

In the musical Les Miserables there comes a hinging moment in the storyline where the main character Jean Valjean is struck with an internal crisis. Once a convict he is living as a reputable factory owner, and has risen to become mayor of his town. This new life was only possible because he has skipped parole, and lied about his identity.

The crisis moment comes when he learns that a vagrant has been caught and identified as him. The book describes how former convicts, and former jail warder Javert all testify to this vagrant being Jean Valjean.

The real Jean Valjean is faced with a question of identity and launches into the tremendously powerful song 'who am I?' He stands at a crossroads, can he live a lie forever? Will he reveal his true identity? He is torn by the question; 'who am I?'

Who am I?

It's the question of our age. We live in a world where identity is up for grabs. We are encouraged to define who we are in clothing, style, music, tattoos, gender, sexuality, the factors to consider are almost endless. Who am I?

Today as we meet the Church at Philippi we are going to ask questions about Identity; as we work through vv.1-8 - we'll consider Our true identity as people who 'Live in Christ'. In the second part of the passage we'll dig into Paul's prayer for the church at Philippi, and see how they can live out this new identity in vv.9-11.

Pray

1) True Identity

As we think about our true identity we are helped enormously by looking at the identity of the writers of this letter.

We know the primary author is the Apostle Paul, and he's sending greetings on behalf of Timothy as well. They are both known to the Philippians, they are dear friends. Paul's identity at the very start of verse 1 is confronting.

In our English translations we might have 'Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ.' Not really a fair rendering, Paul and Timothy are *slaves of Christ*.

The Philippian's were familiar with slaves. Some of their church members might well have been slaves themselves. Some slaves carried out menial work, other slaves held positions of importance in the civil service, or domestically as managers of households and assets. We need to be clear in our minds that the slavery Paul is

describing is a far cry from the horrific, and rightly condemned slavery in the United States of America, and Colonial territories of the British Empire.

The slave in the Roman Empire was not a free person, but “belonged to” another. Paul’s use of the title of slaves for himself and Timothy points to their total subjection to the will of their master: they were not autonomous; they were subject to the claims of the one who owned them, the Lord Jesus. He was their ‘master’ and their identity is defined by belonging to him.

That’s an uncomfortable definition to be confronted with isn’t it? I’m happy to be labelled as a minister for Christ, a follower of Christ, but a slave to Christ? That changes how I relate to Jesus and the world around me. As a slave my actions, all come under the direction and will of Jesus.

The way I conduct business has to look different doesn’t it? I have to conduct myself in a way that fits with my master’s will. My relationships look totally different. Who I associate with, the way I talk, how I use my time, it all has to fit in line with the will of my master. But what a master to submit to! Not a master who is harsh and controlling, but a master who made himself a slave to serve others.

A master who knows the experience of emptying himself, of humility and servitude, of exercising the will of another.

A master who doesn’t rule with an iron fist, or in a way that is domineering, but with gentleness, and to bring about life in all its fullness. When we are slaves to Christ Jesus, we are truly free. Free to have our identity reformed, reshaped, and redeemed.

As a Christian, who Am I? I am a slave of Christ Jesus.

As a culture Philippians were defined by their loyalty to the Emperor. It was what they were known for. It was who they were. Their loyalty to ‘lord Caesar’ was an absolutely central part of their identity.

Philippi was a city where people had been granted Roman citizenship due to their loyalty to Octavius, in the war for supremacy after the assassination of Julius Caesar. They were fiercely loyal to the Emperor, and the religion of Rome, which claimed that Caesar alone was the divine lord.

Paul calls them, ‘God’s Holy people in Christ Jesus.’

He doesn't label them as 'faithful supporters of the Emperor', or servants of 'Lord Caesar.' but points to a greater allegiance, they are God's Holy people, in Christ.

Their culture was permissive, licentious, loved overt displays of wealth.

Like most of the Roman world pagan worship was the norm. The values system is diametrically opposed to the Christian faith. To describe someone as having humility was an insult. Bragging about your achievements is expected and increases your social status. Denying yourself was oppressive.

These undercurrents formed identity, they were the unseen culture, the air that was breathed, the contributed to the worldview and identity of Philippians; but these Christians, are Holy people. They have been made right with God through the death and resurrection of Jesus, and now they are to push back against the cultural norms and to live a different way.

They are God's Holy people, bought at a great price, and set free from slavery to their cultural identity.

Isn't this an amazing gift of God? Not to have to have our identity caught up in the things of this world, but to look for a greater and higher definition of who we are?

We aren't slaves to sin, we aren't slaves to subculture, our sexuality, our age, our marital status, our unmet desires and expectations for this life, we are slaves only to the Lord Jesus, who frees us from the bondage of sin, and death.

The Philippians are slaves of Christ, they are God's Holy people, and they are even more than that to Paul; they are dear friends and partners in the gospel.

Have you noticed the warmth and affection, the depth of relationship that Paul has with these brothers and sisters? He thanks God every time he remembers them, v. 3, he prays with joy v.4 because of their partnership v.5, he has them in his heart v.7, he longs for them with the affection of Christ Jesus v.8.

Paul loves these people. And he has examined his love for them, and concludes that it is a right and good love, a love based in their being recipients of grace together.

He has been encouraged, strengthened by their partnership in a time of great suffering. Paul is in chains. v.7, but he is full of joy despite having been confined under house arrest for preaching the gospel.

He knows the plight of the Philippians, he knows that their new identity in Christ is costly; it has been for him. He has lost everything he once held dear. Status, position, stability, friendships and so have some of us.

Some of us have faced deep rejection - from a family member, a dear friend. Some of us have counted the costs in business or work, a deal we couldn't close because it didn't sit right with our faith. We find ourselves living uneasily with the culture around us, wondering when the world changed. Paul has suffered because of his faith, the Philippians have suffered because of their faith, we have suffered because of our faith.

But look at what we can be absolutely confident of; v.6 That Jesus will complete the good work he has begun in us.

Paul's losses, the Philippian's losses, our losses, haven't been in vain. We are being changed day by day as we submit to the Lord Jesus. He has begun something in us, and he will see it through. There are no half measures with the Lord Jesus, he won't let go. If he has called us to faith in him, he will see his Kingdom purposes at work in us. That doesn't mean life will go well at every turn.

Paul is in prison, the Philippians are hurting and counting the cost of their faith, but Jesus will take and use even the suffering to shape us into his likeness. This is not a perfect church, we are going to discover that as we walk with the Philippians in the coming weeks, but there is an undergirding of hope and confidence, that despite their imperfections, Jesus is at work among them.

Who am I? What is our identity?

Slaves of Christ, Holy people in Christ, sanctified, people of a promise, that God is at work in us, and will complete that good work in us on the day of Jesus' return.

It's a far cry from how our culture would define us; bigots, old fashioned, out of touch, deluded, weak.

Brothers and sisters take heart, We have a new identity: founded on the unshakable promise of Jesus, that he will complete what he has begun in us.

2) How do we live it out?

Very briefly, how do we take hold of this new identity, how do we live it out?

Paul's prayer in v.9-11 shows us. We saw in v.4 that Paul prayed for these believers continually and with great joy. Now we get an insight into the content of Paul's prayer. What is the key word here that tells us how to live out being slaves of Christ, God's Holy people?

He wants our love to abound more and more;

Paul wants them to put on the same love they have received from God. It is a generous and undeserved love, summarised in one beautiful word in v.7 'grace.' It is unearned, and costly. It's a love he's seen in them, but he wants it to 'abound more and more' to grow, to increase, as they push on in their faith.

He's not interested in a sentimental, or glib kind of niceness and getting along; Paul's expressed the depth of his love for them in his prayer and his words, and now he explains he wants the love they have to be accompanied by knowledge and insight, to increase their love and unity.

Their love, their unity has to be undergirded by right belief. A study of the meaning of the way Paul is describing 'knowledge' in his letters shows that this knowledge is "recognition of the will of God that is *effective* in the conduct of one who knows God.' It makes a change.

It's very tempting to gloss over doctrinal differences, for the sake of unity in the church, but Paul is helping us to see that without belief in the things that really matter our love can't abound and increase, we can't have true unity.

He wants the Philippians, and us, to have agreement in doctrinal truth so that we can discern what is best. That's love in action isn't it? Seeking what is best for others; but what is best is not always obvious.

We have hearts which are lead astray, we have our own desires and preferences, but if we are slaves of Christ, we must be discerning, we must have knowledge of the will of our master and carry that will out, even when it costs or offends us. That's not easy, but it comes with a great reward.

When we take our wills captive, and align them to the wills of our master, when we discern what God thinks is best, which He has so clearly laid out for us in His Word which he brings alive by His Holy Spirit.

When we live God's way, we grow in the most marvellous ways. We produce the fruit of righteousness in our lives

Instead of selfishness we love,
Instead of being people who despair we know true joy,
Instead of living in uncertainty and anxiety we have peace,
We live lives slowly growing in forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

We can be presented as pure and blameless on the day of Jesus' return, which gives glory to God as we see and proclaim his goodness in changing us.

As slaves of Christ, God's Holy people in Christ Jesus we can love each other and live together, as an imperfect community of believers seeking the will of God in the Bible.

We can draw each other on, helping to discern where we need to change, loving in a radical way. We can endure, we can walk through suffering; not because we are perfect. Not because we've got it together, not because new are blameless, but because Christ is.

We can handle the ridicule, rejection, costs of following Jesus, because he is as good as his Word, and on the day of his return, we will give him glory for completing what he started in us. Through his death and resurrection, and our constant bending of our wills to his, we can be presented as pure and blameless, giving glory to God.

That's a magnificent direction to be headed isn't it?

Why don't we pray and ask God to help us pursue that end!