

The Freedom of Identity I Corinthians 4:1-5

We've been in a series called, *This Verse Changed My Life*, and I want to take you to a verse in the Bible that when you and I really live into this reality it will completely revolutionize our lives, and set us free from people pleasing and the tyranny of judgment. It's a verse tucked away in I Corinthians 4. Let's go there.

You and I understand what identity theft is- it's when someone poses as you, and is able to open lines of credit, and make all kinds of purchases, while you get the bill. It's a very real thing that has happened to good friends of mine, and so because of that, a few years ago, my wife and I decided to make sure our identities were secure by purchasing something called, LifeLock. Whenever LifeLock suspects suspicious activity they will send Korie and I notifications. Now the essence of these notifications can be reduced to three words, "Is this you?" In short, they want to know if this is really who I am; if this is our true identity?

Connecting to the Audience

The question of identity is a core question of life. "Who Am I," is the soundtrack to our souls, a question we can never escape. In fact, Dietrich Bonhoeffer- the great 20th century German theologian- wrestled with the question of identity deeply. Just a few days before he was executed by the Nazi's for standing in opposition to them, Bonhoeffer wrote this poem: *Who Am I? This or the other? Am I one person today, and tomorrow another? Am I both at once? A hypocrite before others, and before myself a contemptibly woebegone weakling? Or is something within me still like a beaten army, fleeing in disorder from victory already achieved? Who am I? They mock me these lonely questions of mine. Whoever I am, thou knowest, O God, I am thine- Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Who Am I?*

Oh friend, if we were to be really honest we would join the ranks of Bonhoeffer and confess that the question of identity stalks us daily. The recently retired athlete asks this question- Who am I? The parents who have spent years guiding their children, and are now staring down the empty nest, asks this question. The one who just lost their job asks the question. The successful businessperson who started the company, sold it for millions and has nothing but time on their hands now, asks this question. The recent college graduate filled with more dreams than success or money asks this question. The question of identity, of who am I, is the background elevator music of our minds. Answer the question of identity correctly and you will know freedom and contentment. But answer the question of identity incorrectly and you will know bondage and discontent. Yes, the question of identity is *the* question of life.

The Only True Answer to Identity- I Corinthians 4:1-2

So what is the answer to identity? This is why Paul writes our passage. I Corinthians 4:1-5 is all about identity. The reason Paul is writing on this subject is that according to I Corinthians 1:10, he has gotten word from Chloe's house that there are divisions in the church. One group says they are of Paul, another of Apollos, another of Peter and still another of Christ. Instead of one unified church, we have a church that is fractured and divided, with people placing their identities in men. By the way, division tends to happen when we settle for the lesser identities of this world. When people choose to put their identity in success, they will look down on the less successful. When people put their identities in their ethnicity, they will naturally experience division from another ethnicity. And when people choose to put their identity in a political agenda, they will find themselves at odds with people of a different agenda. Of course this is not to say we shouldn't be successful, celebrate how God made us or have our political convictions, we should do these things. But doing and having them as an identity are two different things.

Now what's interesting here is this: On the one hand there was a group of people at Corinth who said they were of Paul, which is easy to understand, because when we talk about sheer influence, Paul is one of the top five leaders in world history. Easy. And Paul could have played into this, and built his brand around his success and celebrity. But this would have led to an overinflated ego, and a nauseating pride. On the other hand there were groups of people at the church of Corinth who not only refused to follow Paul, but actually ridiculed him for his unimpressive speaking. Paul could have let this perceived weakness of him define him, allowing it to become his identity. You and I know of plenty of people who have built their identities in being a victim. See the tension? Building our identity around our successes or weaknesses will never do.

Instead, Paul gives us a third option for building our identity. Look at verses 1-2. The Greek word for *servants* means an under-rower and was a reference to the large Roman ships where below deck there would be scores of rowers who moved at the command of the pilot. The word *steward* simply means the manager of the house. This was not the owner of the house, but the one who ran the house on behalf of the owner. What both these words have in common is a person who doesn't exist for their own pleasure, but whose identity is inextricably tied to the one in authority over them. Likewise, Paul is saying that his identity is not in his successes or weaknesses, but in the one who is in authority over him- Christ. When my identity is in Christ I am free to put gospel distance between my successes and weaknesses. Those things don't define me. Jesus does!

You and I have heard these stories. Yeh we have. A person got locked up decades ago for some violent crime, and it seemed as if all hope was lost. And then they discover that since being locked up they've developed this thing called DNA testing, which is all about identity. So they run the DNA test and find out that person didn't do the crime and having figured out their identity there's freedom. Oh friends, this is exactly Paul's point. When we live into our true identity in Christ there's freedom! Freedom from performance. Freedom from the

opinions of others. Freedom from the snide remarks that come my way. Freedom from my own opinions of me. Once you live into the DNA you share with Christ you are free.

Breaking Free- God is Our Judge. I Corinthians 4:4b-5

Yeh, but what exactly does this look like, and how do I practically live into this freedom on a daily basis? Paul answers all these questions. Now notice with me there's a little word that keeps popping up- *judge*. It's an important word that we have to understand to make sense of this text. The word judge doesn't so much mean verdict, as it does the process that leads to the verdict. It's the idea of one who is being evaluated and scrutinized. This is further illumined as Paul uses more legal language in verse three when he talks about the "human court". If you've ever been a defendant in court, you understand that for the time leading up to the trial, and during the trial, you are under a tremendous amount of scrutiny and evaluation. Everything is being looked at, and opinions are being formed. Now notice, Paul says that's what it's like to some degree for his whole life. Study his ministry. Always under scrutiny. The Judaizer's told the Galatians that they couldn't trust Paul because he wasn't a real apostle. The religious leaders attacked him and tried to kill him. Crowds in Lystra and other places got upset with him. He stood before King Agrippa in a human court to plead his case. Everywhere he turned he was facing constant evaluation and scrutiny. Paul was the LeBron James of his day.

And to some degree that happens to all of us daily. People are evaluating and forming their own opinions of us based on where we live, go to school, send our kids to school, what we drive, how we vacation, what we say, who we vote for, the whole nine. Everyday we get up it seems as if we are walking into human court after human court. And trying to live up to people's evaluations is a miserable existence.

But Paul goes onto say that it is not just others who judge, it's ourselves who judge (3b). We all have an inner lawyer who is constantly evaluating us. Charles Spurgeon was known to sulk on Sunday afternoons if he thought the sermon didn't go well, to the point of melancholy, his inner lawyer working overtime. Who in here can relate? We leave a meeting or a time of hanging out and many of us brood over, did we say the right thing? Was I too harsh? Why didn't I speak up? Did I talk too much? Did they like me? Or, maybe it's your inner lawyer, who like the author Brennan Manning, describes as one who is constantly calling you an imposter and calling into question your faith. Doubt washes over you all the time. There's a voice always saying you're not good enough and you never will be. We all need to fire our inner lawyer. Paul did.

So how do we break free of this constant evaluation from others, and ourselves? Paul tells us. He actually says there's a third source of judgment, and it's God (5). God is the only real judge, because he is the only one who knows everything about us. While we make judgements on appearances, the Lord knows the heart. God is the one who knows me, and he is the one I will ultimately have to answer to. And when we understand that future reality, it should change how we live in the present!

In just a few weeks Korie and I will drop our second son off at college in California. From the time he was born, we envisioned this day, so we have been putting money aside. The future reality of him going to school, impacted our present daily lives. Friends, don't you see. Because I know there is a future reality when I will stand before my one and only judge, that should impact how I live today.

Breaking Free- People Are Small, God Is Big- I Corinthians 4:3a

Okay, so when my identity is in Christ there's freedom. What does this look like? Well, I understand God is my only true judge and when I live that way it will free me from the judgments of others. But there's more. Look at verse 3. The Greek word for small is the superlative of micros. It means tiny, tiny, tiny! See what he's saying? When I live in the light of God being the only true judge, people become small and God becomes big. It's not that other people's judgments are invisible, it's just that they're beyond microscopic.

This was something Paul lived. So Paul plants the churches in Galatia, seeing many Gentiles come to Christ. After he leaves, Jewish religious leaders known as the Judaizer's come in and they start telling these new Gentiles that Paul can't be trusted; that he's not a genuine apostle. Just real nasty stuff. Paul gets word and writes the letter to the Galatians and notice what he says from jump street: "For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ"- Galatians 1:10. See it? Paul says if you spend your time people pleasing, your identity is not in Christ. But for the person whose identity is in Christ, people are small and God is big. This doesn't mean people are insignificant, but it does mean that they're not who I'm living for.

When Jaden was a little boy every time he made a shot he'd look up in the stands at me and smile. After the game he'd come up to me and ask me, "Hey dad, how did I do?" He never asked anyone else that in the stands. He didn't ask his teammates that. And I never saw him ask his coaches that. It's as if he knew, that if dad said I did good, that's enough for me. That's what Paul is saying. Play your life for the one person in the stands, and his name is God. Let him be big, and everyone else small. Do you know that freedom today? Or are you still in bondage to the tyranny of people and their judgments?

Breaking Free- Performance Free Living- I Corinthians 2:1-5

Now listen to me. When a person's identity is not in Christ, but is found in the lesser identities of this world (work, money, success, etc), what happens? Well, then they are a slave to what others or themselves think, people have a disproportionate role in their lives, bigger than God, and they are on the treadmill of performance, always feeling like they have to prove themselves. Madonna felt this way. Listen to what she says in an article in Vogue: "My drive in life comes from a fear of being mediocre. That is always pushing me. I push past one spell of it and discover myself as a special human being but then I feel I am still mediocre and

uninteresting unless I do something else. Because even though I have become somebody, I still have to prove that I am somebody. My struggle has never ended and I guess it never will"- Madonna, Vogue Magazine. And this is a millionaire celebrity adored the world over saying this! When your identity is in the lesser identities of this world, you will be a slave to performance.

But when our identity is in Jesus, the ultimate identity, now we are free. Remember, Paul is writing the Corinthians because many of them don't like his speaking, they don't feel as if he is performing up to par for them. They say Paul is not eloquent. Look at how Paul answers them, "And when I, I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God"- I Corinthians 2:1-5. See the freedom here? Paul's identity was so secured in Christ, he was freed from any notion that he had to live up to their expectations (By the way, I wonder how many churches in world history fired their pastors because they didn't have impressive speech?).

Gospel Conclusion

Paul didn't have to labor in the human court of approval, because Jesus had already stepped into that court. Some two thousand years ago, Jesus stepped into the kangaroo court of this life. People had scrutinized him and cast their verdict. They demanded that he be crucified. On the cross, Jesus took humanity's bad verdict, so that God, the only true judge could render the final good verdict on each of us. And you know what that final verdict is? RIGHTEOUS! So we don't have to perform for his verdict, instead we labor from his verdict. We are free!