

**“Identity in Jesus” – Pr Jim Sprengle – Epiphany 5
February 4, 2024**

- I. **1 Corinthians 9:23** – ²³ I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.
- II. **When we get less snowfall, I get concerned about summer forest fires.**
 - a. Firefighters are busy all summer even when snowpack is good... so I like lots of snow in the winter and rain in the spring to keep the fires away.
 - b. I read a story about smoke jumpers back in the 1940's, that sent a crew of sixteen men by parachute to fight a fire in Montana.
 - i. Unfortunately, the parachute on the radio didn't open, so they had no communication – they were basically on their own.
 - ii. They weren't too worried, because it was a small fire, and most of them figured they would be home in no time.
 - iii. The story became a tragedy, because the fire quickly changed and only 3 of them lived to talk about it.
 - c. As it turns out, many of the men tried to race to the top of a ridge to beat the flames coming at them.
 - i. However, during training, they were told to never, ever drop their firefighting gear, especially their Pulaski – which is a brush ax that firefighter's carry.
 - ii. Pulaskis and gear are important to fight the fire, but when this fire started rushing at them at 600 feet per minute, and they needed to climb a 35-degree slope... the extra weight was a burden that cost many of them their lives.
 - iii. Unfortunately, the tools that worked great under normal circumstances became unnecessary baggage in a race for life.
 - d. In the race of life, each of us carries around our gear... maybe not a Pulaski, but we have other things that we use all the time and don't want to get rid of...
 - i. For some, it's a persona of being tough or “no nonsense”.
 - ii. Others carry around a people pleasing attitude that doesn't want any conflict or using the dreaded word, “no”.
 - iii. Some of us grew up in a certain culture or environment that was very involved in athletics, or science, or music, or nerdy stuff, or being macho.
 - iv. Lots of us carry the place of our origin with us – including its sports teams, the kind of people that live there – whether it's rugged Alaska, my home state of Colorado, the Midwest, or even another country.
 - e. Certainly, these things are a part of us, but when do they become unnecessary weight that holds us back from our Christian walk?
 - i. Do we carry around certain “equipment” with us that only identifies us as part of a certain group or club?

- III. **Christians should be all things to all people.** (vs 22)
- a. I know, I know, the world teaches us to be true to ourselves... to be real...authentic... genuine.
 - b. So, what is Paul trying to say in our reading today?
 - i. Are we supposed to be phony and insincere when we connect with people around us?
 - c. To answer these questions, we need to understand the context and what Paul has written to the Corinthians up to this point.
 - i. There was a group of people who were using their freedoms in Christ to essentially be selfish... and even divide the congregation.
 - 1. Sure, they *could* eat meat that was sacrificed to idols, but is that the best influence for unbelievers, or even new Christians who might get the wrong message?
 - 2. Sure, they *could* blend in with the pagans around them, going to their temples and attached marketplaces, but how does that look for a Christian to be doing that?
 - 3. Yes, they *could* take sides with Paul, or Peter, or Apollos as their pastor, but the division from being in a certain club was showing others that Christians don't get along very well.
 - d. So, we have Christians in Corinth who are divided into groups... and each group has its own equipment that identifies it – and they spend time in the group that they agree with... or is similar in style.
 - i. First it's important to remember that many of these Christians in Corinth were not Jewish to begin with, they were outside the Jewish faith growing up, and so we call them Gentiles.
 - 1. The Jewish and Gentile Christians began their lives in completely different settings, so it makes sense that they didn't have a lot in common.
 - ii. Some of these Christians were in business, dealing with merchants from all over the Mediterranean because Corinth was a port city.
 - iii. Some of the Christians there were brought to faith as they spent time with guys like Paul, or Peter, or Apollos, and each leader had a different style.
 - 1. For example, Paul was a well-educated Pharisee, while Peter was an uneducated fisherman.
 - iv. So, many times these Christians from different backgrounds would gravitate to where they felt comfortable, and often this led to divisions.
 - v. You can envision someone with a Pulaski ax look around the room, and they see someone else holding one too – so they scoot over to chat with them – it's a natural fit!

- e. However, Paul is trying to tell them that Christians are all the same on the inside... or as 2 Corinthians 5:16 says, we should stop evaluating people from a human point of view.
 - i. The goal is to set aside the outer symbols or equipment we carry around to make us unique, and recognize the inner blessing is always the same for us Christians – we are saved through Jesus.

IV. **Jesus Christ, the Savior, came to redeem all people.**

- a. I know we like to think we are special, and on one level we are definitely chosen and loved by God... but we are all equal at the foot of the cross.
- b. The season of Epiphany is supposed to be an “aha” moment... we see the Wise Men come from the east, and we learn that God means to save people from every nation, even Gentiles like these Wise Men!
- c. In the same way, we have an epiphany that God loves people no matter their background, sinful behavior, race, or income... Jesus died and rose again for every person.
- d. Do you think when you die and go to heaven, Jesus will ask you questions like, “What state were you born in?” or, “Was your mother from Germany?” or, “Did you letter in football during high school?” or, “What’s your favorite kind of music?”
 - i. Then, when He gets your answer, He sends you over to the group that answered the same... I hope you don’t see heaven like that.
- e. No, Jesus will welcome all who have faith in Him... all those who believe that He really did die on the cross and rise again to pay for our sins and restore us to a right standing before God... and as we believe this truth, the worldly measures and hierarchy fade away.
 - i. We don’t bring our accomplishments, our money, our status, or anything else when we die... we only bring a life lived for Christ.

V. **The greatest thing we can be is a Christian living for Jesus.**

- a. As Paul writes, “I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.” (vs 23)
- b. Paul isn’t concerned about his status as a Pharisee before he became a Christian... or about the fact that Jesus came to him personally to convert him... or that he should be paid for his work in growing the churches he supported and for which he labored for years.
 - i. Paul is getting everything he needs from the gospel, and the fact that others may come to know Jesus through his work.
- c. Paul cannot be part of a closed, social group and still be open to sharing the gospel with different people from all walks of life.
 - i. As Christians, we may find ourselves gravitating to the “club” that feels most comfortable in our church, or maybe in our personal lives.
 - 1. However, the lesson we learn today is about setting aside our preferences, our status, or our perceptions about others... and remembering that we are all equal at the foot of the cross.

- d. Our identity is found in Jesus, and not in all the things we think are important...
 - i. Maybe it's time to consider all the equipment that we are hauling around with us... everything that make us fit into a certain club... and drop it as we run the race God has set out for us...
 - ii. ...because the only club that really matters is the "Jesus Club", Amen.

¹ Source: Adapted from Norman McLean, *Young Men and Fire* (University of Chicago Press, 2017)