

**LIVE|14 – Mistaken Identity****“I Am What I’ve Been Through” (Part 4 of 4)**

1 Corinthians 15:3-10

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*For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. 1 Cor. 15:3-10 (ESV)*

Imagine with me for a moment, what kind of feelings you have in the following scenarios:

You walk down to the mailbox to retrieve your mail. After you open the door and pull out the small pile of junk mail, newsletters and bills, you notice something that looks like an invitation. You open the envelope and read the following words: “Class Reunion.” What goes through your mind and heart in that moment? For some people those words create excitement and anticipation. But for many more, I would suspect that those words surface feelings of regret or maybe even shame.

The way things ended at your last job was very painful. There was the humiliation of having security escort you down the hallway with a cardboard box full of the contents of your office. But what made everything worse were the broken promises, the dishonesty, and the unfairness of it all, especially on the part of your boss. You thought you were close, but now you realize you were only close for convenience. For the last two weeks your first thought when you wake up is: “I can’t believe he did that to me. I can’t believe that he’s going to get away with it.”

Your parents divorced when you were eight years old, and you can still remember where you were sitting when you learned what was really happening in your home. But you had no idea what it would mean. Suddenly Dad no longer lives at home. You visit him every other weekend. You constantly feel torn between two people you love. And it is really uncomfortable when people ask about your family.

Whether it is something you did or something that was done to you, the past can create some strong emotions. What we have been through has the potential to shape us in ways that are powerful and deeply personal. And when it comes to our identity, it is surprising how much our past can shape the practical answers to questions like: “Who am I?” “Where do I belong?” and “Why am I here?” What we have been through can be defining, but it can also be devastating.

Today is our last week in our LIVE mini-series on mistaken identity and next week we will resume our study of the book of Romans. We’ll start our journey again in Romans 5, and we will be discovering the hope of righteousness.

So far we have examined the mistaken identities of “I am what I do,” “I am how I look,” and “I am what I have.” Today we are going to try to get a better understanding of how we deal with the past.

## A Framework for the Past

Before we actually get into the text, I want to set up a framework for how to think about what we have been through. The past is complicated – sometimes because of what we have done, other times because of what has been done to us.

Steve Viars, who pastors Faith Church in Lafayette, wrote a book called *Putting Your Past in its Place*. In the book he gives a very helpful way of thinking about our past:



I think that this framework is helpful for a number of reasons: First, it identifies that our “past” is complicated. It can include things that we have done, or it can involve things that have been done to us. When it comes to the past, some people struggle with feelings of guilt, regret, or shame because of what they have done. Still others have to battle with the issue of unfairness, suffering, and how all of this relates to their view of God. So talking about the past is challenging because all of us have different feelings as they relate to what we have been through.

Second, it is helpful because it identifies that our response to our past is very much a part of the story of what we have been through. When you think about your past, you may have responded very well or righteously to your failures. Or you may have reacted with even more sinfulness, compounding the grief. If your past includes something that was done to you, the way in which you responded is very much a part of how that event shaped, or continues to shape, your identity.

So let me start by acknowledging the complexity and emotion connected with this subject. I am sure that there are a number of you who did not want to come to church today, and I would also suspect that are others who are hoping that somehow I can “fix” what has been a life-long struggle with how the past has defined you.

We come to this subject from various perspectives. Yet there are a few things that we all have in common when it comes to this subject. We all have a past, and it is not perfect. I’ve said this before, but every family has elements of dysfunction in it. If you think that perfect parents equal perfect children, then you have a Garden of Eden problem. God is the perfect parent, and yet His kids still rebelled. So we all come to this Sunday with imperfect pasts. Every one of us have moments in our past where we responded really well to our failures or to what someone did to us. We all have pain from the past. And every one of us also has situations in the past that are embarrassing, shameful, and regretful.

The issue is not if you have a past, but what you have done with that past. And today, the focus is on how to think about the past in terms of the identity offered to us in the gospel.

## **Four Principles for Dealing with the Past**

Our text today is in 1 Corinthians 15, and it is one of many places in the New Testament where the apostle Paul talks specifically about his past. The reason why Paul's instructions are so helpful is because of the fact that Paul had committed things in his past that were very public and scandalous. And he had things in his past that were done to him. Therefore, his teaching is particularly helpful.

The context of 1 Corinthians is important to understand. Paul was forced to defend himself and his preaching of the gospel because this church was not only having problems, but they were also being very critical of Paul. They were judging him (1 Cor. 4:3), being divisive (1:10-17), and eventually disparaging his ministry by saying "his letters are demanding and forceful, but in person he is weak and his speeches are worthless!" (2 Cor. 10:10, NLT). In other words, they were attacking Paul's identity. "Who is this guy?" "Why should we listen to him?"

This was important because the Corinthians were attacking Paul in order to excuse their lack of faithfulness to the gospel in their beliefs and in their actions. So Paul defends himself by giving a wonderful explanation of his identity in Christ in light of his past so that he can have future ministry with this church and so that they will listen to what he has to say about the resurrection from the dead. However, a central part of the problem with Paul's ministry was his past. So what does he do with his past and what principles can we learn?

### **1. Start with the Gospel**

Paul starts by reiterating the gospel.

*For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures . . . (1 Cor. 15:3-4 ESV)*

This was not new information to the church, and he shares it here because of its foundational importance and priority. The simple message that "Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures . . ." is foundational to everything in life, particularly how we view our past. The gospel has the power to transform everything about lives, to become the identity underneath or inside all other identities.

Last week I tried to summarize the "Gospel Script" by giving you four statements to remember. I found myself repeating these four phrases throughout the week, and I hope that you will commit them to memory. They are not exhaustive, but I have still found them helpful:

- **"God is holy"** – There is nothing in the universe that possesses greater purity, beauty, and glory than God.
- **"I am not"** – My fundamental problem in life is the brokenness that is due to the presence of internal and external rebellion or sin against God.

- **“Jesus Saves”** – Forgiveness and restoration is available by putting one’s faith in Jesus, and by trusting in Him, God declares me to be righteous.
- **“Christ is my life”** – Once I have been “graced” with forgiveness, everything about my life is impacted by this new identity that I have in Jesus. The Gospel becomes the lens through which I see everything. It becomes my view of the world.

When the Bible talks about the effect of the gospel, it often uses the phrase “a new heart” or a “new self” (see Ezek. 11:19, 36:36, Eph. 4:24, Col. 3:10). And this refers to the way that this gospel identity changes something so deep in you that it changes everything. That is also why Jesus used the term “born again” in John 3:3.

In order to effectively deal with the past, and in order to understand your identity in light of your past, you must first deal with the gospel. In other words, you have to deal with the reason behind your past. You see, whether it was something you did or something done to you, the Bible tells us that our world has fallen into sin. We do bad things because we are sinners. Sinful things happen to us because other people are sinners. If you do not understand God’s remedy for sin, then you will not be able to effectively deal with your past.

Instead, you will find any number of other ways to cope and compensate. Maybe you have spent years trying to sort through why you did what you did and trying to justify it or comparing yourself to others. Maybe you have struggled with bitterness and anger because of what was done to you. And maybe you’ve ruined relationships, bounced from relationship to relationship, or tried to drown the pain by looking to a substance or sleep or work.

Maybe you have sat through the last three weeks and you are starting to realize that the real need in your life and the real issue in your identity is the fact that you have never settled the spiritual issues in your life. If that is the case, I want to invite you to turn from your sin and put your faith in Jesus. I want to urge you to be born again, to become a follower of Jesus, and to make Christ your life.

The reality is that you cannot deal with your identity and you cannot address your identity as it relates to your past without coming to terms with the gospel. It is the one thing that changes everything. It is the one reality that transforms all other realities. By being “born again,” we can truly live. By finding Christ, we find our true identity.

## **2. Be honest about your past**

When you see yourself and your past through the lens of the gospel, it frees you to be honest about the pain of what you have been through. Rather than denying the past, redefining the past, explaining the past, or allowing the past to define him, Paul simply acknowledges the reality of what is in his past. Look at verses 8-9:

“Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.” 1 Cor. 15:8–9 (ESV)

Now it very easy to fly over the word “persecuted,” but just think of the scandal and shame that Paul must have dealt with everywhere he went. Paul, prior to his conversion, led the most organized, systematic,

and widespread arrest, torture, and murder of Christians that the church had ever seen. He was deceived, ruthless, arrogant, and wrong. Imagine what it must have been like to enter into a gathering of believers knowing that the families had suffered or lost loved ones because of him. No one had sinned against the church of Jesus Christ more, and 1 Corinthians 15 is not the only place he mentions this:

“For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it.” Gal. 1:13 (ESV)

“. . . formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent . . .” 1 Tim. 1:13 (ESV)

Paul also knew what it was like to be unfairly treated. In 2 Corinthians 11:24-27 he lists imprisonments, countless beatings, being nearly killed numerous times, thirty-nine lashes, beaten with rods three times, and once he was even stoned. He knew what it was like to be lied about, denied, and betrayed. Paul’s life was filled with suffering.

Yet what is so compelling is the fact that he acknowledges those events – both what he did and what others did to him – as a reality but not as the ultimate reality. In the same way, you can be honest about your past without glorying in it or having it be the sum total of who you are. Gospel identity (“God is holy, I am not, Jesus saves, Christ is my life”) liberates the hold that your past could have on you.

### **3. Eclipse your past with grace**

Something really important happens in 1 Corinthians 15:10, and this is not the only place in the Bible where we find it. After Paul talks about his past as a persecutor, he says: “But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain . . .” 1 Cor.15:10 (ESV)

Now that phrase: “But by the grace of God” is the key. It means that Paul’s past was real and had an impact on his life – even his present life. However, something greater than his past entered into the equation: God’s grace. Paul did not deny or diminish or become defensive or defeated about his past, but he saw his past through God’s grace.

If you have been at College Park for very long, you are bound to hear me use a particular word that has become a favorite when talking about the past. It is the word *eclipse*. I love that word because it describes the way that God’s grace becomes the greater focus in front of another object. In this case, it helps us because it acknowledges the reality of the past. It is real. It is there. It is not going away. But it is not the main thing. It is not the focus, and it is not the ultimate reality.

I love this word because when it comes to your identity, you cannot deny that your past has a significant effect in shaping your view of yourself, where you belong, and other big picture issues. Yet sometimes I see or hear people dealing with their past by focusing almost entirely on it by trying to figure it out, analyze it, or fully understand it. Others live in so much shame over their past that they try to justify it, redefine it, or hide it. And none of those strategies work! What we need is something greater than our past to transform it, to redeem it, and to give it meaning and purpose. That is what grace does!

Eclipsing the past with grace is one of the beautiful realities of the gospel’s power. Let me show you a few other places where the Bible talks about our past like this:

*I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service, though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. **But I received mercy** because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. **But I received mercy** for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life. To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen. 1 Tim.1:12–17 (ESV) (emphasis mine)*

*And I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers. **But when he** who had set me apart before I was born, and who **called me by his grace**, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles . . . Gal. 1:14–16 (ESV) (emphasis mine)*

There is something beautiful and liberating about the eclipsing power of God's grace. It has the potential to make your dark past the platform upon which the glory of God is displayed. And it also has the power to transform the sufferings that we experience.

Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers because of their jealousy and hatred. When he had the opportunity to enact his vengeance, he chose to be kind and merciful. He famously said the following words to them in Gen. 50:20 " . . . You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good." What is Joseph doing there? He is eclipsing the past sins of others that were committed against him with the gracious purpose of God for his life.

This is the potential freedom that comes to those who find their identity not in what people have done to them, but in terms of what God's grace means to them. Rather than have your identity shaped by the tragic events of your past, you can see them as the means by which God, somehow, is working out His plan for your life. Now, do not expect anyone who has not tasted God's grace to understand or appreciate this understanding of your past. You cannot eclipse the past with God's grace if God's grace has not invaded your life. In fact, if you are here today and have not experienced the grace of God's forgiveness, you might understand why the past is such a struggle. You have no lens through which to see it, understand it, and interpret it. There is no real point, no purpose and no meaning. Perhaps part of the reason why you are here today is because God, by His Spirit, is showing you your need for grace.

You see, this is what gospel identity does! It changes your sinful past from being the definition of who you are to being the place where God's grace found you. It also changes the hurtful past from being that confusing and unfair event that has ruined everything to being a painful experience that God has used to trust in Him and to believe that He works all things out for your good.

There is a classic song by Larnelle Harris (yes, I know this dates me) called "Were it not for Grace," and the chorus captures the beauty of what we are talking about here:

"Were it not for grace, I can tell you where I'd be  
Wandering down some pointless road to nowhere  
With my salvation up to me, I know how that would go

The battles I would face forever running but losing the race  
Were it not for grace"

We eclipse the past by building our identity on the grace of God.

#### **4. Live on grace**

The final aspect here of developing a biblical identity is the recognition the importance of living in and through and by this grace every single day. I thought about calling this fourth point "Make the Turn" or "Move On." But those seemed too self-focused. Instead, I want to see how a biblical identity is something that you have to continually embrace or practice or believe. Look at what Paul said in 1 Corinthians 15:10:

*But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. **On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.*** 1 Cor. 15:10 (ESV) (emphasis mine)

When I read this with a team of guys this week, I laughed because the phrase "I worked harder than any of them" struck me as a pretty bold statement. Imagine Peter or John reading this and what they must have thought. And yet it is true. When you have a past like Paul, ministry life is not going to be easy. So he had to work hard because his past was not good.

I love this because it acknowledges the real challenge that our past can be. There is compassion here because this verse acknowledges that there are long-term or life-long effects on us due to what we have done or what has happened to us. Sometimes I find that well-meaning people do not help those struggling with the past because they downplay the trauma or the shame.

I find it refreshing that Paul says in effect: "I had to work really hard." Some of you know exactly what he is talking about. There are some days that you wake up and your first thoughts are a tidal wave of grief, regret, shame or bitterness, confusion, and frustration. I love the compassion and the hope here. Paul's life was not easy.

But he had learned to live on God's grace. He was a man impacted by the grace of God. His identity bore the imprint of God's grace in his life. Day by day he had to apply God's grace to his life. And any progress that he saw, he knew was owing to God's grace. Paul was a man who had been "graced."

That is what we need, as well. We need to remind ourselves that grace eclipses our past, changes us now, and gives us a future. One of our staff guys put it this way: "Grace turns my shame into healing, my guilt into justification, and my regret into new hope."

The key is to learn to live on the grace of God, to allow the Bible to shape your identity, and to look at your past through the lens of the gospel. When you start with the gospel, you are able to be honest about your past, to eclipse the past with grace, and then to live in that grace every day of your life.

#### **Implications for All Walks of Life**

This message applies to all of us because we all have things in our past, but not all of us have the same things. Let me conclude with a few wide-ranging pastoral thoughts.

First, you may hear all this talk about the past, and you wish you had a past. Maybe you do not have one of those “cool” deliverance testimonies. You ought to thank God for His mercy to you, and yet acknowledge that you are a sinner just like everyone else. But you should also have compassion on people whose lives have been touched deeply by their past – more deeply than you probably understand.

Second, for those of you with events in your past in which someone treated you poorly or maybe even illegally, maybe today you can see that situation through a new and different lens. I want you to know that what happened to you does not need to define you. If you have come to Christ, then you understand that God reached into your life and changed you in a way that is not entirely explainable. He loved you, saved you, and is still making you new. Somehow, some way, everything in your life is working in accordance with His plan. You can trust Him. You can be thankful that although the past does not make sense, God is still good. And you can build a new gospel identity through your pain to glorify Him and help others.

Third, maybe you regretted the thought of coming to church today because any time the idea of the past comes up, you are flooded with grief, regret, and sorrow. If that is the case with you, I’m so glad that you came today, because hopefully you can see how much you have in common with the apostle Paul. You need to live by the phrase “By the grace of God I am what I am.” You can use your mistakes and your previous failures to humbly and honestly declare the beauty of God’s grace. Paul was greatly used by God, and I think part of the reason was because of his past. God can use you too, as long as you remember where your real identity is.

Finally, there have to be a few of you here today for whom the real need in your life is that you address the fundamental and core issue in your identity. Your past is only a symptom of a much deeper and greater problem: your sinful heart. The problem with the past is that you are prone to repeat it. Your heart will pursue the same desires, and it will yield the same result. What you need is a change of heart or a conversion. And the Bible tells us that is possible through a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. You see, you will always look for your identity in something. That is probably part of the problem with your past. The wrong crowd, the wrong desires, the wrong circumstances, and the wrong actions led to regret and consequences. Maybe it is time to answer the question: “Who am I?”

My hope is that you would turn to Christ – that you would acknowledge your need of Him and put your faith in Him today. My prayer is that you would be born again and become a child of God, so that your identity would sound like this: “I am a sinner but Christ is my life!”

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