

True Freedom: Children of God

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Date: 24 October 2021

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[0 : 01] Well, who are you? Who are you? The question of identity is a really important question in today's world. And identity really is the essence of who we are as people.

The author Pete Nicholas in his book, *A Place for God*, says this. He says, think of the challenge you face when setting up a social media profile. How do you present yourself? Authentic, but not a mess. Confident, but not arrogant.

Beautiful, handsome, but not superficial. Moral, but not self-righteous. Popular, but not at the whim of the crowd. It's so difficult, he says. And I'm sure we can all relate.

Just be honest. You can relate to what he's saying. And then there's the hashtag no filter, which is used on social media as a way of communicating authenticity. It's a pushback on all the filtering and photoshopping and editing of images of ourselves. Because we want to let people see the perfectly natural appearance that we have, warts and all. But we know that even with the hashtag no filter image, a huge amount of time and effort has been put into getting the best picture from the best angle and the best light to give the best possible impression of ourselves.

And yet when it comes to image, it goes further and deeper still. Because identity is one of the biggest issues in our contemporary Western culture. Just think of the rise of identity politics, with all the debates surrounding sex and gender and race and religion and class and so on and so on.

[1 : 41] And so in pop culture, you get Lady Gaga singing. I'm not going to sing. But she says, don't hide yourself in regret. Just love yourself and you're set. I'm on the right track, baby. I was born this way. And on the other hand, we also get Caitlyn Jenner tweeting after changing sex. I'm so happy after such a long struggle to be living my true self. So our world presents an odd contradiction when it comes to identity. There are two different messages being preached at us. On the one hand, we're being told, just be yourself. You were born that way. Yet on the other hand, we're being told, be whoever you want to be. You can change yourself. But which is it? Just be yourself or be who you want to be. It's confusing, isn't it? And it's no exaggeration to say that we seem to have an identity crisis in our world today. But we don't need to be confused about our identity by just listening to the voices in our culture telling us who we are or who we should be. Let's not just listen to those voices, but let's listen to the voice of the God who made us. Because with God, we don't need to construct an identity for ourselves because Christianity invites us to receive a new identity, an identity from God in Jesus Christ.

And it's an identity where we discover who we truly are, warts and all. And yet we discover that God accepts us despite what we are. And it's by faith in Jesus that we become God's children. And so becoming a Christian means being adopted into God's family. It means becoming part of a family where we're all on the same level. And so we receive this new identity as a child of God. We receive this new status through Jesus. And we receive a new experience through the Holy Spirit. And so we're going to see what Paul says here in Galatians about identity and what it means to be a Christian. And so there are three points this afternoon. First of all, we see a new identity, 26 to 29. We see a new status, verse 1 to 5.

And we see a new experience, verse 6 to 7 of chapter 4. So a new identity, a new status, and a new experience. First of all, a new identity. Paul's speaking here about a new identity in Jesus Christ, verse 26.

So in Christ Jesus, you are all children of God through faith. Paul literally says, for in Christ Jesus, you are all sons of God through faith. Now in ancient cultures, it was the son and not the daughter who would inherit the, who would receive the inheritance. So the son was the legal heir who would get everything. And so what Paul's saying here is that all those who have faith in Jesus, men or women, are sons of God. In other words, we're all heirs. And the Galatians needed to hear this because they were being urged to follow false teaching from Jewish false teachers who were saying that if they were going to be real members of the family of God, then they needed to follow all kinds of rules and rituals like circumcision in order to be proper Christians. But Paul's been saying in Galatians that it's faith in Jesus alone that makes you part of God's family. All you need is faith in Jesus. And so the Galatians were already children of God. And so Paul explains how this is possible. Verse 27, he says, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. It doesn't mean that baptism itself unites us to Christ, but baptism symbolizes a

Christian believer's union with Jesus Christ. And so it's a sign of belonging to God's family that happens through faith in Jesus. Paul puts it another way by telling the Galatians you have clothed yourself with Christ. He's describing faith in Jesus a bit like you might put your clothes on in the morning, a new set of clothes. Being united to Christ by faith means we're clothed with Christ's righteousness, where our old life has been replaced with a new identity as God's child. And so it changes everything about us, this new identity. It changes our relationship with God. It also changes our relationships with the people in God's family. That's what Paul says in verse 28, there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female for you are all one in Christ Jesus. So he's saying God has only got one family where those who have faith in Jesus are God's sons and daughters. And so that means we're all united as brothers and sisters in Jesus

[6 : 50] Christ. And so race and class and gender distinctions that did divide people in the ancient world and continue to divide people in today's world, they don't matter when it comes to our standing with God.

If we are all one in Christ Jesus, it means there are no second class citizens in God's family. We're all first class. I always hate that on an airplane when I'm in economy class and then there's a business class and there's first class and I'm never in those places. And it makes you feel rubbish because all these people seem far more important. But there's none of that in God's family.

There was a common prayer back then in the days when Paul wrote and Jewish men would pray this prayer and essentially they were thanking God that they had not been born a Gentile, a slave, or a woman.

But what he's saying here is the gospel of Jesus Christ gives us a new identity in the family of God. It destroys this kind of attitude that some people are superior to other people because the gospel of Jesus Christ destroys, Paul says, the barrier of race. He says there's neither Jew nor Gentile.

Now when he was writing there was a massive gulf between Jew and Gentile. And the Jewish false teachers that are mentioned in Galatians, they didn't help this by insisting that Gentile believers needed to be circumcised in order to be like Jews. Because the Jews were in a sense assuming a cultural superiority to those who were Gentiles. And yet racial and cultural divisions have no place in God's family if we're all one in Christ. So no one is racially or culturally superior to anyone else.

[8 : 47] No one should feel like an outsider in church. Because if we have faith in Jesus, then everybody is an insider. And that's why we should always celebrate our differences, whether race, culture, color, or language. So that's the first thing. The gospel destroys the barrier of race. The second thing is the gospel destroys the barrier of class. Paul says there is neither slave nor free. Now every society has got its own class system that divides people and puts people into categories. They had it in Galatia and we continue to have it in our world today. Our society is riddled with class distinction.

And it's highlighted, I think, in cities like Glasgow because there's just so many people going about. And it comes from all kinds of factors. Things like where we live or what school we went to, whether we went to university or not, what job we do, how much we earn, the kind of clothes we wear, even the kind of sport we play or the sort of accent that we've got. It all subtly, not always intentionally, but it all subtly speaks of class distinction, doesn't it? But in Christ, none of these distinctions matter. They will be a feature in the world out there, but what Paul's saying is they should never be a feature in the Christian church. Class should never be a barrier or a divider in church. No one should ever feel inferior or ignored if we are all one in Christ Jesus.

So the gospel destroys the barrier of race, it destroys the barrier of class, and it destroys the barrier of gender as well. Paul says, nor is there male and female. Now what Paul is saying here was well ahead of its time. What he's saying is counter-cultural and radical. Because to suggest back then that men and women were equal was not done. It was obvious in society that men, or so people thought, men were far more superior. But there's none of that with Paul. Male and female are one in Christ and therefore equal. Now of course, equality doesn't mean there is no distinction between men and women.

Paul's not suggesting that Christianity destroys or even ignores all the distinctions there are or differences that there are. So Jews were still Jews, Gentiles were still Gentiles, slaves were slaves, men were men, women were women, and so on. So the distinctions will always be there, but what he's saying is they should never divide us. Because our new identity in Jesus Christ connects us to a whole load of different people who are also in Jesus Christ. And so that should impact the way that we think about one another, the way that we talk to and about one another, and how we relate to one another. So we'll never speak about them. We'll only talk about us. Because we are family. We are family.

I got all my sisters and me. So just ignore that. So our identity as a child of God defines us far more than race or class or gender. Now these days our culture is hypersensitive to any kind of prejudice regarding race or class or gender. And yet it seems that we are becoming more divided, not less divided.

[12 : 31] And so it is only Jesus Christ who can make diverse people. People from different races, classes, genders. Only Jesus Christ can unite diverse people. Which I think gives the church a fantastic opportunity to show the world that Jesus is our best and our only hope of uniting radically different people. And that's why Paul says that we are all Abraham's children. Verse 29, if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed and heirs according to the promise. So those with faith in Jesus are Abraham's family, therefore God's family. And the Galatians needed to grasp this because it's not racial descendants of Abraham who are heirs, but it's spiritual descendants, spiritual in the sense of having faith in Jesus. Those who have faith in Jesus will inherit everything God has promised.

And so Christianity, can we see it's not about constructing an identity for ourselves through our own efforts. It is an invitation to receive a new identity from God as his child.

And so let's see how this new identity gives us a new status. And that's our second point. First, a new identity. Second, a new status. What Paul's doing here is describing what it means to be adopted by God. Where God brings us from the state of slavery into sonship. Meaning sonship heirs.

Men and women heirs of all that God has promised. So slavery is our natural state, but we can receive a new status as adopted children in God's family. So first of all, he speaks about slavery. So let's see that in verse one and two. What I am saying is that as long as an heir is under age, he is no different from a slave, although he owns the whole estate. The heir is subject to guardians and trustees until this time set by his father. Okay, so Paul has just called his readers heirs in verse 29. And now he uses this illustration, say of an owner of an estate who dies, but he has a son, but his son is just too young to be the heir of the estate. And so Paul's saying that when the son is too young to receive the inheritance, well, he might as well be a slave because he's under guardians and he's under trustees and they control him and they control the property until this date, like the boy's birthday, is set by his father. And so until the boy comes of age, Paul's saying he's more like a slave than he is like a son. But when that big birthday comes, when he comes of age, everything changes. He's free from his slavery and the inheritance is now his to enjoy.

And so Paul's illustration here applies to what God has done in bringing people from slavery to sonship. And he's describing God's work in human history. And so he's thinking of human history in two periods, two different periods. So there's the period before Jesus came in human history.

[15 : 48] That's the time when the heir is under age and he's like a slave. And then there's the period that begins when God sent Jesus. And that's like the big birthday, if you like, for the human race, when the heir comes of age and receives the inheritance. And so Paul's talking about this transition from slavery to sonship. So verse three, he says, so also when we were under age, we were in slavery under the elemental spiritual forces of the world. Doesn't expand on what these basic or elemental spiritual forces are. But he's probably referring to the way that God's law dominated life for the Jews and the basic pagan beliefs and how they dominated life for the Gentiles. And Jews and Gentiles, everybody was enslaved to these forces, just like underage children who are awaiting their inheritance. And he says, but Jesus came to make us sons of God. So there's the slavery, verse one and two, and then he moves on to sonship, verse four and five. Sorry, slavery one to three, and then sonship, verse four and five. But when the set time had fully come, God sent his son, born of a woman, born under the law to redeem those under the law that we might receive adoption to sonship. So the emphasis here is on what God has done. But when the set time had fully come, God sent his son. So God had been working out his purposes in history, first in giving his promise to Abraham, you remember, then giving his law to Moses, which was like an enslaving force. And then God sent his son to redeem us so we can be adopted. And so Jesus, God, the son, Paul says, was born of a woman. So he was born human, as we all are.

He was born under the law, as we all are. And he was obliged to keep it, as we all are. And so Jesus, in coming, identified with us as human beings. But while we can't keep the law, Jesus was able to perfectly keep the law for us. Because as God the son, he was perfectly qualified to meet all the law's requirements. And that's why Paul says only Jesus can redeem those under the law. Now that word redeem is a word from the slave market, the ancient slave market, still modern slavery today. Redeem is a good word to describe what happens when somebody is set free from their slavery. But back then, the only way a slave could be set free was if a price was paid to his owners to buy him. And so Paul's saying, Jesus paid the price for our freedom from slavery, how? Through his death on the cross. Jesus fulfilled all the law's demands so that he could free us from the law's condemnation. But that's not all, because Paul says Jesus did it so that we might receive adoption to sonship. So Paul is speaking here about this legal force of adoption, how adoption gives us a new status. Any child who is adopted into a family has a new status, new rights, new privileges, new identity, if you like. And in Roman law, when a slave was adopted, they would receive all the financial and legal rights of a son. They were a true child in their new family. And so Paul's saying, just as an adopted son in Roman law had all the same rights as a natural son. So for those of us who have faith in Jesus, we receive all the rights and privileges of being a child of God. And so it's not just that Jesus redeems us and sets us free. He then also brings us into

God's family. He doesn't just take our sins away. He also transfers to us all the rights and privileges of sonship that he's won for us. And so it's like, to use another illustration, it's like we're a prisoner on death row and death is the only end. But we're not just released, sent out the door to go off and make a life for ourselves. Now we're brought into a loving family and a wealthy family and we're given a share of their inheritance. That's what Paul's saying here when somebody becomes a Christian. I love the story of the adoption of Abir Hussein. You may have heard of her. If not, I'll tell you the story. In 1976, a royal Jordanian flight was guided to a safe crash landing. And the plane overshot the runway into a Palestinian refugee camp in Amman, in Jordan. And everybody in the plane was safe. They all survived. But amidst all the rubble of this plane crash, then there was a poor family and their home. And every member of that family died, except for one screaming little girl who was left all alone. But King Hussein of Jordan, who was the monarch at the time, he chose to adopt this girl and bring her into his royal family. And she was called Abir. And she went instantly from being an orphan to being a princess, from having nothing to then belonging to the family who owned basically the whole kingdom and ruled the kingdom.

And then when you look at the photos, she's in all the family photos. She looks different from everybody else, all the other siblings in the family, but still a definite part of that royal family.

So this one gracious act by the king gave her this new status as an adopted child. And it completely changed her life and her future forever. So when I googled her name this week, she's got all sorts of degrees in America, which probably as an orphan in a plane wreck with no parents wasn't going to happen to her. So she got this great inheritance. And it's a fantastic story, isn't it? It really is. But it helps to illustrate something of what it means to be an adopted child of God. We're not just saved and rescued, but we're given this fantastic inheritance. How? Through God's gracious act in sending his son, Jesus, so that we might put our faith in him and receive a new identity and a new status. And it does change our life and our future forever. And that's what it means to be a Christian. But there's more. So there's a new identity, there's a new status, but there's also a new experience. And this is our final point. So just as we're given a new status as a child of God, we're also given a new experience of this through the Holy Spirit. See what Paul says in verse 6, because you are his sons, God sent the spirit of his son into our hearts, the spirit to cause out Abba, Father. Notice there's a parallel between this verse, verse 6 and the earlier verse 4. So verse 4, first of all, God sent his son. Then verse 6,

[23 : 27] God sent the spirit. So God sent his son to make us his children. So through Jesus, we are adopted into his family. And then God sent his spirit to assure us that we are God's children. So through the spirit, we experience this reality of being God's child in our lives. So Jesus brings us into a relationship with God the Father, which we then experience through the spirit who dwells in our hearts. So God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit all work together. So we don't just become God's child, but we can feel it too. We can experience its reality. And it's as if God shares his divine genes with us, which is amazing. How does he do this? Well, the spirit enables us to cry out Abba, Father.

Abba is the Aramaic word for father. And it means something like dad. So it's a term that's both respectful, as well as being affectionate. And it was said by young children who were both secure and confident in their father's love. And it was also the term that Jesus used when he spoke to his father. When he prayed to his father, he used this term, Abba. But now what Paul's saying is the Holy Spirit enables all of God's children to address God in this intimate, personal way.

So amazingly, you and I, if we have faith in Jesus, have got the same rights and privileges to talk to God as Jesus had. So we too can approach God with a confidence and with a boldness because we know that he is our loving father. We can enjoy and experience intimacy with him. And just like a young child might instinctively cry out, mommy or daddy, because they know that their parent will pay attention to them and will run to them and help them. So we are able to cry out to God at any time in prayer. We've got that new identity, that new status, and so we can enjoy this new experience. Because the Spirit in our hearts helps us experience the warmth of God's love for us. There's a great illustration of this told by Thomas Goodwin, who was a Puritan in the 17th century. And the story goes, he was walking along the street one day and he saw in front of him a father and his son. They were walking down the road together.

And then at one point, the father turned, he picked up his boy, he gave him a big hug, he kissed him, and he said, I love you. And then the little boy said, I love you too. And then the father put him down, they held hands, and they continued to walk down the road. Now, the boy was the son of the father, and he was loved by the father, even when he wasn't being hugged. But what a different experience.

It is to be hugged, to feel the reality of the father's love for him. And so there's a similar sense in which this is what happens when we enter into a relationship with God. So relationary, we are secure because we are adopted as a child through the work of Jesus, God's son. So we can be absolutely certain that God loves us. But God has also sent his son. Sorry, he's also sent his spirit into our hearts so we can experience that love that he has for us. And yet it doesn't stop there. Verse seven, so you're no longer a slave, but God's child. And since you are his child, God has made you also an heir.

[27 : 33] So the Galatians became God's children, part of God's family. Their new identity gave them a new status and a new experience, which then guaranteed a future inheritance. And it is only through faith in Jesus Christ that we can receive the same. And so this passage, as we close, it forces us to ask, what is my true identity? Who am I? Am I a child of God? Have I been adopted into God's family? Because if I have been, then I'm no longer a slave. I'm a son and I'm an heir and I have a fantastic inheritance that I can enjoy now and also look forward to in the future.