

**Philippians 3:1-21**  
**Identity: You Are More Than Your Past**

**Introduction (before scripture reading):**

- I. Over the last two weeks we have been looking at the theme of identity: who am I?
- II. It is a hotly debated subject in our day and age and we've seen how critical the theme of identity is when it comes to understanding the many ironies and fallacies prevalent within our cultural mindset,
- III. but I hope we have also seen how the theme of identity is a constant thread we find throughout the biblical narrative.
- IV. And in contrast to the prevailing ideology of our age, our identity is a complex composite of several factors, which cannot be minimised or any one prioritised over others. . . .
- V. **Over the last two week's we've explored the biblical foundations of Identity.**
  - A. And we've found that the Bible gives a clear framework through which we can thoughtfully engage our culture.
    1. The Old Testament teaches us that our main identity marker is found in the fact that we are created in the image and likeness of God.
      - a) God is the cloth out of which we were cut, which means, the more we know about God, the more we will discover about our true identity, who we were made to be.
      - b) God and His Word are the external standard by which we prioritise and understand our various and complex identity markers.
      - c) Identity is found not inward, nor outward, but upward.
    2. The New Testament builds on the OT teaching and Christ comes as the perfect man, revealing to us the true and undistorted image of God for us.

- a) And Jesus is not just some model to imitate, but in fact because we are united with him through the incarnation: he is our representative before God the father.
- b) Which means his death and resurrection becomes the means through which we too can discover and live out our true identity.

(1) And the whole of the Christian life is a process of dying to our false self and living to our true self through union with Christ. . . saying no, to what we have become in our sinful body and saying yes to who Christ has renewed.

VI. So, in essence, the OT supplies the foundational ideals of identity (law sets up the divine expectations). . . and the NT supplies the foundational means through which God graciously provides so that we can achieve the ideal.

A. Taken together the OT and NT therefore give us a very dynamic set of questions and lenses through which we can engage and critique our culture on one hand, but also at the same time provides a solid and durable guide for us in our own search for our unique identity.

VII. So, now over the next three we'll take the bible's foundational teaching on identity and apply them to some of the more practical issues we face in our context

VIII. And this week we will begin with the fact that we are all products of our past. . . our families, our cultures, our ethnicity. . . our experiences. All these factors have shaped us. . .

A. But how does our new future in Christ, help inform our understanding of our multi-faceted past?

B. Philippians 3:1-21 is one of those foundational passages that will help us understand how to interpret and understand our past in light of our future in Christ.

### **Introduction (after scripture reading):**

I. Pray

II. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V7WNVMAAtq00>

III. In Philippians 3, Paul shares with us his own testimony.

A. Like the so clearly articulated, we have two basic places to look when we sear for our identity. . . here in this created world. . . or to our creator.

IV. Paul shares how he once looked for his ultimate value and identity in the things of this world. . . rather than in his creator.

V. For him his identity was found in his accomplishments, his family heritage, his ethnicity, his national influences. . . but now in Christ, all of these are actually liabilities compared to knowing Christ.

A. The way Paul processes his past, in light of his present and future is going to be extremely valuable for us as we apply what we have been learning about identity to our own past.

VI. We are unavoidably a product of our past.

A. We can never escape our:

1. Family heritage
2. Genetic/Ethnic make-up
3. Past Experiences- good and bad
4. National/Cultural/Linguistic influences

B. These are all factors that for the most part we have absolutely no control over. . . right?

1. Besides our experiences which are actually the product of our choices and the choices of others. . . each of us finds ourselves involuntarily placed in these contexts and they do define who we are. . . both positively and negatively.

a) Just like our own make up being a combination of both the good God intended for us and the bad sin has twisted and distorted within us. . . our past is also a blend between good and evil. . . wholeness and brokenness.

**VII. Now, in Philippians chapter 3, Paul is making some very big statements about identity. . bringing up these very same identity markers in his life.**

A. Just like in our passage last week, we see how much our union with Christ immediately effects the way we prioritise and engage with these key identity markers.

B. This morning we will dive into the entire chapter 3 and because it is 1 complete thought. We will break it down this way:

1. Vss 1-9: Paul's Past- The self-righteous accountant
2. vss 10-16: Paul's Present- The aspiring athlete
3. vss. 17-21: Paul's Future- The hopeful citizen

**C. Now, let's dig in and see how Paul's own story will help us understand our stories and how these stories in turn shape our own identity.**

### VIII. Let's begin with verses 1-9: Paul's past—the self-righteous accountant.

A. Here he begins with how he used to find his identity in a long list of his accomplishments. . . and we see in these verses some familiar identity markers.

1. Family heritage; Genetic/Ethnic make-up; Past Experiences- good and bad; National/Cultural/Linguistic influences
2. And he recalls how in the world's eyes he was at the top. . . he had accomplished and been given everything he needed to be a success.
3. This was his identity. . . coming from a traditional culture. . . these were those outward identity markers that he identified as making up his true identity. . . this is who he was.
  - a) And the language he uses here is very telling. . . he uses language of accounting. . . profit/loss . . . asset and liability.
  - b) He saw all these things as assets/profits. . . so imagine this list as a ledger.

- (1) Circumcision —> Asset
- (2) Family heritage-->
- (3) Ethnicity -->
- (4) Morality -->
- (5) Religious zeal-->
- (6) legalistic goodness—>

c) All these formational markers are where he had placed his confidence, his hope, his joy depended upon these things.

- d) For Paul these were all things he used to elevate himself. . . He could always make himself feel more holy, good. . . by just comparing himself to others.
- (1) These measuring units made him feel righteous and justified before God.
- (a) But then he met Christ, who presents a completely perfect standard of righteousness.
    - i) A completely different way to measure perfection.
    - ii) After knowing Christ, Paul's standards were all wrong!
  - (b) Christ's righteousness is perfect, flawless and he comes and shows us a new standard for goodness.
  - (c) After coming to know the beauty of the grace we have in Christ, Paul comes to realize that the world's standard for measuring success are mixed up.
    - i) It doesn't matter what end measurement you have when your standard for measuring things is wrong from the beginning.
      - (1) If you need to find the metric cubic meters squared of a room. . . and you are using an American ruler using feet/inches then your measurements are rubbish. . . not worth anything. . they need to be converted to metric measurements.
- e) Well, exactly that is what happened when Paul met Christ. . . the perfect image of God. . . the standard by which we prioritise and engage with all our potential identity markers.
- (1) What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage (lit. "manure"), that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith. — Phillipians 3:8-9

(2) So, now, after meeting Christ all these prior assets have become liabilities. . .

(a) What was a profit is now counted as a loss:

- i) Circumscision -->
- ii) Family heritage-->
- iii) Ethnicity -->
- iv) Morality -->
- v) Religious zeal-->
- vi) legalistic goodness—>

B. So, this is a fascinating twist. . . for Paul it is clearly a matter of the value we place on these things. . . the worth/value we assign to our past equals the power it has over us. . .

C. That is why the safeguard for us as Christians is to “rejoice in the Lord”: look at how begins this section:

D. “Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord! It is no trouble for me to write the same things to you again, and it is a safeguard for you.” Philippians 3:1

1. Put your joy in Christ. Rejoice in the Lord! What does that mean?

(1) Put all your hope and all your confidence in Christ.

(2) Let Christ be your only treasure.

b) What the world might call “#blessed”, Paul stamps liability.

- (1) spouse -> Liability
- (2) Children -> Liability
- (3) Good job/education -> Liability
- (4) A home -> Liability
- (5) A fat salary—>liability
- (6) Material things --> liability
- (7) High standard of moraliity --> Liability
- (8) A secure and safe life --> liability

2. The reason these things are a liability is because Christ is Paul's treasure. . . these are all good things when not made into ultimate things.

a) These are liabilities because they are potential idols in our lives.

3. Rejoice in the Lord, means let Christ be the source of your joy and your satisfaction.

a) Jesus says it this way:

(1) "The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and hid; and from JOY over it goes and sells all that he has, and buys that fields." (Matthew 13:44)

b) Rejoice in the Lord: means that whenever we are called upon to choose between ultimately finding our identity in anything in this world or Christ, we choose Christ.

E. Paul has no problem repeating this basic truth again and again and again. . .

F. As he says here "it is not embarrassing (literal) for me to repeat this message to you over and over and over.

G. Why?

1. This simple message: . . . is a safeguard for your faith.

a) When being in Christ is our primary identity marker. . . it gives us peace and security and a foundation no one can take from us.

b) It guards our hearts from disappointment, hurts, brokenness. . .

c) When we rejoice in the Lord (when he's our treasure), we can endure the loss of everything else around us, but no one can rob us of our joy because no one can rob us of Christ.

(1) It is a question of the value and worth we assign to these other identity markers, because if they are taken away from us. . . if they let us down. . . we will be crushed.

(2) . . . but there is a “surpassing worth” in knowing Christ.

## **IX. So, how does Paul’s past relate to his identity now? What is the lesson for us in our study on identity?**

A. From these opening 9 verses we can see that the big idea Paul is trying to get across and impress upon the philippians in these verses is to be intentional and cautious about the value we place on these outward identity marks in comparison to Christ.

1. He becomes that standard by which we order and prioritise our identity markers. . . he is the true measurement/standard.
2. When we rejoice in the Lord. . . that is ultimately a question of the worth or value we place on these things in comparison to Christ. . .
  - a) In comparison to knowing Christ. . . our past is equivalent to dung. . . it is more a liability than an asset compared to the surpassing worth of Christ.

B. Now, that has huge implications for us in our identity formation. . .it means that these outward markers are important. . . but they are not ultimate.

1. So consider someone who has experienced a tragedy. . . a loss of child. . . a divorce. . . a deep wound.
  - a) It is a possible to assign so much value and worth to these experiences that they ultimately define who we are. . . I’m a divorcee. . . a widower. . . a grieving parent. . . our past can imprison us.
    - (1) But Paul is saying here these experiences no longer have power over us in Christ.

(a) If the son sets you free. . . you are free indeed.

2. Think of Paul himself. . . he was not a victim but rather a victimizer. . . a crucial part of his past is that he was a persecuter of the church. . he murdered Christians.



- a) Think of a the shame and guilt, Paul carried with him upon his conversion. . . his past actions could have imprisoned him and defined him.
  - (1) But not so in Christ. . . look how Paul allows his past to inform his present, yet not imprison him or define him in 1 Cor 15:9-10
    - (a) For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. 10 But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. — 1 Cor 15:9-10
    - (b) So, obviously, he cannot ignore his past. . . he cannot escape it. . . it is undeniably a part of his identity.
      - i) But his past does not imprison him. . . limit him. . . define him. . . instead, God has redeemed Paul's past and used it as crass, extreme example of grace.
- b) So, do you see how our past is redefined and give proper value in light of Christ?
  - (1) Paul is not defined as a Persecutor. . . that is not his identity. . . he is an apostle (one sent by Christ).
  - (2) When Christ is supreme. .. our past not longer has power to define who were are.
    - (a) So, the application points are limitless. . . so each of us must ask how we allow our outward identity markers to define us today.
      - i) maybe some of us have made an idol out of our past wounds. . . our past accomplishments. . . or our past mistakes. . . and assigned them a value they should not have.
- (1) You are more than your past. . . in Christ you are a new creature. .. your past no longer defines you.

**X. SO, let's move on to the rest of Philippians 3:10-14: as Paul changes the metaphor from his past self-righteous self as a moral accountant to his present self in Christ as an aspiring athlete.**

A. I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, 11 and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead. 12 Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. 13 Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, 14 I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. All of us, then, who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. 16 Only let us live up to what we have already attained.— Philippians 3:10-16.

B. Paul moves on from speaking about his past to now speaking about his present and future.

1. vss 9, 10, 11 address the three tenses of salvation. . . past, present and future.
  - a) Vs 9: Paul speaks about justification “he has been saved”
  - b) vs 10: Paul speaks about sanctification: “he is being saved”
  - c) vs 11: Paul speaks about glorification: “he will be saved”

C. The main point here in these verses is in vs 10 is about the ongoing process of sanctification: “I want to know Christ.” . . everything else explains what that means for Paul.

- a) Remember, what we've been learning over the past two weeks. . . the more we learn about God, in whose image we've been created and in whom Christ has perfectly revealed. . . the more we will learn about ourselves.
- b) So, you see the importance of knowing Christ for our identity formation. . . the more we know Christ and learn to become Christlike, the more we are truly becoming our selves.
- c) Identity formation is an ongoing process. . . either we are learning to become who we were truly meant to be in Christ. . . or

we are becoming less and less of who we truly are by allowing the things of this world to shape us.

- (1) And Paul describes this process as a sprinter running the course marked out before him.
- (2) Running the race, stringing towards the end goal. . .forgetting the past and not letting the past hold him back. . . his eyes are forward looking not backward looking.

**D. And so Paul likens the Christian life to a process of learning Christ. . . knowing Christ. . . and unlearning his past.**

1. ANd this is an important aspect to sanctification and really discipleship in general.
  - a) Discipleship is about learning a person. . . knowing Christ as Paul says here.
    - (1) So, its not knowing facts about Jesus, but rather having a living growing dynamic relationship with Jesus.
      - (a) This is why it is important to stress that discipleship is not about events, programs, or curriculums . . . it is about knowing Christ and working that out in our daily life.
      - (b) We cannot compartmentalise Jesus to something we do for 2 hours Thursday and Sunday mornings. . . no, we have to be learning to daily make Jesus our Lord in all aspects of our life 24/7.
    - b) But at the same time discipleship is also about unlearning our past attitudes, values, habits, priorities, way of thinking . . .
      - (1) Our past has taught us to live our present in certain ways, with certain expectations, with certain behaviours. . . but now in Christ we are learning a new way to live.
2. So, discipleship is a learning and an unlearning. . . the christian life as a dual dynamic: of learning and unlearning.

- (1) Jesus talks about discipleship as dying to self, loosing those things, in order to find our true life.
- (2) Paul says forgetting what is behind and straining for what is ahead.
- (3) Either way we have to keep this dynamic alive in our discipling relationships. . . learning Christ and unlearning our old sinful ways.
  - (a) This is why baptism is a part of the great commission.
    - i) Dying to our old self as we go down into the water. . . and living to our new self as we come up.
    - ii) baptism is a picture of the life of discipleship. . . learning and unlearning, stringing ahead and forgetting what is behind. . . dying and rising.

XI. So, I think we can see how this informs our identity formation. . . we have been given a new paradigm for understanding how to live our lives.

A. To know Christ is to know the power of his resurrection. . . . these powerful voices of our past no longer hold sway over who we are, so we die to them and live for Him who died for us.

## **XII. Finally, Paul looks forward in vss 17-21: as the hopeful citizen:**

A. 17 Join together in following my example, brothers and sisters, and just as you have us as a model, keep your eyes on those who live as we do. 18 For, as I have often told you before and now tell you again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. 19 Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is set on earthly things. 20 But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, 21 who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body. — Philippians 3:17-21.

1. So, here in these verses Paul looks forward to our future glorification. Remember the NT has three tenses for salvation.

- a) We have been saved: justification vss1-9
  - b) We are being saved: sanctification vss10-16
  - c) We will be saved: glorification. vss 17-21
2. So, for the Christian, our future glorification is much more formative and influential than our sinful past.
3. Consider what difference a firm faith in eternity makes for us.
- a) If there is not an eternal destiny reserved for us. . . if this life is all there is. . . then the present is all that matters.
    - (1) Then logically, the present time is where you should place your priorities and values, joy and happiness.
      - (a) ANd this is the way our contemporary society lives. . . there is no eternity, so I must live my best life now. . . I must consume and live for myself now . . . preserving my well-being and avoiding all suffering at all costs now.
    - b) But Paul here, warns against this attitude. . . their destiny is destruction. . . why? because their minds are set on earthly things.
      - (1) They have made a God out of created things and worship and serve their families, their vocations, their own well-being.
4. Paul says to the contrary our home is not here in this world. . . pulling on one of those key identity markers, our cultural/national identity, our citizenship is NOT in this world. . . but in Heaven.
- a) Many of you ex-brits can relate as many of you have become german citizens over the past two years!
  - b) We are resident aliens here on earth, whose hearts and minds are formed and shaped from above . . rather than by this present world.
  - c) Do you see how Paul's eternal identity in Christ reshapes and re-defines Paul's past.

(1) He used to be defined by his nationality and ethnicity, but now his identity is defined as a citizen of heaven. . . the future holds more sway over his identity than his past.

(a) A powerful image for us all who find ourselves as resident aliens here in Germany.

(b) We of all people should understand how powerful this metaphor is. . . most of us live in Germany as observers of this often strange land.

(c) There are surely parts of Germany we love, but often we find ourselves scratching our head at weird customs:

i) For example, I've learned since being here in Germany that: Fresh air coming in through a window or door is toxic — “es sieht, es sieht”

(1) Just as those quirks about German culture stick out at us, we ought also to be critical observers of our society in general as they live for the moment without a thought for eternity.

B. Do you see how Paul's **eternal** identity in Christ reshapes and re-defines Paul's past.

a) This is the difference eternity makes . . . the question for us is do we really believe in eternity. . . is that really where we have placed our hope and our security

b) The key to checking the health of our own faith . . . is how we handle suffering, grief, failure. . . how resilient are we when something precious is taken from us.

(a) Watching my mother go through the grieving process after my fathers death this past year. . . has taught me the difference a vibrant understanding of eternity is for the believer.

(b) After 50 years of marriage, she is learning to live without him. . .

(c) . . . everyday my mother has the choice to either be shaped by the loss of my father in a negative, confining way. . . or in a positive, god-glorifying way.

i) To be overcome by sadness and self-pity. . . or to confidently walk in faith, trusting God's timing, trusting that this life does not define her. . . she refuses to be defined by widowhood. . . over and above being a daughter of God.

c) This is the difference eternity makes. . . the question is if we are really shaped by eternity or by the circumstances of this life. . .

(1) It comes back to where our treasure is. . . if it is in this life (family, financial security, success) then when tragedy strikes we will be crushed. . . but if it is in the life to come. . . then we have resilience to stand through any storm.

(2) When we rejoice in the Lord, when he's our treasure, we can endure the loss of everything else around us, but no one can rob us of our joy because no one can rob us of Christ.

### **XIII. So, as we close this morning. . . we see how our identity in Christ redefines our past our present and our future.**

A. vss 1-9: Past: No longer defines us because we place more value in our union with Christ as our primary identity marker.

1. We are children of God first and foremost. . . our past is no longer confines us or dictates to us who we are. Christ has freed us from our past.

B. vss: 10-16: Present: A dynamic process of learning Christ and unlearning our sinful past.

1. Faith and repentance is a process of daily trusting in Jesus and daily turning from self.

C. vss 17-21: Future: Eternal destiny redefines our past and empowers our present striving.

XIV.If being a child of God is our primary identity marker. . . then this means the rest of the Christian life is learning to live out our true identity.

- A. Discovering who our God made us to really be. . . and dying to the self we have tried to be independent of God.
- B. And if we really do this, we will not be shaped by our culture or our society we will have a unique culture. . . our lives should be at odds with the world around us.
- C. The First Century martyr Justin writes this to a new convert about how the Christian identity is at odds with the world around us:

"Christians are indistinguishable from other men either by nationality, language or customs. . . With regard to dress, food and manner of life in general, they follow the customs of whatever city they happen to be living in, whether it is Greek or foreign.

And yet there is something extraordinary about their lives. They live in their own countries as though they were only passing through. They play their full role as citizens, but do so as if they were aliens. Any country can be their homeland, but for them their homeland, wherever it may be, is a foreign country. Like others, they marry and have children, but they do not expose (infanticide) them. They share their meals, but not their wives.

NEXT SLIDE

They live in the flesh, but they are not governed by the desires of the flesh. They pass their days upon earth, but they are citizens of heaven. Obedient to the laws, they yet live on a level that transcends the law. . . They live in poverty, but enrich many; they are totally destitute, but possess an abundance of everything. They suffer dishonor, but that is their glory. They are defamed, but vindicated. A blessing is their answer to abuse, deference their response to insult. For the good they do they receive the punishment of malefactors, but even then they, rejoice, as though receiving the gift of life."

From a letter to Diognetus (Nn. 5-6; Funk, 397-401)

Jesus changes everything. . . so who are you?

Are you formed and shaped by your past. . . your mistakes. . . the sins of others. . . or by the grace of God?



Can you say with Paul: But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect.

You are more than your past. . . rise up and live out your true identity as a daughter and son of our great King!

Pray