

Many of us live in this posture where we don't quite understand our identity. Paul has brought us through last week talking about how the fundamental problem of the human condition is alienation; we're alienated from God. Therefore, we run off into all these other areas to try to fill that void, and we seek those gospels, those things to satisfy what is deepest in us.

What Paul is going to say today is to not forget our identity. Do not forget who we are because if we understand our core identity of who we are, the truest thing about us that begins to leak out into other areas. Paul, for this church in Colossae, is going to say, don't forget what God has done for you, and it is that identity from which you begin to live. You are not identified by your alienation; you are identified by what Christ has done for you.

Then, in a sneak peek for next week, in chapter 3, he's going to teach us how to live out of that identity. His fundamental problem with the church in Colossians is they were buying or beginning to believe this myth about a different counter-identity and were organizing life around that. They had this identity of what Christ had done in them, but they were living according to these other rules and regulations. They were not living in that new reality but in the old.

Look down at verse 2:20. We'll circle back to the top of the text, but I want to point this out because this is the hinge. There are a lot of verses we're going to work through today, but this verse in chapter 2 is the hinge verse Paul is trying to articulate. *"Since you died with Christ to the elemental spiritual forces of this world, why, as though you still belonged to the world, do you submit to its rules:"*

Do you see the tension in Paul? He says you died with Christ. Christ gave you a new identity, and yet you are not living out of that identity. You're living according to the old creation, the old way of living. You're living according to the rules of this world, but you have been born into a new fundamental reality. Paul's concern for us this morning is that we learn not just to believe our identity in Christ, but we move towards living from that place in Christ.

I want to give you a really brief, oversimplified outline to see Paul's logic. Paul is going to pray for the church, both in response to what he talked about and where he's going. In verses 6-15, he warns of a deceptive way of living in which hollow teachings and philosophies come in and sway the heart. Then, in verses 16-23, he's going to assure them of their identity in Christ. And that becomes where everything is pushing towards.

I want you to know how hard I am contending for you and for those at Laodicea, and for all who have not met me personally. My goal is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that

they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, vv. 1-2

Paul, as a pastor, is writing to this church saying, I'm contending on your behalf. I'm working hard for you. I'm in prison for you. I'm pursuing your spiritual maturity. In that, he mentions that he hasn't met them yet or not met all of them. And in this contending for them, he's praying that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love. I love that phrase. I wish we had more time to sit in that particular phrase, but the encouragement in the heart and the uniting in love is so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding. Listen to the language. "The full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ."

The letter of Colossians is centrally focused on this idea of Christ, of Jesus being the Messiah, the one sent from God to bridge the gap of our alienation, to get us to live into the core focus or central uniting factor of this very world. He says that he prays that they are encouraged, that they are united in love, that they could come to know Christ. Remember, in last week's text—which is, in some ways, maybe the thesis of the whole book—we have been given the riches of the mystery, that it is Christ in all, Christ in us, the hope of glory. And Paul says that everything he did as a pastor, everything he was working towards, he was contending for them that they may know Christ.

I know, as a pastor here, this is the heartbeat of everything we do. We spend a lot of time dreaming, praying, planning, and doing all that we do as a church. And if we were to boil it down to one thing, I don't know if I'd come up with this language, but this is what it is: your heart longs to know Christ. It is your heart's desire. It's where your soul finds rest. Paul goes on to say,

"in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. I tell you this so that no one may deceive you by fine-sounding arguments. For though I am absent from you in body, I am present with you in spirit and delight to see how disciplined you are and how firm your faith in Christ is" (vs. 3-5).

Every bit of wisdom and truth in this world finds its meaning in Jesus Christ. He is the central organizing principle of all the created order. He's saying he heard the reports that they have come to this knowledge, this relational understanding of who God is, and he is delighted. They are disciplined in this and rooted in this, but he does have this warning that he's going to unpack. He says, "I fear though that some may deceive you by fine-sounding arguments." Now, here's the thing about fine-sounding arguments. They're a little more nuanced and subtle than you

and I would expect. It's not like we tend to think of these or what later he'll call hollow philosophies as these overt things that we can pluck out. We won't fall for that because it's just so obvious.

But here's the concern Paul is wrestling with. He's saying that there is a way in which you can be deterred from this. You can allow lies to sneak in and begin to not just believe them but live these lies. They can pour out into your world, and he says to be careful. They sound really good. They offer a way of life in this world that ultimately is not in Christ.

Paul, throughout this whole letter, is juxtaposing life in Christ with that which is outside of Christ. He, in some ways, is saying that there are two ways of life that are offered—those in Christ and those not in Christ. He says you can live out these two things, and it's going to sound really good; it's a fine-sounding argument. Part of the reason it is a fine-sounding argument is because it taps into the ways in which our loves and longings have been bent in a different direction than Christ.

Remember, you are not just a thinking thing. You operate far, far more from your loves and your longings. That is what gets you out of bed in the morning. We're less rational than we like to think. This is what we picked up from Descartes in the Enlightenment and the rise of rationalism. And we want to believe that we just think one thing, and then we become that thing. But the problem is, even the knowledge that Paul's talking about, it's the word *gnosko* in Greek, it's a relational knowledge. It's not head knowledge; it's not gaining more information. Information isn't a bad thing; it plays a role. Don't mistake knowledge for information. He's saying, "I want you to know the mystery of a relational understanding, a first-hand knowledge of Christ."

The example I use all the time is that I know my wife differently than I know you all because there's a relational understanding, a connection, a soul connection with her that I have a different layer of than with you all. Paul is saying to not just know information but know God. We are a mixed bag of loves and longings, are we not? We often surprise ourselves with the things we love and the things that we don't love.

I grew up in church. I know the right things to say, I know the stories, and we can confess those things. Yet our hearts are far from them. Paul says that those fine-sounding arguments you're listening to, the reason they're fine-sounding is because they tap into those loves that are just slightly distorted. They play off those things, and they lure you away. He says to be careful of those.

"So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness" (vs. 6-7). Paul details three things that I want to flag quickly because they, in some ways, comprise the life of an apprentice, a follower of Jesus. First, he prays that we will be rooted and built up in him. Now, this image of rooted is what it sounds like. It's similar to the roots of a tree. It's the image of rooting yourself so far down into that foundation that the weather or whatnot can't quite shake you. It's the imagery of Psalm 1. Remember that the one who loves the Lord is like a strong, rooted tree. It says you are called to be rooted and built up in him. This is that core image.

Then, because of that, you become strengthened in faith. We tend to think of faith as a blind leap of jumping in. But maybe it's not a wrong understanding. I would say it's a cheap understanding of faith. Faith comes from the Greek word *pistis*, which is actually really difficult and slippery to translate. Faith is a good word for it, but we've loaded all these kinds of things onto that word faith. I like to think of faith as trust. Or even better, as New Testament scholar Matthew Bates describes it as allegiance to Christ. That feels a little bit more gracious for me to understand that, at times, my faith is my blind trust, if you will.

It is putting our allegiance to God. Our faith in him is a way of interacting in the world when things come at us, where it's like, "Okay, God, I'm going to continue to put one step in front of the other." Allegiance carries the sense of believing that he is Lord of all, above all things, to use Paul's language from chapter one, and our allegiance is with him. He says that when you root yourself and are built up in him, your allegiance is strengthened.

And then I love this last phrase where it says, "Then you will be overflowing with thankfulness." This gets back to that identity piece that Paul is hammering home because when we understand who Christ is and what Christ has done for us, it swells up all of these things, both that rootedness, that strength, and, of course, gratitude because we recognize Christ has given us something that we cannot get on our own. So our hearts begin to overflow with a sense of gratitude for life, for all that we have, all that we don't have, all that God has given us, all of these kinds of different areas. We begin to move towards acceptance of what our life looks like and recognize this has all been a gift from God, even in the areas we can't imagine; it overflows with thankfulness.

Look at verse 8. He's getting back to that warning now. He says, *"See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ."* Now, Paul's doing a few different things here, and it all centers around the word captive. The Greek word for captive is *sulagógeó*, which sounds really to the word synagogue, *synagogi*.

Paul is saying that you can be taken captive. And what he's pointing to is an argument or debate that was raging in the first century. As Jesus was killed, resurrected, and ascended, the gospel was expanding beyond the tradition of Judaism to the Gentiles. This was Paul's primary mission work, taking the gospel to the Gentiles. So, there was this massive debate going on about whether the Gentiles needed to become Jews before they became Christians. So these people called the Judaizers, were in some ways following Paul around, and they were preaching that you had to become Jewish before you became Christian.

Paul is pretty slyly saying, "Hey, you could be taken *sulagógeó*. He's referencing the Judaizers with that word that would undoubtedly have rung in the ears of those Judaizers that were going around with this different teaching, this different philosophy, and he's saying, you can be taken captive by these things. But be careful here. It isn't that Paul is an anti-Semite; it's not that at all. What he's focusing on is that last line I pointed out. He's concerned about any teaching that focuses on something else rather than Christ. It's not an anti-Jewish teaching; it's a

very Christocentric, Christ-centered teaching that anything that deters or moves Christ from the center is a deceptive and hollow philosophy that ultimately doesn't lead to who they were in Christ. So Paul is saying to be careful; you could be taken captive by that.

Then, he uses the phrase "the elemental spiritual forces of this world." Last week, there was one of those phrases as well where I said, I'm not quite sure what Paul means by this. And scholars are pretty torn on what exactly this phrase means. The elemental spiritual forces of this world could mean three things. The first is, it could be doctrinal, something like the Judaizers that are coming along preaching a different doctrine. That's a potential translation for it, our understanding of it. The second is a little more flat than what it reads like. It could be that there are cosmic, spiritual, or personal powers in which they can be taken captive, something like demons and whatnot in the spiritual realm. The last one is it could be cosmological, meaning like the universe, the elements of the universe—earth, wind, air, fire—those sorts of elemental things.

To be honest, I really am not too interested in what exactly it means because the important thing for us isn't to get caught in that debate. But in that last phrase, whatever those elemental spiritual things of the world are, they're not centered on Christ. And so rather than determining what exactly he does mean and how do we guard against that, the important point for us is to determine how we understand Christ and Christ alone, and then we can identify anything else Paul could be talking about. The focus is on Christ.

I don't know if this is true or not, but it's true, at least in principle. I've heard that those who study to identify counterfeit money don't study the counterfeits; they study the real thing so that when they come across a counterfeit, they recognize that it looks different than the real thing. It's a good word for us. We can get caught focusing too much on the counterfeits out there instead of being rooted in and deepening our understanding of Christ. The center of all of those counterfeits begins to pop up, and we recognize that it isn't like Christ. It feels different. What can we focus on in Christ? That is where our focus should be. Paul says to be careful. You can be taken captive to these things.

Starting in verse 9, he unpacks this a little bit more. "*For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and in Christ you have been brought to fullness. He is the head over every power and authority*" (vv. 9-10). That echoes chapter 1. Christ is the fullness of God all in his own person.

In him you were also circumcised with a circumcision not performed by human hands. Your whole self ruled by the flesh was put off when you were circumcised by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through your faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead." vv. 11-12

I'm guessing if you're new to church, that wasn't the turn you expected from Paul. You didn't see circumcision coming up in this conversation, so let me explain a little bit. This goes back to why I believe Paul is talking specifically of these Judaizers who were coming around preaching a different gospel. This concept of circumcision goes back to the Old Testament. The physical way, the physical marking that God marked

his people with, was this practice of circumcision. It was an external marking to say you belong to the people of God as you go through this practice of circumcision. Now, this completely changed in the New Testament, where we no longer have to go through these sorts of external markings, but rather, as Paul says, you were not circumcised by human hands—that would be the Jewish people—but you Gentiles were circumcised in your hearts by Christ.

It moves from an external marker to an internal marker. He says you don't need to go through that process of external circumcision. But rather, it's what Christ has done in us. He says that we were not circumcised by human hands, but that's not the focus. He says, but in him, in Christ, we were circumcised. We are God's people, but not by human hands, but rather by an internal working of Christ.

Then he identifies in verse 12 that it's through this idea of baptism that baptism is this marker in which you unite with the very death of Christ. That's what we're doing in the practice of baptism. When you go under the water, you are saying, "I identify with the very death of Christ." In Colossians, Paul is focused on how we live in him. Because remember last week, if you identify with Christ's death, you also identify with his resurrection. He says that's what is coming. And he says it isn't this external marker that you once were defined by, but rather, it's this internal work of Christ.

The bottom line is this. It's that your identity in Christ is no longer derived by anything external but by the internal work of Christ in you. He says this is who you are. And he says you have to be careful. You can get caught up in all of these external things.

Let's zoom out one layer further. I spent a lot of time this week thinking about this idea of how to bridge the gap between what Paul was talking about in the first century and us in 2024. I'm guessing you weren't tempted to go get circumcised this week to follow Jesus; that wasn't on your mind. But I will suggest that this week, you may have been tempted to believe a different gospel, a gospel of accomplishment or accumulation, a gospel that says if you achieve this external marker, then life will be happy. Or that alienation you feel, maybe you were tempted to think, if I get into the right relationship, that person will satisfy me. And it's this external thing that you're placing all of your hope on, thinking that this is how I'll be settled. If it's a job or a promotion or whatever it is, these kinds of classic things that we run to become idols and these other gods that we worship, all of it in search of closing the gap of that alienation. Paul is saying you are no longer marked by those external things.

We'll close by talking a little bit more about those things. But those external things slowly erode your soul. They demand more of you. They didn't die for you. You, in some ways, are required to die for them. You have to lay your life down to earn more, to achieve more, to gain this status, to acquire these things, these experiences or possessions or whatever it is, and those are largely neutral. But he says to be careful. They sound like fine-sounding arguments. You can slowly begin to believe the lie that they will satisfy.

It is not through external means that you are reconciled to God. It is through what Christ has done in you, not by what we can achieve. And

many of us, if we're not careful, begin to cultivate and shape identities based on those external things. We're disappointed and dissatisfied over and over and over. Paul says not to be caught in those things. Look down at verse 13.

When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross. vv. 13-15

Here, he's getting and pushing towards that identity. He says that we were dead in our sins, meaning those areas we were pursuing to close that alienation, those things had quite literally started to kill us. Think of Romans 6:23. *"The wages of sin is death."* Get inside Paul's logic. He spent almost all of chapter 1 saying that Christ is that which the entire universe centers around. He's before all things. He's in front of all things. He's the head of all things, all powers, all authorities. He's sustaining all of creation. Sin, in some ways, can be understood as just removing Christ from the center.

It was St. Augustine who would talk about sin being the self bent inward. It's the self replacing God. And he says, when something other than Christ becomes the center of existence, the wages of that, what that earns you, is death because it isn't the way you were created. It isn't the way in which the universe operates. And so he uses these metaphors to describe the effects and the impact of sin, which are really hard to put our hands around.

But he says that first, you have this legal indebtedness. It's as if your sin is creating a debt that Christ had to pay on our behalf. And he says that debt, that legal indebtedness, is beyond what you can pay. So Christ went to the cross to pay that debt. He has forgiven your sin. He is covering that debt. He goes on and he says that there's these powers and authorities in which they have this rule in the world and he says sin allows that to happen. It grows and metastasizes in creation, but Jesus on the cross made a spectacle of them.

Because if all that sin can reap is death, when Jesus, the perfect human, takes on that death and then three days later begins to breathe and walk out of that grave, he makes a spectacle of their power, saying, "Oh, where death is your sting? You can't hold me in the grave." He says he's conquered it; he's overcome these powers of sin.

The gospel of Christ, the work of Christ in you, has this ability to forgive sin and cancel debt and make a spectacle of the powers of this world that operate based on that sin principle. He says he has exposed all of that. The work of Christ is done for us, it is sufficient to not just cover our alienation, but to restore and redeem all of the created order. And Jesus in the cross has done that. Paul says that we so easily are missing that. We are being held captive to these other things.

This was controversial for the first world because the claims Paul made, the life that Jesus had, the resurrection itself, rewrites all of history. He says that we were dead in our sins. In the uncircumcision of our flesh, which holds that idea, the circumcision was that you were the people of God, meaning your sins had created something that meant you weren't the people of God. But yet Christ has entered in to bridge that gap. He has brought about that reconciliation, forgives the sins, cancels the debt, he stood against it, and he overcame these powers and authorities.

Therefore, do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ. Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you. Such a person also goes into great detail about what they have seen; they are puffed up with idle notions by their unspiritual mind. They have lost connection with the head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow. vv. 16-19

He says, in light of all that, you live from that posture of what Christ has done in you. And what results is this immense freedom. He says not to let people judge you by these external markers. Don't let people judge you by what you eat or drink or with regard to a religious festival, a new moon, or a Sabbath day.

Now, let's spend a little time on that Sabbath day. We talk a lot about Sabbath around CPC and it's helpful because what he's saying is that you can't be judged on whether or not you uphold the Sabbath. Part of that Jewish identity was that you upheld these laws and these rituals, and those were how you were reconciled to Jesus. But notice that he's not down on these things. Paul says you're not judged by those things. They're a shadow of a greater reality. So he's not denigrating those religious festivals or the Sabbath day. He's saying, don't miss the point. Those are not how you earn your position with Christ, but rather, they give you a foretaste of the true thing. It's a shadow of a greater reality.

Which is why, if you remember back when we were talking through the Sabbath series, our focus was that this isn't how you get right with God. You don't accomplish these things and then God shines upon you. You step into this because you are getting a taste of the Sabbath rest, which is to come in Christ. And so that's why we were very open handed with all these disciplines. At any point, if they stir you from Christ, I'll be the first to get rid of them. It isn't through some contract that you do these things and experience Christ. What they do is they open and organize your life towards the greater reality, which is Christ. We Sabbath not to earn God's love; we Sabbath because Christ loves us, and we can experience that love here and now. That's the gift. It's a shadow of a greater reality. He says don't let people judge you on these external markers. Those things are not what ultimately determines where you find your identity.

Then, we finally return to verse 20. *“Since you died with Christ to the elemental spiritual forces of this world, why, as though you still belonged to the world, do you submit to its rules: ‘Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!’?”* (vv. 20-21). Dallas Willard said, “The world, the life of the disciple, is not about getting to heaven when you die. It’s about Jesus getting heaven inside you.” It’s getting you to live into that reality, the core of your identity here and now. Jesus came and said the kingdom of heaven is at hand. It’s available. It isn’t that this whole story is about you flying away some glad morning to heaven. No, it is about how heaven has entered into this reality. And as we disciple under the way of Jesus, we begin to live into that now.

The problem is our hearts, our loves, and longings are mixed. We have a foot in this world and a foot in the world to come. We have a foot in this life and a foot in Christ. We are torn between these things. And what he’s saying is, when you died to those elemental spiritual forces, those things other than Christ, don’t let them rule you. Don’t keep living by those things. You’re missing out on the freedom that’s offered in Christ. He’s perplexed as he looks at this church, because it’s easy for us to fall into this trap.

Often, the way I see it in my own life, having grown up in church, is I feel caught by this need to earn God’s love because of the legalistic teaching I grew up in. It soaked into my being in such a way that I couldn’t imagine God would love me when I did things that he didn’t like, but yet he did. He calls me to holiness. He calls me to grow in those things. I don’t think it’s out of an angry posture. It’s because he sees the freedom that’s available to me, but I get caught and say, “No, I’ve got to do these things. I’ve got to hold this plan. I’ve got to Sabbath every Saturday. I’ve got to make sure I spend my quiet time.” I get caught in this thinking that this will make God love me.

Church, there’s no freedom in that. That’s just another enslavement. That’s an external marker in which I’m finding my identity, which, if I could say openly as a pastor, is a bit of an occupational hazard. Being a professional Christian is a weird thing. And if I’m honest, I struggle with it. It’s hard to do that because my life and my well-being are wrapped up in some ways by my performance. So I have to constantly remind myself that I have died to those things that are other than Christ. I am not what everything else says about me; I am who Christ says about me. That’s the truest thing about me. It gets covered and clouded by my own failures and sins and all of that, but the truest thing about me is that Christ has died for me. He’s canceled my sin. He’s paid my debt. He’s conquered those powers that overpower and control me. I’ve been given freedom.

I have a feeling I’m not the only one. Mine might look a little bit different. Church, where are you caught in these elemental spiritual forces? These things other than Christ, where your hearts are swayed towards things that aren’t the freedom that’s offered in Christ? Paul says you’ve died to those things. Don’t let them rule you.

These rules, which have to do with things that are all destined to perish with use, are based on merely human commands and teachings. Such

regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence.” vv. 22-23

That gets back to that deceptiveness. In our capitalistic mind, we think if you work eight hours, you earn an eight-hour wage. So it makes sense then that if I work for God’s love, he rewards me with that. That has been so saturated into our minds. This idea of grace cuts across all of the logic that’s in our bodies and in our lives, grace cuts across that logic. It is something so profound and something so different than we can imagine. And he says that it appears like there’s wisdom there, but it’s self-imposed. It can feel humble. I just need to humble myself before God; then God will love me. That’s not how grace operates. You humble yourself before God because you believe and understand there’s freedom in the fact that when you go sin, Christ continues to love over and over and over, not because of what you’ve done, but because of what Christ has done. He is the initiator of that love.

He says that these have an appearance of wisdom, self-imposed worship, and false humility with the harsh treatment of the body. But then notice this last line, “but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence.” There is really a bit of a twist at the end of this text. Paul is saying that to be enslaved to something like sensual indulgence, which we’ll get to a little bit more in chapter three, is you’re enslaved to that. You have no freedom to live, but rather, they dictate how you operate. And he’s saying all of those rules, those ways of living that press on you, they’re actually hollow. They have no power. You can put as many restraints on your life as you want, as many kinds of website blockers as you want, but yet it won’t have the power to dismantle that sensual indulgence that drives you.

He says that the desire at your core for more, to accumulate more, to achieve more, that’s so incessant within you that to put rules on it may be helpful at some level, but it ultimately will never have the power to overcome that drive. He says what you do have—and this is in another place in scripture—the same power, the same Spirit that brought Jesus from the dead is available to you. We are not left alone either. The Spirit of God is within us when we identify with Christ’s death. That same Spirit that brought Jesus out of the grave has the power available to us to break the bonds of all of this sin that enslaves us.

Next week, in chapter 3, Paul gets very practical as to how we live into that reality. He’s going to say how you live out of that power. He says that there is a way in which that can take place. But his point here is all those rules and things lack an inherent potency to overcome the pain that is organizing your life and where you’re finding that identity.

I just want to name, and I’ve hinted at them, a few ways in which this idea of identity we have relocated onto another thing rather than Christ—those other elementary spiritual powers or things of this world. And I want to name them because they’re so core to our life in the modern world that we often let it seep in. It sounds like wisdom or fine-sounding arguments.

Identity In Achievements

The first is we believe our identity is in our achievements. We believe this at our core. This is the way our world, our economic system, is organized. It's organized around achievement. What you accomplish, the position or power within your charge, or however it is that you find your meaning and purpose in your job, can become your identity. Over time, we slowly accept the lie that we are what we accomplish.

If that is your God, that is a cruel tyrant because there is always someone a little bit higher on the org. chart. There's always another award, another achievement, another publication, another tax bracket to jump into, and these things—I would say achievements—are rather neutral, but they're terrible gods because what they will demand is that you lay your life down for them. The reality is that's a life on offer, but it will demand more and more of you. It will require your time; it will probably mean the sacrifice of your family; it will require your effort and your sanity, and over and over, these will demand more and more.

If we buy the myth that you are what you accomplish, it is a cruel tyrant, a cruel gospel that will ask for your whole life. Church, we have to evaluate that this is actually neutral in the sense that God has given us skill sets and callings to go work and contribute. Dallas Willard, in another place, would say that business is loving the world in action. So there's a healthy place for that. But I want to warn you not to make it your god. It will wear you out and beat you up. It's an important aspect of who you are. But if you serve it and find your identity in it, it will grind you down.

Identity In Possessions

The second place we can often find our identity is in our possessions. This is downstream from what we achieve because, ultimately, what you achieve affords you the ability to accumulate more things. So, we buy this myth that you are what you accumulate. And this god of the modern age means there's another hit if we just have this package delivered, we just have this thing. It's another hit of adrenaline or another hit that just feels good when we rip that package open or when we acquire that house or get that car or whatever it is. It becomes a status symbol in which you are what you possess. But this, too, is a fleeting, cruel tyrant of a God because the reality is that the car will rust. It will break down. I promise you there'll be an iPhone 16 and then another. We can lay our lives down to earn and accumulate more and more, but it is like a vapor. It evaporates. Possessions are somewhat neutral. I don't think they're bad. I don't think that they're things to get rid of or whatnot. But they're cruel gods.

Identity In Failure or Success

Lastly, we can believe our identity is in our deepest failure or our greatest success. You can begin to believe a lie about yourself that you are your deepest failure. That can be core to who you are, the life you've screwed up, the family that you've destroyed, or whatever it is. You can come to

believe that that is your central core identity. But Christ died for you. Do you get that? You are not your greatest failure. That is not who you are. That's a thing you did that will have consequences, but believe me, it is not your identity. Christ has still met you in your greatest failure.

On the reverse side of that, you are not your greatest success. This links with the achievement and the accomplishment, but you are not that which you perform. You are not your greatest success. It says, ultimately, you are who you are in Christ. Our identity as Christians is only found in him. Tim Keller said, "If you treasure anything else in your life if you make anything but Jesus your ultimate treasure, it will drive you, it will control you, it will demand that you die for it, because Jesus Christ is the only treasure that died for you, and died to get you."

That is Paul's gospel here. He is saying that we find our identity solely in Christ. I encourage you to read back through the book of Colossians. Notice how many times the phrase "in him" or "in Christ" is used. Paul is driving this thing home. This is who your identity is. So, church, my prayer as we close is that you would come to believe this identity of being found in him. We are swayed by all these different gospels, all these different hollow teachings. But you are only found and loved in him. This is your deepest and truest thing. I pray you would heed Paul's words here, that all the fullness of the deity was placed in Christ and that Christ has laid his life down for you.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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Catalog No.1480-3FC