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HOW TO DETERMINE YOUR TRUE IDENTITY (Philippians 3:1-11)

A few days ago, The New York Times published an interview with singer/songwriter Paul Simon, who will be performing this summer at Wolf Trap. I read it with interest, because in the article, Simon said he plans to retire soon.

Here's a 74-year-old man who has been in the music industry for six decades. Surely he would have a strong grasp on his true identity and purpose in life.

"It's an act of courage to let go," Mr. Simon said. "I am going to see what happens if I let go. Then I'm going to see, who am I? Or am I just this person that was defined by what I did? And if that's gone, if you have to make up yourself, who are you?"

What a strange statement. What a tragedy to come that far in one's life only to merely wonder who you have become or why you're here. As we will see in this study, the Bible is clear about a person's true identity - and it can only be one of two identities.

The apostle Paul wrote a passage in Philippians that speaks directly to this important understanding. Who are we? Why should we care? What is at stake?

DIVERT FROM PRETENDERS

*Philippians 3:1-3 - Further, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord! It is no trouble for me to write the same things to you again, and it is a safeguard for you. **Watch out for those dogs, those evildoers, those mutilators of the flesh. For it is we who are the circumcision, we who serve God by his Spirit, who boast in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh***

Paul again shows the special fatherly relationship he had with these believers in Philippi. He begins this section by letting them know he wants to protect them from harmful and destructive influences. To do this, he makes sure they understand that they are the ones who possess the truth and should not be led astray from it. When he refers to them as the "circumcision" (the

physical sign God used to set apart Israel, his chosen people), Paul isn't saying they are Jewish, but that they have been set apart spiritually as the ones God has chosen to be in his family.

Because they had been established in God's truth, Paul was concerned they might listen to the voices of false teachers who were prevalent in that day (and, by the way, still are.) That's why we see his warning to watch out for the "dogs, those evildoers". It was a strong rebuke to call someone a dog in that culture and Paul was well aware of the damage that could be done if a teacher of false doctrine were to gain a foothold in the church there.

We should have the same careful attitude in the teaching that we choose to believe. But how do we know what is right or wrong? That is where our own vigilance is crucial to our own spiritual well-being. We have to know what the Scriptures say if we are to recognize a counterfeit teaching.

Bad theology was everywhere in the first century. Paul included warnings like this one often in his letters. For example, when he wrote Titus he called false teachers "rebellious people" and in Titus 1:16 says, "They claim to know God, but by their actions they deny him. They are detestable, disobedient and unfit for doing anything good."

We have to be just as careful today and depend on the Bible to help us detect error.

*2 Timothy 3:13-15 - ...evildoers and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived. But as for you, **continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.***

DANGER OF YOUR PEDIGREE

*Philippians 3:4-7 - though **I myself have reasons for such confidence**. If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, 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 righteousness based on the law, faultless. But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ.*

A pedigree can be a dangerous thing. One's upbringing or accomplishments could cause a person to rely on themselves too much when it would be wiser to depend on the Lord.

Paul was the model Jew. As he recounts his credentials in these verses, he shows why he could boast in his earthly qualifications. They once meant everything to him, but no longer. When he wrote this, he considered them "loss", not gain, for Christ's sake.

God isn't looking for the impressive background. That's good news if you feel ordinary. If you're not ordinary, though, God isn't interested in your prestigious standing. He is only looking for those who are available to faithfully obey and follow him. The greatness and power to do his will come from him, not from the one following him.

*Jeremiah 9:23, 24 - Thus says the LORD: "Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, **but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the LORD.**"*

When we put our human capacities in the right perspective, we cannot find our ultimate worth in our abilities – one's only rightful boast is in God and his attributes. In politics, pointing to one's skills and record means everything, but to God, those do not make you acceptable. Trusting him in spite of all human accomplishments makes one acceptable.

DOMINATION OF YOUR PRIORITY

*Philippians 3:8-11 - What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, **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 on the basis of faith. **I want to know Christ**—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.*

Do you want more of an idea of how Paul felt about his own righteousness that came from law-keeping? He called it dung, garbage, refuse, worthless. But the righteousness that is available to the one who comes to God on the basis of faith alone is of surpassing worth. Nothing in this world compares to it.

Here is where the two identities are found; all of us fall into one of these two categories. Either we are trying to attain worth and satisfaction by depending on our own self-determination and pride or we are humbly surrendered to God's ways and trusting his perfection to clothe us in his righteousness, knowing our righteousness will never be good enough.

My prayer is that knowing Christ will be a growing priority for me and you through our lives. I pray Paul Simon would find this important truth. That would bring great glory to God, who should be more desirable than anything this world can offer or promise. May we not come to the end of our time on earth having no idea what our purpose is or who we are. The search to find our identity is right in front of us.

In eternity, we will all have to answer to God. Not what family we came from or what party we belonged to or what our accomplishments were – but did we know Christ.