. But again, I think the danger lies more on the negative side of the equation, whereby we can project other people's bad behavior towards us onto how we think God will behave towards us.

[25 : 32] There's loads of ways that can happen. So people who've had a bad experience from their father will think God is probably going to be like that as well.

People who've had a bad experience in a relationship where they've trusted somebody and they've been badly let down, they think God might do that to me as well.

People who had a good friend who then just moved on from them, ditched them, they think God's probably going to do the same.

Once God gets to know me, he won't want to know me like everybody else. Maybe you've been on the receiving end of somebody in the community who you feel has judged you. You feel like people are watching you and talking about you and looking down their noses at you and you think God will behave in exactly the same way.

Or possibly the most damaging of all, you've experienced a church that's hurt you or somebody in church who's hurt you.

[26 : 47] And you think if that's what the people in church are like, then that's probably what God is like. And in all of these ways, we can point these arrows in the wrong direction.

And as we do so, our sense of identity gets confused and our view of God becomes completely inaccurate.

And that's why it's so crucial that you don't do that. You must not get the arrows the wrong way round. We must have the arrows the right way round. We've got to have them pointing in the right direction.

What God says about us, what God thinks about us, has got to become the controlling factor in our understanding of our identity.

And it needs to shape the way that we behave in the sight of other people. And the key point is this.

[27 : 49] He is the only one who's right. When you think about your identity, He is the only one who is right.

And if these three are saying contradictory things, He's the only one who's correct.

It's only ever Him who's right. And that means your understanding of your identity is only ever going to be correct when it's biblical. And over the coming weeks, we're going to think about that.

And we're thinking about the various different ways in which the Bible reveals what God really thinks of you. We're going to think about what our identity as Christians really is.

And we need to play that the arrows are going to be pointing the right way and that our identity is going to be shaped by what God thinks and what God says.

[28 : 56] I'm going to just close with a couple of points of application. In fact, I'm just going to close with one point of application. I was going to have three, but I've run out of time.

So I'm just going to pick the third one because that's the one I want to get to most of all. What I want to say is this. I'll give you my headings so you can think about them. First of all, our understanding of our identity will shape our expectations.

So you can think about that. That's really important. The second thing I was going to say is that our right understanding of our individual identity is crucial for shaping our collective identity as a church.

So it's something that doesn't affect us as individuals, it affects us as a church. The third thing is the one that I really want to focus on for just two more minutes. And it's this. Remember I said at the start we had two big claims.

We said it's possible for your understanding of your identity to be wrong. It's highly likely that your understanding of your identity is wrong. I want to just prove that point right now and say that your true identity is not the same as how you naturally see yourself.

[30 : 09] Now that's the opposite of how our culture thinks. Our culture says no. Your true identity is entirely how you see yourself. The biblical position is the opposite.

And we see that in the verses that we read at the start and that I want to come back to as we close. These verses are telling us that our identity is not the same as how you naturally see yourself.

These verses are telling us that it is a fundamental theological fact that your true identity is not the same as how you see yourself naturally.

Your true identity is not the same as how you see yourself naturally. And it's revealed in these verses that are on the screen, Ephesians 3, 14 to 15.

And the fact that lies at the heart of this claim is this. You are not strong enough to know and understand how much God loves you.

[31 : 21] You are not strong enough to know and understand just how much God loves you.

How do I know that? Because here Paul is praying that you will be strengthened with supernatural power so that you may have strength to comprehend the breadth, length, height and depth and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge.

What is that saying? It is saying that it is only with supernatural help from God the Holy Spirit that you can even begin to understand how much God loves you.

And that is the fundamental starting point for our study of Christian identity. That the foundational truth that is being pressed upon us from God is three words from the eternal, almighty, major of the universe.

God is saying at the heart of your identity is the fact that I love you and I actually love you more than you are capable of understanding.

[33 : 00] That is the starting point for understanding our identity as Christians. And on your own, you're not actually strong enough to know how big that is.

And every day you and I need to repeat Paul's prayer so that this truth will flow down that diagram and shape the way I think about myself and the way you think about yourself.

And if you're sitting here tonight and when I say that, this is the foundational truth that God's love for you is that big and you're looking at that diagram and you're thinking, I can't believe that I don't think that's true.

I don't think that he loves me. Do you know what you're doing? You're doing that. You're sending your own nonsense back up to God because that's the biblical truth.

And at the heart of your identity is the fact that God loves you more than I have the words or the strength or the skill to convey.

[34 : 14] That is why the Christians identity is a very cool thing for us to understand. Oh, I'm spoiling my slideshow. I'm getting too excited with it all.

I think I just say, I mean...