

## **Missions & Identity**

Let us pray together.

*Heavenly Father, we want to thank You for Your love for us. You delight in your people, and we delight in one another too, Father. It is such a privilege to be called to be part of Your church, and we pray, Father, that as we reflect on what it means to find our hope and security in You and in Your love for us, we pray, Father, for Your wisdom and understanding. Help us to search out by Your Spirit those areas of comfort and idolatry in our hearts which separate us from You and from one another and from those around us. We ask that You teach us, for Jesus' sake, Amen.*

At the end of the lesson last time, we were beginning to look at some of the insights of the apostle Paul into the dilemma that faced the early church as it sought to be obedient to the Great Commission. We have spoken about the reluctance and difficulty that the church experienced. There were ongoing problems that existed in the churches over the acceptance and full welcome and status of Gentile believers. And I suggested that because Paul had been at the very heart of Judaism. Once he understood the Gospel he saw perhaps more clearly than anyone else what the issues were which caused this problem of separation. We also began to look at a series of insights which we find throughout Paul's letters and throughout his ministry which helped him in this regard. What is our identity as believers? From where do we get our sense of our own well being or self-worth, in ourselves, before God, and before other people? As you think about yourself, who are you? And let me read again Paul's words from Philippians because they are so foundational to what I want to say here. The context is Paul discussing this problem of people in the church who were going around insisting that everyone be circumcised.

Paul writes in Philippians 3:3, "For it is we who are the circumcision, we who worship by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh—though I myself have reasons for such confidence." And then Paul addresses this issue of our internal sense of confidence. What is it that makes us comfortable with ourselves and before other people? It is a very profound question to ask, and we all need to reflect on it. Verses 4-9 continue:

If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh [those things in which we put our hope, confidence, sense of security, and our sense of identity] I have more: 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 legalistic righteousness, faultless. But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish [dung], that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith.

Now Paul is challenging us here, and it is something we all need to think about. Where do we find our fundamental sense of well being, value, security, and identity as individuals? Paul includes his race. He was an Israelite, a Hebrew of the Hebrews, and of the seventh kingdom of the tribe of Benjamin. He was someone racially pure. Now for us, is our sense of identity found primarily in our race or in our national identity? How important is it that I am black, white, brown, or yellow, or that I am American, British, Chinese, Korean, or Brazilian or whatever it happens to be? Is it important that I am from a particular part of this country? That I identify myself primarily as from the South, the Northeast, or the West? You

know, who am I? Who do I think I am in the deepest recesses of myself? Paul speaks not only of his race and national identity, his cultural identity, but also of his religious heritage. He is a Pharisee of the strictest sect. He is passionately devoted to the observance of the law, absolutely zealous for the doctrines of God's Word. He was so zealous that he was committed to persecuting those he saw as heretics. And we need to ask ourselves this question: what about those issues too? Is it that I am Reformed, that I am Baptist, or that I am Presbyterian? Or is it my status within that heritage? I am a professor at Covenant Seminary, the Presbyterian Church in America's (PCA) national seminary. And that is a good thing. See, of course, Paul regards all these things as precious. He talks elsewhere about how precious his heritage was to him—his national and cultural heritage and his religious heritage. It is not that these things are insignificant. That is not the point. Remember how Paul says how much he loved his fellow Jews and that he would be prepared to have his name blotted out of the Book of Life for their sake. It is not that he thinks it is unimportant. The point is what matters most: Christ or these things. Paul says I consider all of these worthless in comparison with knowing Christ. He says he is prepared to lose them all. Can you say that? Can you say that in the end it really matters nothing to me in comparison with my relationship with Christ? Can you say that about your pride in your particular heritage in this nation or whatever nation you come from or in your religious heritage? You see the problem is for all of us, and this was the problem for Paul, that it is the most precious gifts of God which can become idols to us. We make idols not usually of worthless things, but of things which are really to be treasured. Pagans make idols of the sun, moon, stars, forests, mountains, and storms. The sun is a wonderful thing; without it life would die, but we are not to worship it. We are not to find our meaning in relationship to it.

Let us think of some examples. Why do you think it is that Jesus and Paul address so passionately the issue of the law and the misuse of the law when they are talking to Jewish people? The most passionate denunciations by Christ recorded for us in the Gospels are His denunciations of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law. The reason is because they made God's law into an idol. It became their sense of identity. It became the thing they treasured most. They prided themselves that they had God's law. And the Gentiles were immoral dogs in comparison. They took God's beautiful gift, the gift of His commandments, and they turned them into an idol, the thing which gave them their sense of identity. Of course the law was a wonderful gift of God to the Jewish people, to the people of Israel. Even until this day you find Jewish people wherever they are in the world making a disproportionate, for their numbers, contribution to the culture in which they live. This is because God's law and God's Word, even where they no longer worship Him from the heart, has given them enormous cultural strength. It is an identity that has bound them together. Though it is a beautiful gift of God, they turned it into an idol. Some, for example Michael Green, have said of the Jews of the ancient world that they had the greatest righteousness the world had ever seen because of the gift of God's law to them. Or we may think of the Greeks. Paul says that the Greeks seek wisdom. People said of the Greeks that they had the greatest wisdom the world had ever seen. You would find many philosophers today who would acknowledge that Greek philosophy, Greek wisdom, has shaped all of Western thought ever since. They claim that the whole of Western philosophy is just a series of footnotes to Plato. It is been said over and over again. God gave the Greeks a wonderful gift of wisdom that still blesses the culture in which we live today. But it made the Greeks arrogant. The Athenians thought they were the finest race on the face of earth. They looked down on everybody else because they found their identity in their wisdom. It became an idol for them.

There is a wonderful article from the New York Times on freedom for our own culture today, here in the United States. America has the greatest freedom the world has ever seen, and it is something that every one of us who lives here absolutely treasures, and rightly so. People still come to this country from all over the world because of the political freedoms here. They come because of economic freedom, the

possibility of making a living for oneself and one's family. They come for religious freedom—in the United States right now is the greatest religious diversity the world has ever seen. They also come for freedom of the press, for freedom of expression. But you and I know that the greatest idol of the culture in which we live right now is freedom, the autonomy of the individual. It is the freedom to do exactly what I want to do regardless of what God or anybody else says. Freedom has become the master of our culture. It is not just a gift which we treasure, but it has become an idol in which enormous numbers of our contemporaries find their primary sense of well being. I am free to do what I want to do—to pursue my life as I define it. It affects every one of us as Christians. Freedom is a wonderful gift of God, just like wisdom or the law of God, but it can become an idol because it becomes our primary sense of where we find our meaning and purpose in life.

Let me address those of us who are Reformed in our heritage. God has given us a wonderful treasury and heritage of doctrine. It is one of the glories of the Reformed churches historically. I am not criticizing that for a moment; I treasure it myself. But we can very easily turn our own heritage into an idol. I have had the privilege over the last six years of going every year to the Netherlands. I have spoken for one of the most Reformed churches in the world there. They do not even regard the PCA as really Reformed. They criticize us as an evangelical denomination, which for them is a term of abuse. They just recognize two or three other denominations in the whole world as being truly Reformed. Their Reformed heritage and doctrine has become an idol. It matters more to them than Christ Himself. Consequently, I have met pastors in that denomination, which is absolutely conservative theologically and committed to dotting every "i" and crossing every "t" of reformed doctrine, who are not Christians personally because their doctrinal heritage is more important to them than the Gospel itself.

We can turn any of God's gifts, no matter how beautiful they are into idols, into our primary source of worth and identity. And that is not to cast any kind of discredit on the gifts themselves. They are wonderful gifts, whether it is the gifts of God's commandments or of wisdom, freedom, or sound doctrine. But if that becomes more important to us than the fact that we are going to be found in Christ having a righteousness, identity, and security which is not something that comes to us from anything but from Him and through faith in Him, then we have made a huge mistake. That is what Paul is addressing here. He is not despising his heritage. I am not despising any of these things I speak about. But where is our identity? What do I put my trust in ultimately? What would I let go of if I had to let go of it and was left with nothing but faith in Christ Himself and His substitutionary death for me, which grants me righteousness? When I stand before God on the Day of Judgment, none of these other things, no matter how beautiful they all are, is going to make us acceptable before God. There is no other foundation that can be laid except Christ Himself. Of course, all these other things are important, but they flow from Him and I treasure them in relationship to Him. So all my doctrine drives me back to Him because Christ Himself is at the very heart of all our doctrine. And trust in Him, love for Him, security in Him, hope in Him, must be what is at the very center of my being. So that is the first issue, the question of what is my identity?

Second, what is going to help us grow as believers? How am I going to mature as a Christian? How will I teach others to grow: my own children, the young people in our churches, our congregations? Is it going to be our particular cultural or religious heritage, our traditions and rules? Is it the way we do things, even our Christian cultural patterns? Or is Christ Himself going to help us grow? Look at Paul's word is Colossians 2:16-23. Paul addresses various things here: "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." Here he is talking about the laws that defined Judaism in terms of food, drink, religious festivals and celebrations, and their particular ways in which they observed the Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ. All of them pointed to Him. The

Sabbath was the declaration that the Lord is our righteousness, said Moses. Christ is the most wonderful fulfillment of that. He is indeed our righteousness. Not anything we do, not the works of our hands or anything else we accomplish, is our righteousness. We have righteousness in God through faith in Jesus Christ. And then Paul talks about various religious experiences which had come into the church in Colosse. He says this in verse 20: “Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world, why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules: ‘Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!’? These are all destined to perish with use.” He is talking about any kinds of patterns of life, traditions, and rules which we add to God’s moral commandments for us. “These are all destined to perish with use, because they are based on human commands and teachings. Such regulations have the appearance of wisdom with their self-imposed worship.” We all make all sorts of rules for ourselves about our spiritual life, but if they are not to be found in God’s Word they are self-imposed worship. They may be useful as discipline, which we need because we are lazy and sinful. But we must never make the mistake of thinking that those disciplines we adopt for ourselves (reading Scripture, prayer, fasting) are commanded by God. He did not command these things in exactly the way we are doing them. They are not actually the means and basis of our acceptability to God and our growth into maturity. They have an appearance of wisdom, and some of them may have some practical wisdom. This includes all the rules we adopt about what we are going to do in the Christian life and what we will encourage other people to do, what they should read, what kind of clothes they should wear, etc. Paul ends his comments in verse 23 by saying, “Such regulations have the 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.” In the end that is not how sin gets conquered. It is conquered through faith in Christ working itself out in love for His commandments and walking in His ways.

So how will I grow as a believer? And Paul also addresses this frequently in his personal letter to the Galatians. The people were saying you can start with Christ, but now you have to add all these patterns of Judaism to your life: the food laws, circumcision, etc. And Paul asks them if they are returning to these things after having begun with Christ. The effect will be to cut yourself off from Christ altogether. We are not only justified through faith in Christ, but we are sanctified through faith in Christ as well. Let me commend to you Francis Schaeffer’s *True Spirituality*, in which he addresses that issue of sanctification through faith. He is not saying there is no place for obedience. He was not an antinomian, but sanctification comes through faith in Christ working through love for His commandments and love for Him.

What will help me grow as a Christian? How will I mature in faith? And how will I help my children, our young people, to grow? It will be by constantly pointing them back to Christ and calling them to give their lives to Him in sacrifice for His love. There is to be grace and gratitude. The love of Christ leads me to a delight in His law.

The third question is how will we value others in the kingdom of God? How will we regard one another? What status will we give them as believers, friends, and fellow worshippers? How will we regard those with whom we visit, sit down and eat, rejoice, and grow together in the Lord? Are we going to value people by their race, their cultural heritage, the part of the country they come from, or their economic or educational status? Will it matter their gender, their particular heritage, the kind of church they belong to, or the branch of Christ’s church of which they are a part? Do they have to conform to our own particular patterns of living as a Christian? How do we regard one another?

Listen to Paul’s words from Galatians where he has to oppose Peter to his face because Peter and Barnabas have backed off from being together with Gentiles. Galatians 2:11-16 says,

When Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was clearly in the wrong. Before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group. The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray. When I saw that that they were not acting in line with the truth of the Gospel [this is the fundamental issue. The Gospel itself is at stake here], I said to Peter in front of them all, “You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs? We who are Jews by birth and not ‘Gentile sinners’ know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified.”

How do we value one another? On what basis do we make our relationships with people? Is it because we agree on every little point of doctrine? Or we have exactly the same views about how Christians should live? We are to value people because they have faith in Christ, regardless of all the other differences there are among us. Look at Paul’s words in Galatians 3:26-29: “You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.” And then he makes this wonderful statement: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female...” Our cultural, racial, national, and religious heritage differences are put away. Our economic circumstances and gender differences are completely insignificant to us now in terms of how we are going to think about one another and how we are going to greet one another. The Jews looked down on women. They did not regard women as people who could be disciples, who had adequate minds to learn from God’s Word. That is why it is so remarkable when Jesus says of Mary that she has chosen the better path because she wants to learn theology at the feet of Christ. It is said that the Pharisees had a prayer: “Thank you, God, that I am not a Gentile, but a Jew. Not a slave, but free. Not a woman, but a man.” And if that is indeed the truth, then Paul is reversing that prayer here. So now in Christ we are “... all one in Christ. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.” He goes on to say that every believer is an heir of Christ Jesus, an heir who is indwelt by His Spirit, the spirit who cries, “Daddy,” “Father.”

How do we regard one another? There is quite a diversity of denominational backgrounds with different heritages theologically, practically, and experientially in the life and worship of the church. Do you insist on talking to people, getting to know them, and delighting in friendship with only those who have precisely the same heritage as you? Or do you delight in those who belong to Jesus Christ? When we meet one another in the Kingdom, we will find out who is exactly right on all these points of doctrine that we practice, but we will be glad to be there because of Christ. And we will be glad to see others there, whatever their particular heritage right now. We will rejoice with others who have had faith in Christ and are heirs according to the promise.

How do we value one another? Let me urge you to delight in the diversity that exists within God’s Kingdom, racially and culturally, with regard to gender and denominational affiliation. Do you love the people of God who belong to Jesus Christ? That is the challenge to us in the New Testament.

Look at Paul’s words as well in Ephesians 2. Here you see how passionately Paul felt about this issue of unity between Jews and Gentiles. The barrier between Jews and Gentiles was a bigger one than any of us will ever face because the Jews were absolutely sure that the barrier was one that God had set up. So they thought they had God on their side in the strongest possible way. As I have said, they misinterpreted what God said. The Old Testament law itself is filled with commands to be hospitable, open, and welcoming to aliens and strangers and to incorporate them into the life of God’s people. That

is not how the Jews have thought about it. Paul writes these very beautiful words here in Ephesians 2:11-13: “Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called ‘uncircumcised’ by those who call themselves ‘the circumcision’ (that done in the body by the hands of men)—remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world.”—That is true for every single one of us until our conversion, until God called us to Himself through faith in Christ Jesus.—“But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ.” We have been brought near, first of all, to God and His Kingdom, to Christ Himself, to God’s promises, and to citizenship in the true Israel because we are all children of Abraham. But then Paul says this: “For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.” He is no longer thinking about peace with God but peace with each other. If you have experienced hostility, negative mentality, prejudice, or unwillingness to draw close together in your own heart and life in the past toward other believers, Christ has put that hostility to death by the cross. That is how Paul puts it.

We live in a society that is deeply racially divided. And sometimes as white believers we try to pretend it is not. But it is. Luke, who works with me and who has no chip on his shoulder whatsoever, said to me one day something which moved me so deeply. He said, “When my second child was born I wept.” And I thought at first he meant just, I wept with joy because that is how we respond when we have a child. And he said, “No, I wept with sorrow when I saw that my second child was a son, because I could see in my mind all the hassles that he would have from the police as a young African American male in this society.” Now that really struck me to the heart, in the deepest possible way. It would never have occurred to me to weep at the birth of one of my sons. I worship at a black church. My own pastor just recently had to move his son to another school because he had been stopped several times by the police simply because he is black. It was not because he was doing anything wrong in any way. And so just for safety, my pastor moved his son.

We all know these are the challenges of our culture and these are the challenges in our churches as well. Christ has put to death any hostility that exists between us in any of these areas. He has made peace between us and He calls us to put that into practice because Christ is our identity and not these other things. That is what matters. In the Kingdom we are going to rejoice with complete gladness that there are people from every tribe, tongue, people, and nation on the face of this earth. And we need to start enjoying the first fruits of that right now. So let me challenge you with this: who are your friends and who do you welcome into your home? Who do you sit and eat with? Practice the beauty of unity that Christ has died for on the cross. In Romans 14 and 15 Paul addresses the areas where we have differences as believers. He talks about the practical matters of our way of life: how we observe the Sabbath, what kind of foods we eat. Paul challenges us in those passages to remember this is my brother and sister for whom Christ died. Why are we judging one another? Why are we critical of one another? This is my brother and sister for whom Christ died. How do we treasure one another in the Kingdom of God? That is our third challenge.

The fourth challenge is this: how will we reach out to other people with the Gospel? This is where the answer to our first question, “What is my identity?” becomes so important. If my identity is often in anything other than Christ reaching out to people who are different than me, this is going to be very difficult. If we insist on holding onto our particular cultural identity and traditions, it is going to be very difficult. Remember Calvin said tradition is a good guide, but it is a poor master. No matter how precious those traditions are, we are going to have a very hard time reaching out to other people who are

different from ourselves. If our identity is fundamentally in anything other than Christ then we are going to separate ourselves from unbelievers and sinners because they are not like us. They do not share our patterns of life. Of course they do not.

We need to remember three things. Number one, Scripture calls us to recognize that everyone we are ever going to meet is made in the image of God and that means they are glorious (Psalm 8). The question we should ask of every person we ever meet, no matter what other characteristics they have culturally, what sin is expressed in their life, or what they believe, is, "What, Lord, is this person, this man, this woman, that YOU consider them?" The question that Psalm 8:4 asks is "What is man that you are mindful of him?" And Psalm 8:5 answers the question, saying, You have "crowned him with glory and honor." You have made him a little less than God. You have set everything under his feet. In other words, our response to every person we ever meet is that God looks at this person and says here is a person made in the image of God. That is to be our first response, to see the glory of a person. Not to see their sin first, but to first see their glory and their dignity as a person made in the image of God. We are to treasure all the things that are good and admirable and beautiful about that person as a person made in the image of God. There is a wonderful example of this in the film *Dead Man Walking*. It is a true story, of course. Here is a guy on death row for committing an appalling murder and violent rape. A Christian is appointed to be this guy's counselor before he is executed. She finds it very difficult because she thinks about what he has done, but she is able to see his dignity as a human person made in the image of God despite the wickedness. Despite the wickedness! That is what God's Word calls us to do. James says, in James 3:9-10, how can you curse men who are made in the image of God and at the same time bless God? It is a blasphemy against God to dishonor a human being and not to see that they bear His image. It is like saying, "God, this person is trash. He is worthless." But that is not how God thinks of him. "What is this person, Lord, that you are mindful of him? You have crowned him with glory and honor." We are to see glory and honor in the face of everyone we meet.

Second, when we see people sin, and of course we are always going to see it, we are to remember we are sinners like them. When we stand before God as sinners, we stand on level ground. James says if you have broken the law at any point, you are guilty of the whole lot. That is the reality. We cannot grade sin. I was talking to one of our graduates the other day who called me in deep distress because he is facing the real challenge of what kinds of people his church will reach out to. It came down to a very practical thing. They were having a swimming party and one of the girls came in a two-piece bathing suit, and the person leading the youth group wanted to send her straight back home. He said we do not want girls like that here at our church youth group. My graduate friend had to say that if they take that attitude, all of his daughter's friends in school who are not Christians would never come to any church function. They would think the church was insane. But the response was, in that case, your daughter should not have friends like that who wear two-piece bathing suits. We do not want them coming to this church because we have to keep our standards.

If we are guilty of breaking God's law at any point, we have broken all of it. When it comes to sin, we all stand on level ground before God. I cannot look down on anybody else. I cannot be like that Pharisee who says thank you, God, that I am not like other people who wear two-piece bathing suits, or whatever other foolish example we want to put in there. We cannot require of people that they conform to any particular standards of dress, hairstyle, footwear, or morality before we welcome them to the hearing of the Gospel of Christ. When I was a seminary student, a fellow student who was a pastor was asked to go preach at a revival in a church. When he got there he met some kids on the street out where he parked his car. This was in the late 1960s, and they were kind of hippies. They had long hair, and they were wearing all sorts of interesting clothing with bare feet and other things. He got chatting with them, and they asked him what he was doing. He said he was going to be preaching that evening, so he invited

them along and they came with him. And when they got to the church door the pastor of the church met them and said, "Were you planning to come in?" They said that they were and the student pastor said that he had just invited them." They were told, "Well, you go home and change your clothes, put on some shoes and then you can come back." People are justified through faith in Christ not through getting their lives together first. It does not matter if it is outward sin or even deep patterns of sin in their lives that have to be dealt with. They have to be dealt with. When you come to Christ you come to repentance. But we are on level ground here as sinners.

Third, we need to remember that everyone out there needs Christ just as you and I do. We needed Him at the point when we did not belong to Him, and we need Him every moment of our lives. Without Him we would perish today. That is true of everyone around us. Those are the first three things we need to see of people: they bear the glory God, we are sinners like them, and as sinners we are all in need of Christ.

It is this understanding that enables Paul to say in 1 Corinthians 9:19-23, "I am all things to all people." But what does that mean practically to be all things to all people? It means that I am prepared because I find my identity in Christ first. I am prepared to let go of my culture for the sake of the Gospel. That is what Paul means when he basically says, "I can be a Jew to the Jews, a Gentile to the Gentiles, and weak to the weak." In Acts 16:3 we read that Paul got Timothy circumcised. It was painful for Timothy because he was an adult. Paul did not think circumcision was of any value at all before God anymore, but he had Timothy circumcised so as not to offend Jewish believers. In Acts 21:24-26 we read that Paul was prepared to take vows himself and have his head shaved. For the sake of the Jewish believers he takes a vow, pays for those traveling companions with him to take the same vow, shaves his head, and goes up to perform his vow at the temple. He does not think things like that matter anymore at all in terms of his relationship with God. He does it for the sake of other people because he loves his fellow Jews. He loves them passionately, and he is happy to go along with things that will enable him to be with them. He is able to proclaim the Gospel to them, sit and eat with them, and delight being with them. But when he is with the Gentiles he does not do any of those things. He eats their food, and he does not require new Gentile converts to be circumcised. He does it for the sake of Christ, for the sake of being able to spread the Gospel, and for the sake of those who need to hear it. Paul let go of what a strict Jew would do in order to reach out to other people. This is not easy. It is easy enough to say that you can be all things to all people, but let me give you an historical example of how difficult this is. If you look at the history of the church in Ireland, since the Reformation, there were two basic settlements of Protestants. Fundamentally they were Presbyterians from Scotland; the great majority of them settled in Ireland around the 1620s and 1670s. If you look at a map drawn around 1700 of where those Protestants settled in Ireland and you look at a map today, you will find they are exactly the same. There is no difference. There has, over those last 350 years, been almost no outreach with the Gospel of Jesus Christ to their Catholic neighbors. Why? The fundamental reason was that their Protestant cultural identity was more precious to them than reaching their neighbors with the Gospel of Christ. Every year, Protestants, some of whom are genuinely committed Christians, will march. They are celebrating the victories of 300 years ago when they killed some Catholics and restrained Catholic power. How do you think it is possible to communicate the Gospel to Catholics if you celebrate every year that this is what we did 300 years ago? Of course it is not possible. A friend of mine who worked in Ireland last summer said if people ask whether you are a Protestant or a Catholic and you respond that you are a Protestant nobody will listen to a word you say. That is the end of the discussion. That is the end of any possibility of relationship because you have identified yourself with the Protestants of Northern Ireland. It becomes impossible to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ. You identify yourself simply as a Christian, as someone who has faith in Jesus Christ. It is not because you are ashamed of being a Presbyterian or anything else for that matter, but because you recognize the situation. If you are going to be able to preach the Gospel

of Christ to these people your identity has got to be found in Christ. And if it is not, then there is no possibility at all of preaching the Gospel and being heard by people. That is a tragic historical example and there are many others like this.

As somebody who comes from and loves Britain, I pray that God will send some of you there. That is one of my regular prayers—that He will call some of you to proclaim and to live the Gospel there. That is my earnest prayer. England desperately needs people to go there and plant churches. About five percent of the population, at most, is Christian. As I said the other day, more than 90% of the people have never read the Bible in their lives and simply do not go to church at all. They are completely ignorant. You might just as well be in a totally pagan society. It is very challenging in that context to proclaim the Gospel. But if God calls you to go to England, and I pray that He will, you are going to have to go and adapt yourself to the culture. Let me give a practical illustration. As I look at Americans who work in England right now, you can tell almost immediately which ones are going to flourish, which ones will stay for the long term, which ones will have any likelihood of reaching out to English people. Some will go and they will say, “I have to keep my little piece of America here. I am going to send my children to the American school in London.” As soon as you do that, English people do not listen to you. That is the reality. It is because they experience it as a rejection of their culture and their whole educational system, which they are very proud of, rightly or wrongly. If you are going to go to England, you have got to be like the English. You cannot go somewhere and then not adapt yourself to the culture and delight in it. It is not just adapting yourself but it is delighting in it, and entering into it as a family, if you are married with children, fully participating in it. Otherwise everything you do is experienced as a judgment and as a rejection. You are seen as a temporary visitor and you might as well have a visitor’s visa and plan to leave as soon as can.

Jesus, of course, is the most wonderful model. This is what the incarnation is. He came to Palestine in the first century, and when people looked at Him they saw a guy from Nazareth. That is what he sounded like. I have an English accent, but I do not want anything about myself culturally to be a barrier for the Gospel. That is what it means to imitate Christ. It means being all things to all people, counting others more highly than we count ourselves. That is what Paul says in Philippians 2: have the mind of Christ; think of others more highly than you think of yourself. That is what communicating the Gospel is going to be. If you leave seminary and you are committed to finding your identity in a particular cultural heritage and working only in that context, you will only reach out to those people who are exactly like you. You will constantly experience the problem of reaching people who are different in any kind of way. But if you take Paul’s insights seriously and say, “My identity is in Christ,” everything else is rubbish in comparison to knowing him.

How am I going to grow? I am going to grow through faith in Christ. How will I treasure other people and delight in being with them? Simply by recognizing their faith in Christ. How will I reach out to others whoever they are, whatever they do, whatever their cultural practices? By acknowledging they are made in the image of God and delighting in that. I need to recognize that I am a sinner just like them and that we all need Christ. If we understand these four things, then we will be able to be all things to all people. And God will delight to open the windows of heaven and pour out so much blessing you will not know what to do with it. I am very serious. We need to take tiny little steps in the direction of seeking to treasure people who are different from ourselves in any of these ways I have spoken about. God does not ask us to be perfect. Christ is our righteousness, our sanctification, our wisdom, our redemption. We take tiny little steps of faith saying, “Lord, this is what you call me to. Help me in my weakness.” God opens the windows of heaven, and you will find that God will enable you to delight in relationships with every possible kind of people, be welcome anywhere you go, and communicate His word to anyone at all. For that is the calling of the Gospel. Amen.