

Identity #6: Christ Alone

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West Side Church of Christ
Searcy, Arkansas
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Scripture Reading

“But all these things that I once thought very worthwhile—now I’ve thrown them all away so that I can put my trust and hope in Christ alone” (Philippians 3:7 TLB)

“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, that I may gain Christ and be found in him...” (Philippians 3:8-9 ESV)

FINDING MY IDENTITY

Contemporary Western culture’s number one claim about identity is this: you have to be true to yourself. And the way to be true to yourself is to follow your heart.¹

Those two words are extremely important. I didn’t just say “culture.” I said “contemporary” “western” culture.

By contemporary, I mean this hasn’t always been the case. By western, I mean this isn’t the case in all places even now. Just a few years ago, an article appeared in the journal *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* titled, “the weirdest people in the world.”² They said when we study people—to learn what people think and how they are wired, the vast majority of them are Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic. In other words, “WEIRD.” In fact, most of them are American undergrads looking to make a few bucks. And we just assumed that people are the same, and this western group of American undergrads represented the world. They do not.

¹ Some of these examples in the introduction (such as the lyrics from Frozen and the Sound of Music) are taken from Tim Keller, “An Identity That Can Handle Either Success or Failure,” New Canaan Society. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-N_178ASBg0&ab_channel=NewCanaanSociety

² Joseph Henrich, et. al, “The Weirdest People In the World?” *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 33/2-3(June 2010): 61-83; discussion 83-135. Doi: 10.1017/S0140525X0999152X. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/20550733/>

The psychological differences as well as the differing interpretations one can see between the dominant cultures of East and West are often dramatic.³ Did you know much of the world—I mean Asian countries like India, Japan, China—are not individualist, they are collectivist. That is, they find their identity in adhering to group values rather than in personal success at the expense of their community’s needs. For many in the East, self-esteem and personal happiness are found in how you can surrender your will to fulfill your role within the system. In the West, we are the exact opposite. We value personal success regardless of what the community has to say about it; in fact, we consider it praiseworthy to buck the system, to go against the grain, to be yourself no matter what anybody has to say about it. Self-esteem and personal happiness are not found in how well we serve the system, but in how quickly we can reject it to find our own way.

And there are all sorts of reasons for the differences. You can think in terms of large-scale philosophical differences. Taoism is huge in the east, and it teaches that how you respond to your obligations based on your station in life is key. In the West, democracy is all the rage, where individual rights, liberty, and freedom are the greatest goods.

But think about everyday life as well. To take just one example, think about agriculture. What’s the dominant crop in southeast Asia? It’s rice. Who do you need to depend on in order to grow rice? Everybody! It takes tons of labor, and depends on a complex irrigation system that spreads into multiple farms. If this is what you and your community think of when they think of “work”, you can see how the value system of that culture might also be “collective.” But now think about America. Yes, we grow rice here (more in Arkansas than anywhere else in the US). But our greatest crops are corn, soybeans, and wheat. Wheat takes about half the amount of work that rice does, and you don’t count on irrigation systems; you count on rain. This means wheat farmers don’t have to depend on everyone, working in cooperation with other farms; they can just tend to their own crops. You can see how if this is what you and your community think of “work,” you could see how you might naturally think more individualist in your daily life and politics as well.

Contemporary Western culture’s number one claim about identity is this: you have to be true to yourself. And the way to be true to yourself is to follow your heart.

³ David Robson, “How East and West Think in Profoundly Different Ways,” BBC (Jan 19, 2017). <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20170118-how-east-and-west-think-in-profoundly-different-ways>. Note, however, that the lines “east” and “west” are often blurred, and the differences can be more a matter of differing interpretations rather than deep psychological differences. It’s the differing interpretations I wish to emphasize in this sermon. See Nicolas Baumard, et. al., “Weird people, yes, but also weird experiments,” *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 33/2-3 (Jun 2010): 84-85. Doi: 10.1017/S0140525X10000038. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/20550737/>

You want a snapshot of this? I'll give you two.

First, think about these lines:

Climb every mountain
Ford every stream
Follow every rainbow
'Till you find your dream

You know that song—it's from *The Sound of Music*.

Do you want something more contemporary? Listen to the philosopher Elsa: She speaks of “this swirling storm inside.” What storm? The storm of who I am vs who my community wants me to be. She feels the pressure:

Don't let them in, don't let them see
Be the good girl you always have to be
Conceal, don't feel, don't let them know

But she can't live this way. It's not being true to herself. So what does she decide to do? Everybody together:

Let it go, let it go
Can't hold it back anymore
Let it go, let it go
Turn away and slam the door

Here is the calling card tag-line:

I don't care what they're going to say

After all (she says in the second verse),

It's time to see what I can do
To test the limits and break through
No right, no wrong, no rules for me
I'm free...

Here I stand and here I stay
Let the storm rage on

That’s it, in a nutshell.

Contemporary western culture says your identity is not based on *surrendering* your interests for the good of your family or community, but on *asserting* your interests in spite of your family, community, or what anybody else tells you. As you come to realize what your body craves, or what your inner voice tells you, or where your dreams are guiding you, then you come to realize the real you—who you are—your identity. You’ll find it when you follow the desires of your heart.

HEART

The Christian counter-narrative has two parts, and both are very important.

Part 1: “Following the desires of your heart” is actually a good and Godly idea because you were made with a heart that was made to desire the right things. You were given a beautiful soul and a meaningful body by God himself. He breathed life into us and thus our spirit longs for His spirit, and the deepest longings of the human heart are fulfilled in God and in God alone. As Augustine said to God, “You have made us for yourself; and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.” Part 1 is Genesis 1&2 and it is a beautiful and wholesome picture.

But here is Part 2. Something went terribly, terribly wrong. Christians call it sin, the Fall, our break from what were meant to be, called to be, made to be. But you don’t need Christian language to understand this. Just look around—everything and everyone seems broken. Something just isn’t right. We all can look into the cosmos and say, “Houston, we have a problem.”

Scripture speaks of this problem with the language of sin, and it speaks of sin as a disease—infesting everything. And the problem with thinking we will find release from our ills and that we will recover our true self by looking within and following our heart is this: the problem IS deep within ourselves. The problem lies with our heart.

In the words of the prophet Jeremiah, “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?” (Jeremiah 17:9 ESV)

To fully appreciate this, we need to see three ways the heart is deceitful and sick, and how Christians follow an alternate route to the claims of contemporary western culture.

THOUGHTS

The first way is to focus on our thoughts. In the Bible, “heart” can sometimes refer to the seat of intelligence—what we think, remember, or understand. Think of those verses that say you “understand with your heart” (Mt 13:15b; Jn 12:40b).

And the first way NOT to find my identity is this: My identity is not what I think apart from the wisdom of God.

Just because something *seems* right doesn’t mean that it *is* right.⁴

Try this out: what color is a yield sign? If you are over 50, I imagine some of you want to say “yellow.” But you’d be wrong. A yield sign is red and white. They used to be yellow, but they’ve been changed out. When did that happen? 30 years ago!

Does the Monopoly guy wear a monacle? The answer is “no”! He never has!

Just because something *seems* right doesn’t mean that it *is* right.

Listen to this wise saying from 3,000 years ago: “There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death” (Proverbs 14:12; 16:25 ESV)

So, it is helpful to challenge thinking, even our own thinking. “The one who states his case first seems right,” says Proverbs 18, “until the other comes and examines him” (Proverbs 18:17 ESV)

Christians don’t let our thinking, our thinking patterns, our memories, our accumulated ideas to stand unchecked. Instead, we run all our thinking through a filter.

Why? Well, first, we can be deceived by others. Romans 16:18 says “By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the naïve.”

But we also believe—no, we know—that we can easily rationalize and deceive *ourselves*. Listen to Galatians 6:3: “if anyone thinks he is something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself.” Or James 1:26: “If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person’s religion is worthless.”

We can deceive ourselves. Deceive ourselves about what? That our thoughts, ideas, and plans may not be entirely good! On one occasion, Jesus used his divine power to peer

⁴ https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/False_memory#Mandela_effect

inside those standing around him. The text says, “Jesus, knowing their thoughts, said ‘why do you think evil in your hearts?’” (Matt 9:4)

Because it’s there—in the heart that decides, determines, and devises—that we find not only wonderful truths, but also deep-seated evils. All those evil actions we do, and evil ideas we have, they flow from the heart; for “out of the heart (that is from deep within) come evil thoughts, immorality, theft, murder...” you name it! (Mt 15:19; Mk 7:21). In Romans 1, Paul describes the downward spiral of forsaking God and he describes it this way: “they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened” (Rom 1:21).

Then, those darkened hearts become hearts of stone. Defiant. Refusing to listen to reason or to even consider that they might be wrong, or tragically headed in a dangerously wrong direction. What the Bible calls “hard heartedness” (Pharoah; Mk 6:52; 8:17). Paul describes the process in Ephesians 4. He speaks of those “darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart” (Eph 4:18).

Instead, we need God to work on how we think. Paul’s prayer for the Ephesians was this: if you want to know what is the hope you have and that lies within you, you need the eyes of your heart to be enlightened (Eph 1:18). God can “open the heart” so we can believe right things (Acts 16:14). And we surrender even this to Christ as we lay our whole selves on the altar as a living sacrifice, so that we can experience the “renewing of our minds” and so that we can have “our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience” (Heb 10:22).

DESIRES

Second, there is a danger in seeking the basis of our identity in our desires. This is a second use of the word “heart” in scripture—where “heart” is the seat of the emotions. The Bible speaks of “sorrow of heart” (John 16:6; Rom 9:2) or even “anguish of heart” that comes with tears (2 Cor 2:4). When people felt guilt, they were “cut to the heart” (Acts 2:37). This is far and away the dominant meaning of “heart” in today’s culture. When people say they have a “broken heart,” they mean they feel emotionally hurt; when they say “follow your heart,” they almost always mean “do what makes you feel good.”

But here is the danger. We are warned over and over again in Scripture about how our desires can be deceptive. James says that if we look deep down inside ourselves, if we look into our hearts, we might find “bitter jealousy and selfish ambition” (James 3:14). Romans chapter 1 details the downward spiral that comes from following the lust of

our hearts (Rom 1:24). When Stephen gives that long speech recounting the history of Israel, he gets to the part where they rebelled and started acting like people who didn't want God and His ways (even though God had rescued them from Egypt and led them by the hand out of captivity. And Stephen puts it this way: he says our fathers were stubborn and refused to listen to wise counsel. “And in their hearts they turned to Egypt” (Acts 7:39).

For the Christian, my ultimate identity is not what I feel or desire apart from the reordering of God.

All those danger signs, all that warning, that says “watch out—you can't trust the desires of your heart” is lost on a whole generation of people in a culture that says the only thing you can trust—the only place to find your true identity—is in your impulses and desires. If your body tells you it wants something, and you don't feed it what it wants, you are denying your true self. But if you give in to your impulses and desires, well, then, you are being truly you. You are liberated and free. You finally live your truth and you have found your identity.

Tim Keller offers a very helpful analogy here that is worth repeating.

1200 years ago, an Anglo-Saxon warrior is walking around Britain. He looks into his heart and he sees two very strong impulses. One of them is he likes killing people. When people get in his way he just likes smashing them (aggression). And he looks in his heart and he sees something else: he sees a sexual desire that doesn't fit into what the rest of the culture says is OK. So here is what he's going to do. He's going to look at his aggression and he's going to say “that's me! That's me!” It's a warrior culture. It fits in fine. But he's going to look at that sexual desire and say “that's not me. Squelch that.”

Scroll forward. 1200 years later, a young man is walking down a street of Manhattan. He looks into his heart and he sees two very strong impulses. One is aggression. He likes smashing people! What is he going to do with that? He's going to go to therapy. He's going to go to anger management classes. Or he is going to go to jail. But the other thing—he goes in and sees a particular kind of sexual desire and says “that's me!” Why? Because your culture 1200 years ago told you “aggression is a good thing.” In other words, both the Anglo-Saxon warrior and the modern person who says “any sexual desire is me”—you are not being yourself, you are not liberated. You are doing what your culture told you. You are no more liberated than that Anglo-Saxon warrior 1200 years ago. Because each of those guys has received a grid—a value-laden, moral grid—that they've laid down and are looking at their heart through it. You are really not just

looking into your heart and being yourself. You are doing what your culture tells you.⁵

Here's the truth: every one of us accepts some parts of ourselves and denies some parts of ourselves. We are conditioned by our culture, by our environment, by our neuroses, by our religion, by our community—you name it. And we adopt a grid or a set of lenses and we use that grid or we use those lenses to decide what aspects of my desires will be expressed. I am a Christian. I don't mean to suggest for one second that I have no grid. I certainly do. I have given myself over to Jesus Christ and I surrender my desires, my impulses, my wishes and what I think I need and I read all of that through the lens of Jesus Christ. I may hunger for food that ultimately will not satisfy. I may thirst for something that sounds good now, but will not in the end give me what I truly need. So I go the source. And when Christ reorders my desires, I learn to crave the water that never runs out; I learn to hunger for the life-giving manna from heaven.

"But that's denying yourself." Absolutely it is! That's the first call of Jesus Christ. The Greeks said the key to identity was to know thyself. The Romans said it was to defend thyself. But Jesus said the first step to true identity, happiness, fulfillment, and peace is to deny yourself.

God doesn't hate our desires. He made them. He doesn't want us to end all desires. He wants to purify them and reorder them. He wants us to feel deeply, to love fully, to be moved to tears and to be experience pure elation. But he wants us to want the right things. God says he will encourage our hearts (Eph 6:22; Col 2:2; 4:8), comfort our hearts (2 Thess 1:16-17), and when we doubt ourselves, he will reassure our hearts (1 John 3:19-21).

But I can't find my "true self" by looking deep within and asking what I feel like doing today; and the funny little secret is that nobody does that any way. We all have impulses and desires that we bottle up. The question is who are we trusting to give us the right set of lenses?

James 5:8 says "establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand."

My ultimate identity is not what I feel or desire apart from the reordering of God.

⁵ Tim Keller, "An Identity That Can Handle Either Success or Failure," New Canaan Society. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-N_178ASBg0&ab_channel=NewCanaanSociety (14:36-17:04)

DUTIES

And finally, there is a danger in finding the basis of our identity in our particular religious duties and obedient actions. My identity is not what I do or obey over and above the person of God.

We’ve seen how “heart” can refer to how we think and how we feel. But it can also refer to what we will, purpose, or decide to do. On the positive side, Paul tells the church that when you give, give as you have decided “in your heart” (2 Cor 9:7). But there is a negative sense as well. Peter confronts Ananias and Sapphira who conspire against the Holy Spirit to lie to God. And Peter says “why have you contrived this deed in your heart?” (Acts 5:4).

Maybe the identity of my heart can be found in what I do and how I do it. We’ve already talked about work in a previous lesson on calling. But what about our religious identity?

Once upon a time, two men went up into the temple to pray. One was a Pharisee—a high-profile religious leader of God’s people; the other was a vile tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed this way: “God, I thank you that I am not like this man. I’m no extortioner. I’m not unjust. I’m no adulterer. And I’m so grateful that I’m not like this guy—this, tax collector. Oh no. I fast twice a week. I give a tenth of everything I have. (Luke 18:9-12)

Let’s not forget: these are commands of God. On the negative side, extortion and adultery are ungodly, and we are told to avoid these things. He’s been careful to avoid these. He’s kept those commandments. On the positive side, God expected his people to fast. Let me let you in on a little secret: so did Jesus. In the Sermon on the Mount—the model of Christian ethics—Jesus didn’t say “if you pray,” he said “when you pray.” Not “if you give,” but “when you give.” And he didn’t say “if you fast,” but “*when* you fast.” In the book of Acts—the handbook for how to do and be a church—We see the gathered people worshipping the Lord and fasting (Acts 13:2, 3; 14:23). I don’t do that very much. I’d be willing to bet there are several in this room who have never done that.

How about giving? All the research says that, on average, people give 2% of their income to charities, including their local church. And that 2% is often based on net, not gross. And usually, that’s only if they are currently employed. This man says “I give 10% of everything I own. If I’m out of a job for a while, then I throw in my living room furniture.” How much? 10 percent of it! You could be forgiven for thinking to yourself, “what a righteous man!”

That’s what you are supposed to think. That’s how parables work. He describes what anyone in their right mind would see as model behavior. And then he pulls the rug out from under us.

You see, all of this focus on what I do right for God, this “look how well I keep the first commandment,” betrays a seedy underbelly. He can’t really be keeping the first commandment because what he is doing is causing him to completely disregard the second commandment: to love your neighbor as yourself. And Jesus says the second commandment is “like” the first. You can’t really keep one without the other.

I can’t think of a command of God that we should look at as merely optional. Can you? How many times does God have to say it for him to mean it? Just once. So I want to do everything—everything God tells me to do. And I even have great respect for the restoration movement line that I inherited that says when it comes to things God didn’t tell me to do—the silence of scripture—avoid doing things that would cause your brother to stumble or that would reflect something less than a humble obedient heart before God. I bet you feel that way as well.

So I can imagine saying to myself “I know who I am. I know I am secure. I know it because I keep 5 acts of worship and when it came to responding to Jesus, I did everything right. I dotted every I and crossed every T.” And when someone says, “so what are you?” Why do we feel the need to say anything other than “I am a Christian.” Well, because if I say that, and I don’t emphasize all the particulars that set me apart and different from other people who call themselves Christians, they might confuse me for them. And they’ll never realize how grateful I am that I’m not like them.

Paul knew this so well. In Philippians 3, Paul can see this problem from a mile away, so he puts together his own hallmark special. Have you noticed how those Hallmark Christmas movies always have the same plot, just different actors? If so, maybe you’ve seen this one then. The young man—so full of himself—goes out to the barn to complain to grandpa, whose busy working. The young man gives all the reasons why he’s so special, why he’s being ignored and underappreciated at work, and by his friends on the softball team, and even his wife doesn’t seem to know just how great a guy he is. And the old man just keeps on working. And then, he looks at the young man, and then looks deep off in the distance, and he says gives some lesson about a tree, or acorn, of that rocking chair he just built...something about how sturdy and dependable things are often unrecognized and underappreciated, until you need a place to stand when stuck outside in a rainstorm, or a place to sit when your body is aching. And then he goes right back to work. And we, the audience, just revels in the old man’s wisdom about letting go of everything except what really matters.

Well, Paul does his own Hallmark special for a church that is fighting amongst themselves, probably about who is greater, whose done the most, whose done it the best, whose got the track record and the spiritual medals to show for it. And here’s old Paul with the long beard, in his woodshed:

“Yeah, I got a lot of diplomas on the wall over there. Just take a look.” And we go look at them. Wow! There’s his birth certificate—Born at Benjamin hospital, the most exclusive one. There’s his valedictory medal from Pharisee U. He’s even got a little award for being circumcised on day 8. Not sure why that one is up here. There’s the accolades, there are the trophies and keys to the city, gathered for his speeches and service to the community. And we are truly impressed.

“Now, don’t be impressed,” says Paul. “I’m not. Do you know why they are out here in the barn, rather than in my office? Because I wanted to put them where I can’t help but smell horse manure when I read them. You see, that is all worthless. I think of it all as garbage. It’s who I used to be. It’s how I thought of myself. It’s how I handled myself. But now---ever since that day—they mean nothing to me.”

“What day?” we ask him.

“The day that changed my life” he says. “The day I met Jesus Christ. And one day, not too long from now, I’ll meet him again. On that glorious day of his return, when all the angels gather round, and all the dead rise up to witness, and all creation sings his praises, there I will be—I will be found IN Him, clothed with his righteousness. And to think...that’s how he sees me right now!”

Religiosity says I find my value, my worth, and my identity in what I do well and how I do it better than others. But Paul says “nothing, nothing, nothing I offer compares to what HE has offered me. And my identity is found in him and him alone.”

God’s people obey God’s voice. Of course we do. But it was Jesus who said, “when you have done all that you were commanded, say only this: ‘we are unworthy servants; we only did what was our duty.’” (Luke 17:10). Hear it in Phillips translation: “When you have done everything that you are told to do, you can say, ‘We are not much good as servants, for we have only done what we ought to do.’”

“Not much good as servants.” That sounds far less like the Pharisee, and far more like the tax collector. Do you remember how that story ends? “But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’” (Luke 18:13). This is a tale of two identities. The Pharisee said, “I know who I am because of how good I act, and in my good acts, in

comparison with those whose actions are less than good, I define myself.” The tax collector said, “I know who I am—a no good sinner in need of God’s mercy.” And Jesus says, “I tell you, this man went down to his house justified; the other guy did not.” (Luke 18:14).

Hear this challenge, church. Obey God. Do everything you tells you. When it comes to things he doesn’t talk about, even then be completely humble, sensitive and loving. Do right. Do what you believe with all your heart to be right. But find your identity in none of it. For nothing I do compares to this one identity marker: “to be found in Him.” Here is love, says John: not that we love God. If you want to talk about love, don’t tell me what you did for God yesterday. Here is love: not that we love God, but that He loved us, and sent His son to cover all our sins (1 John 4:10).

TRUE IDENTITY: CHRIST ALONE

God made my mind, gave me a heart to desire, and calls me to obey, but the fall has affected how I think, it has corrupted what I desire, and misplaced pride often gets confused with the duties we perform. So where can I find my true identity?

The answer is this: In Jesus Christ alone.

“I am anxious for you with the deep concern of God himself—anxious that your love should be for Christ alone, just as a pure maiden saves her love for one man only, for the one who will be her husband” (2 Corinthians 11:2 TLB)

“But all these things that I once thought very worthwhile—now I’ve thrown them all away so that I can put my trust and hope in Christ alone” (Philippians 3:7 TLB)

“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, that I may gain Christ and be found in him...” (Philippians 3:8-9 ESV)

“Because of this, your trust can be in God who raised Christ from the dead and gave him great glory. Now your faith and hope can rest in him alone” (1 Peter 1:21 TLB)

“May your spiritual experience become richer as you see more and more fully God’s great secret, Christ himself! For it is in him, and in him alone, that men will find all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Colossians 2:3 PHILLIPS)

“Your old life is dead. Your new life, which is your real life—even though invisible to spectators—is with Christ in God. He is your life. When Christ (your real life, remember) shows up again on this earth, you’ll show up, too—the real you, the glorious you...” (Colossians 3:3-4 MSG)

Hear these beautiful lyrics from Lauren Daigle’s song, “You Say”:

I keep fighting voices in my mind that say I'm not enough
Every single lie that tells me I will never measure up
Am I more than just the sum of every high and every low
Remind me once again just who I am because I need to know

You say I am loved when I can't feel a thing
You say I am strong when I think I am weak
And you say I am held when I am falling short
And when I don't belong, oh You say I am Yours

The only thing that matters now is everything You think of me
In You I find my worth, in You I find my identity.

And I believe...what you say of me.