

“Identity”
Philippians 3:4 – 14

This morning we come to this passage in Philippians and you have noticed that I've been preaching a number of one-offs each week.

By that I mean I haven't been doing a series or going through a book of the Bible which I normally do.

On Tuesday I felt to settle on a topic... and ever since then it's been hard work. It's been compounded by putting my back out on Thursday evening at football training (you know, after scoring my sixth goal... ☺).

So what I'm trying to say is I've really been a struggle this week to bring it all together and if it's seems a bit clunky this morning there is a bit of back story to it.

The question I want to explore this morning is this: who are you?
Or when we engage in self-talk, who am I?

It's a question about *identity*.

And it's been said that in the West the question of identity is the question of our age because with the question of identity are greater question that go to the core of who we are.

Do I matter? In other words, is there a meaningful purpose to my existence?
Coupled with this is, do I have worth?

These are deep seated questions that go to the deepest part of us.

Everyone – EVERYONE – is living for something; everyone is basing their worth and meaning – their identity – on something or someone.

And we *are* meant to matter and know we have worth.

The issue is where does it come from and who gets to say?

The simple answer to the question of who gets to say in the Western world is “I do” and no one else – not parents or the state or God or religion.

.

And where does it come from?

Well, in our Western culture **how or where do we find identity in our society and culture today?**

Consider this list:

- A spouse or partner
- Family and children
- Work and career
- Your sexuality
- Money and possessions
- Pleasure, gratification and comfort
- Relationships and others approval
- A ‘noble cause’
- Achievement

Now, these are not a problem with having a purpose and worth – the problem is that for human beings these are ultimately unstable as our core identity; they can desert us in a moment.

If for example we live for your career and don't do well you'll feel like a failure and punish yourself all your life.

If you live for your children and they disappoint you and turn out great you'll feel like a worthless person.

There was a mother who had a brilliant and beautiful daughter and who wanted her admiration and love above all things. Whenever the girl didn't obey her or respect and affection, it ignited explosive anger. The woman experienced what she should have seen as normal childish resistance as to authority as profound rejection. This led the daughter to first mistrust then despise her. As soon as she was old enough the girl put hundreds and hundreds of kilometres between them, leaving the mother with an unfillable hole in her life.

Even if we do well, there is a risk there is still this yawning chasm within us is left unfulfilled.

Bob Odenkirk, who plays Saul Goodman in “Better Call Saul”, and has won multiple awards, who's not a Christian as far as I'm aware, he had this insight:

"That's the wonderful lesson of success.

If you're lucky enough to have success in your career, in your life, a degree of success that you dreamed about or maybe even better than you dreamed about, then you're left looking and going,

'Oh, wait a second, I'm still unsatisfied. I'm still not okay with myself.' Then that makes you go, 'I always thought success was gonna give me that,' and of course, it isn't."¹

A well-known novelist said:

"When good writing was my only goal in life, I made the quality of my work the measure of my worth. For this reason I wasn't able to read my writing well. I couldn't tell if something was good or bad, because I needed to be good in order to feel sane. I lost the ability to cheerfully interrogate how much I liked what I had written, to see what was actually on the page rather than what I wanted to see or feared to see

We look for it sexual or romantic relationships.

Even in the church we have got the purpose of marriage largely wrong. In wider society and in the Christian world we have elevated marriage to a status that is unattainable.

Many people feel that if I find the right person then "I will be fulfilled. My life will be made whole. It will be complete."

No human being can the weight of meeting the deepest needs of another person.

Someone wrote:

"Marriage becomes hard work once you have poured the entirety of your life's expectations for happiness into the hands of one mere person. Keeping that going is hard work."

Our modern culture insists that we find our identity – our meaning and worth in these ways while failing to acknowledge that it leaves people broken along the way.

If our identity is wrapped up in something and we lose it, we will be crushed. Our self-worth is plummet and our sense of meaning will be gone.

They all seem reasonable ways of finding identity and not only are they unstable but they're also crushing.

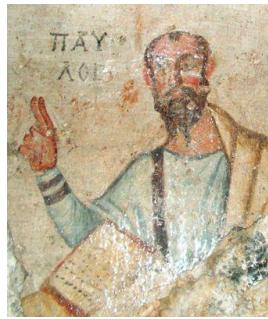
¹ <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/entertainment/life-after-near-death-bob-odenkirk-on-better-call-saul-his-heart-attack-and-making-changes/4VWR7AAM060M7KS5UDECHE3GGQ/>

- A spouse or partner – you will be emotionally dependent, jealous, and controlling. If the relationship fails you will be devastated beyond recovery.
- Family and children – you will try to live life through your children until they resent you or have no self of their own.
- Work and career – you will be a driven workaholic and a boring, shallow person. At worst you will lose family and friends, and if you’re career goes poorly, develop deep depression.
- Your sexuality – you will constantly seek to meet your sexual appetite as well as incessantly seeking affirmation but will become enraged at those who don’t or won’t affirm your sexual choices.
- Money and possessions – you’ll be eaten up by jealousy or worry about money. At worst you’ll be willing to do unethical things to maintain your lifestyle, which will eventually blow up your life.
- Pleasure, gratification and comfort – you’ll find yourself addicted to something as an “escape strategy” by which you avoid the hardness of life.
- Relationships and others approval – you will be constantly hurt by criticism and thus always lose friends. You will fear confronting others and therefore be a useless friend.
- A ‘noble cause’ – you will divide the world into “good” and “bad”. Ironically, you will be controlled by your enemies, because without them you will have no purpose.
- The broad category of achievement, if you fail you will become miserable and given to despair and if you do achieve the satisfaction will be short lived leaving you feeling empty.

So where do we go?

In this morning’s reading we are hearing the words of Paul the Apostle. From what we know Paul was not an imposing figure.

The earliest artistic portrayal of him is from around 450AD.



That was until recently when a fresco was discovered from around 400AD:



400AD

Both are well after he died.

We only have one physical description of Paul that describes him as:

"A man small in size, bald-headed, bandy-legged, well-built, with eyebrows meeting, a hooked nosed, full of grace. For sometimes he seemed like a man, and sometimes he had the face of an angel."

Again we don't know if this is genuine as it is written well after Paul died.

Yet we do have this self-description in Philippians where he lists his achievements:

"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;
as for zeal, persecuting the church;
as for righteousness based on the law, faultless."

Paul's identity was deeply rooted in him being a deeply devout religious Jew. By the measure of his contemporaries and peers he should have been satisfied, a success.

Yet Paul went on to say:

“But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ.
8What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth
of knowing King Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things.

I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ 9and 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.

10I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and
participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, 11and so,
somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.”

Paul’s identity – his worth and meaning – was now in King Jesus the Lord.
In the cross we see our true worth not based on performance or achievement but
in the self-giving love of God.
We’re to do the same.

When we look at the cross we see Jesus Christ, the Son of God, dying a shameful
death for us.

Jesus had to die for you and was glad to die for you.

He had to die for you to take the barrier build by sin and the damage it caused as
the only cure for sin in all of history.

He took your place and paid your penalty.

Jesus was also glad to die for you because He knew he secure the God’s gift of
salvation for those trust in him.

Now our identity is found in “knowing King Jesus... and being found in Him”.
In the eyes of God, in the only opinion of the only one in the universe whose
ultimately counts, we are more valuable than all the precious metal in the world.

It means that whatever happens in life – whether you succeed or fail, whether
lifelong plans are achieved or never come to fruition, whether you are loved by
those you love or rejected by them – your purpose and worth – your identity – is
found who Jesus is and what he has done for you and what he says about you.

And we’re told who we are:

- You’re forgiven.
- You are saved by His grace, through faith, not from yourself but a gift from
God.
- You are a child of God.
- You were chosen.
- He has called you out of darkness into his wonderful light (1 Peter 2:9 – 10)
- He delights in you (Zephaniah 3:14 – 17)

- You are adored.
 - You have a purpose and hope
-

That doesn't mean it's easy.

We do live in a world that is constantly telling us where to find our identity.

We're beautiful enough or successful enough.

And that is tough.

It's tough not to imbibe the messages it sends.

Even Paul said"

"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.... I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus."

So what do we do?

We have address this on the level of our affections.

- On the negative, pay attention to the messages that come to the surface *in your worst moments* and if necessary, repent.
- Keep reminding ourselves; make what God says central.
- Engage in worship. Worship has a way of penetrating to the deepest part of us exposing and affirming our true identity in Christ.