



Acts 21:18-23:35
How Should I Define Myself?

Summary: Christian Identity may include, but always supersedes, every other identity.

One of the biggest problems America faces today involves the issue of identity and tribalism. Who are you, and who do you identify with? Who are “your people?”

All human beings want to belong somewhere, to find identity in a group. And so, we look for people like us and we cluster. If you’re a dancer, hang out with your dance friends. If you’re a pilot, you hang out with your flying buddies. If you like Barcelona and you see someone wearing a Messi jersey in Target, you automatically think better of them because you have something in common.

But the world is also full of people who are not like us, and we have to figure out: how are we supposed to interact with them?

Unfortunately, too often the answer is, we pull back and withdraw into our tribes because it’s easy, it’s comfortable to be with people like me, but the greater the differences between you and me, the harder it is for us to connect and communicate. And so, we look at people outside our group as “others.” They’re different, and that usually means *something* about them, maybe *everything* about them, is worse than my group.

This is how we naturally act. This is what we naturally do, we align with people like us while we degrade and distance ourselves from people who are not like us.

But then Jesus comes along, and He says, you’re supposed to love that person who’s not like you. When you become a Christian, you are adopted by God and placed into His diverse family. So how is that supposed to work out?

That’s one of the big questions we’re going to ask this morning, and we’re going to look at a lengthy passage of Scripture to do it because the passage I’ve chosen helps us see how the apostle Paul navigated the intersection of three separate identities – he was a Jewish, Roman, Christian. This situation caused him problems but also gave him some unique opportunities.

By the time we’re done, I hope you’ll be challenged to think through the order and priority of each of your identities, and you’re encouraged to avoid the dangers of discrimination based on anything other than Christ – as we move through these chapters, pay attention to the violence that groups are willing to use toward outsiders, it’s everywhere.

We begin with Paul and a group of friends arriving in Jerusalem.

Acts 21:18 On the following *day* Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present. 19 When he had greeted them, he told in detail those things which God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. 20 And when they heard *it*, they glorified the Lord.

Paul shows up in town, and goes to the leaders of the church and tell them about his ministry to the Gentiles, that is, people who are not ethnically Jewish. He also brings them a financial gift that has been sent by all the churches he has planted.

And I want you to notice the response – *they're excited* – they glorify God for saving people who are not like them. These leaders of the church in Jerusalem see themselves as Christians first, and they are excited about *anyone* else who joins their team.

But not everyone felt that way. Some Jewish Christians were skeptical because they thought Paul was telling people they didn't have to be Jewish anymore if they became a Christian, that it was one or the other. And this was becoming a major issue, one that is still relevant for us today.

Here's the question. If you are a Christian, can you have any other identity? Can you be a Korean Christian? Can you be an American Christian? Or a Korean-American Christian? What about a black Christian, or a white Christian, or a Chinese Christian? And what does that even mean? Is there such a thing as hyphenated Christianity?

Well, what was Paul teaching? Did *he* believe you could be a Jewish Christian? Let's see:

(20 cont.) And they said to him, "You see, brother, how many myriads of Jews there are who have believed, and they are all zealous for the law;

That is, for their Jewish way of life. They accepted Christ as their Messiah, but kept a kosher diet and other distinctly Jewish traditions:

21 but they have been informed about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, saying that they ought not to circumcise *their* children nor to walk according to the customs.

So again, rumors are circulating that Paul tells Jews who live overseas they don't have to keep the law of Moses, in fact they *shouldn't* do things that made them culturally distinct as Jews, they should just be Christians.

But is that true? Was Paul telling people to give up their culture in order to follow Christ? This is a very important and relevant question today.

And the answer is: yes, and no. Paul told the Jews they could not count on their culture for salvation – keeping a kosher diet won't save your soul - but he never said you have to stop

doing all of the things that make you distinctly Jewish *just because you accept Jesus as the Messiah*.

Paul took a vow himself back in Acts 18, and at some point, he encouraged Timothy who was ethnically Jewish to be circumcised – *for the sake of ministry!* But, he also insisted there was no reason for Titus, who was not Jewish, to do the same thing.

And here's why all of this is important today: it means you and I don't have to give up everything that makes us, us, when we come to Christ. There are some things that need to go, yes, we'll talk more about that later, but there are things that you can, and should, retain. They don't make God love you more, but they display diversity among followers of Christ that actually magnifies His glory, and it all happens, in part, by you remaining distinctly you.

So, the leaders of the church in Jerusalem have an opportunity for Paul to show publically, that he's still pro-Jewish culture even as he demands it's Jesus-only for salvation.

22 What then? The assembly must certainly meet, for they will hear that you have come. 23 Therefore do what we tell you: We have four men who have taken a vow. 24 Take them and be purified with them, and pay their expenses so that they may shave *their* heads, and that all may know that those things of which they were informed concerning you are nothing, but *that* you yourself also walk orderly and keep the law.

These men have taken a Nazirite vow, it's a way for Jews to express gratitude to God for some special blessing they had received – perhaps even a response to their own salvation. But it was expensive - you need to take time off work, you have to pay to have your head shaved, and you make a substantial offering as part of the culmination of the vow.

Most people didn't have the money to do it on their own, but other people could sponsor you and that was seen as an act of piety and participation on their part – kind of like giving money to help someone go on a mission trip. And that is what Paul is being encouraged to do – sponsor these men as they undergo an inherently Jewish activity.

25 But concerning the Gentiles who believe, we have written *and* decided that they should observe no such thing, except that they should keep themselves from *things* offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality.”

They want to be clear, even though they're encouraging Paul to affirm his Jewish culture, it doesn't change, at all, their previous decision that non-Jewish people don't have to take up these Jewish customs.

So, if you're not ethnically Jewish, there's a whole bunch of stuff in the Old Testament that doesn't apply to you. The Bible is really, really, clear about that. You can learn from it, Jesus said He came to fulfill all of it, it's important for you to know, but you're not under

obligation to live by the law. If you want to know more about all of this go back and look at the sermon on Acts 15 where we covered the decision he's referencing here in-depth.

26 Then Paul took the men, and the next day, having been purified with them, entered the temple to announce the expiration of the days of purification, at which time an offering should be made for each one of them.

Paul has been traveling overseas, so he needs to go through a purification process before he can enter the Temple's inner courts – it's like he's under quarantine because he traveled from a state with a high rate of infection of Corona-virus. Once he completes his purification, then he will come in and pay for the offerings made by these men.

Unfortunately, knowing when he will come back provides the perfect opportunity for some enemies to ambush him.

27 Now when the seven days were almost ended, the Jews from Asia, seeing him in the temple, stirred up the whole crowd and laid hands on him, 28 crying out, "Men of Israel, help! This is the man who teaches all *men* everywhere against the people, the law, and this place; and furthermore he also brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place." 29 (For they had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian with him in the city, whom they supposed that Paul had brought into the temple.)

30 And all the city was disturbed; and the people ran together, seized Paul, and dragged him out of the temple; and immediately the doors were shut.

These are likely non-Christian Jews and they're zealous about their unique cultural identity. They've heard about Paul too, he was actually quite well known both before and after he came to Christ. And now they say, he's not only telling people to give up their Jewish identity, he's actually bringing non-Jewish people into the Temple and desecrating it.

Here is where knowing a little historical background will help you. This is world history, stuff you can learn studying classical literature and archeology. The year is 57 AD. You know the Romans are occupying Israel, and much of the region is under the rule of the Roman Empire.

But some Jews are organizing revolutions to throw them out. A group known as the Sicarii is conducting cloak and dagger style assassinations *in broad daylight* against Romans and prominent Jews who sympathize with them. Jewish nationalism is on the rise and in just a few short years it will come to a head in all-out war with Rome.

So, any claim that a Jew is anything but absolutely loyal to his people, seems treasonous and provokes a swift and loud response as we see here.

They drive Paul out of the inner courts of the Temple and lock the doors so there's no violence or bloodshed in the really holy part of the building.

Tell me that's not crazy. Instead calming things down and saving a man's life, they shut the doors and wait for him to be killed. This is what happens when you become overly focused on protecting and defending 'your people' against everyone and everything else.

In fact, if you were not Jewish, you could come to the Temple, but you had to stay in the Outer Courts, also known as the Court of the Gentiles separated by a short stone wall which contained warnings inscribed in Greek and Latin. Archaeologists have actually found remnants, the signs said:



"No foreigner may enter within the barricade which surrounds the temple and enclosure. Anyone who is caught doing so will have himself to blame for his ensuing death."

In other words, this is ours – you stay out! Now, that's not a great plan for evangelism.

But the non-Christian Jews who ran the Temple at this time were not interested in reaching the nations for God, they were all about preserving their own nation and returning to the glory they had experienced under King David and King Solomon, it was all about looking out for their own people.

Meanwhile, Rome was also looking out for it's own people.

31 Now as they were seeking to kill him, news came to the commander of the garrison that all Jerusalem was in an uproar. 32 He immediately took soldiers and centurions, and ran down to them. And when they saw the commander and the soldiers, they stopped beating Paul.



Remember, the Romans occupy Israel. And they have a garrison of around 1000 men stationed in the Antonia Fortress. It was built by Herod the Great on the northwest side of the Temple complex in order to keep peace in the city.

33 Then the commander came near and took him, and commanded *him* to be bound with two chains; and he asked who he was and what he had done. 34 And some among the multitude cried one thing and some another. So when he could not ascertain the truth because of the tumult, he commanded him to be taken into the barracks. 35 When he reached the stairs, he had to be carried by the soldiers because of the violence of the mob. 36 For the multitude of the people followed after, crying out, "Away with him!"

They hate him because they think he's not one of them – he's not Jewish enough.

37 Then as Paul was about to be led into the barracks, he said to the commander, "May I speak to you?" He replied, "Can you speak Greek? 38 Are you not the Egyptian who some time ago stirred up a rebellion and led the four thousand assassins out into the wilderness?"

39 But Paul said, "I am a Jew from Tarsus, in Cilicia, a citizen of no mean city; and I implore you, permit me to speak to the people."

Three years earlier "the Egyptian" led four thousand fanatical Jews up the Mount of Olives, claiming the walls of the city would fall down at his command and they could magically enter the city to reclaim it.

Felix, who we will meet in chapter 24, was governor of Jerusalem at the time and he ordered the Roman army to attack the zealots – four hundred were killed, two hundred were captured, but the Egyptian and the rest escaped. They showed up again a few years later at Masada where they held out against a Roman siege after the fall of Jerusalem.

Paul says, "No. I'm not that guy." I'm from Tarsus, a famous university town. He wasn't a revolutionary, he was an evangelist and he wants a chance to explain that to his fellow countrymen.

40 So when he had given him permission, Paul stood on the stairs and motioned with his hand to the people. And when there was a great silence, he spoke to *them* in the Hebrew language, saying,

Acts 22:1 "Brethren and fathers, hear my defense before you now." 2 And when they heard that he spoke to them in the Hebrew language, they kept all the more silent.

Then he said: 3 "I am indeed a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, taught according to the strictness of our fathers' law, and was zealous toward God as you all are today. 4 I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering into prisons both men and women, 5 as also the high priest bears me witness, and all the council of the elders, from whom I also received letters to the brethren, and went to Damascus to bring in chains even those who were there to Jerusalem to be punished.

Notice how cordial he is to the people who just tried to kill him. He calls them brothers and fathers, and he uses their native language to speak to them. He says:

- I was born abroad, but raised here in the city
- I studied at the feet of Gamaliel, the most widely esteemed rabbi of their day
- I was taught according to the "strict manner of the law"
- I was "zealous for God" like all of you
- I "persecuted this 'Way'" – an early name for Christians

In other words, Paul is making the claim, "I have all the credentials for exclusivity. I'm as Jewish as Jewish gets." But, God did something that changed my life:

6 "Now it happened, as I journeyed and came near Damascus at about noon, suddenly a great light from heaven shone around me. 7 And I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?' 8 So I

answered, 'Who are You, Lord?' And He said to me, 'I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting.'

9 "And those who were with me indeed saw the light and were afraid, but they did not hear the voice of Him who spoke to me. 10 So I said, 'What shall I do, Lord?' And the Lord said to me, 'Arise and go into Damascus, and there you will be told all things which are appointed for you to do.' 11 And since I could not see for the glory of that light, being led by the hand of those who were with me, I came into Damascus.

12 "Then a certain Ananias, a devout man according to the law, having a good testimony with all the Jews who dwelt *there*,

In other words, a good Jewish man.

13 came to me; and he stood and said to me, 'Brother Saul, receive your sight.' And at that same hour I looked up at him. 14 Then he said, 'The God of our fathers has chosen you that you should know His will, and see the Just One, and hear the voice of His mouth. 15 For you will be His witness to all men of what you have seen and heard. 16 And now why are you waiting? Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord.'

17 "Now it happened, when I returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple, that I was in a trance 18 and saw Him saying to me, 'Make haste and get out of Jerusalem quickly, for they will not receive your testimony concerning Me.' 19 So I said, 'Lord, they know that in every synagogue I imprisoned and beat those who believe on You. 20 And when the blood of Your martyr Stephen was shed, I also was standing by consenting to his death, and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him.' 21 Then He said to me, 'Depart, for I will send you far from here to the Gentiles.'"

Interestingly, when Paul shares his experience with Jesus no one really seems to flinch. Jesus probably wasn't such a hot topic anymore, there were tens of thousands who believed in Him in Jerusalem. But, almost all of them were ethnically and culturally Jewish. They had occasional problems with the establishment, but at least they were still considered Jews.

Now Paul claims he was here, in the Jewish Temple, and God told him to go reach out to non-Jewish people? The kind of people the zealots were trying to kill and drive out? No way!

22 And they listened to him until this word, and *then* they raised their voices and said, "Away with such a *fellow* from the earth, for he is not fit to live!"

They're ready to kill him because they think he's a threat to their cause and their culture.

23 Then, as they cried out and tore off *their* clothes and threw dust into the air, 24 the commander ordered him to be brought into the barracks, and said that he

should be examined under scourging, so that he might know why they shouted so against him.

The Romans are ready to torture him to get to the bottom of things, to find out why the Jews are so upset. Everyone is defaulting to violence against the person they view as an outsider. But Paul has a surprise:

25 And as they bound him with thongs, Paul said to the centurion who stood by, "Is it lawful for you to scourge a man who is a Roman, and uncondemned?"

26 When the centurion heard *that*, he went and told the commander, saying, "Take care what you do, for this man is a Roman."

27 Then the commander came and said to him, "Tell me, are you a Roman?" He said, "Yes."

28 The commander answered, "With a large sum I obtained this citizenship." And Paul said, "But I was born *a citizen*."

29 Then immediately those who were about to examine him withdrew from him; and the commander was also afraid after he found out that he was a Roman, and because he had bound him.

Roman culture was a complex and exclusive hierarchy with "citizens" at the top; in order to be a military officer, public official, or hold political office, you must be a citizen. Citizens had rights, privileged legal status protecting them from random arrests and interrogations, and were given access to the courts. Lying about your citizenship was punishable by death.

Everybody wanted to be a citizen, but it was difficult to acquire if you weren't born into the right family. Paul was. The commander wasn't, and that suddenly changes everything because now the commander realizes, *this guy is one of us*.

30 The next day, because he wanted to know for certain why he was accused by the Jews, he released him from *his* bonds, and commanded the chief priests and all their council to appear, and brought Paul down and set him before them.

As the man charged with keeping the peace in the city, he has to know: what was that whole riot yesterday about? So, he tells the Jewish leaders to come together to sort things out.

Acts 23:1 Then Paul, looking earnestly at the council, said, "Men *and* brethren, I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day."

He starts by saying, brothers, I'm like you – I love God.

2 And the high priest Ananias commanded those who stood by him to strike him on the mouth.

Ananias had been appointed high priest in AD 47 and served for 11-12 years. He was known to be pro-Roman, extremely cruel, susceptible to bribery, and greedy - he allowed

his servants to plunder the tithes designated to support the lowest ranking priests. In other words, he lost all sight of the true function of the high priest, which was to be an intercessor for the people.

He was assassinated almost immediately by the Zealots at the outbreak of the civil war against Rome just a few years later.

3 Then Paul said to him, "God will strike you, *you* whitewashed wall! For you sit to judge me according to the law, and do you command me to be struck contrary to the law?"

4 And those who stood by said, "Do you revile God's high priest?"

5 Then Paul said, "I did not know, brethren, that he was the high priest; for it is written, '*You shall not speak evil of a ruler of your people.*'"

For some reason Paul doesn't recognize the high priest, but even though he's been mistreated, he still apologizes for lashing out. And then,

6 But when Paul perceived that one part were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, he cried out in the council, "Men *and* brethren, I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee; concerning the hope and resurrection of the dead I am being judged!"

Paul believes there is life after death, and that your relationship with Jesus determines what that life will look like.

7 And when he had said this, a dissension arose between the Pharisees and the Sadducees; and the assembly was divided. 8 For Sadducees say that there is no resurrection—and no angel or spirit; but the Pharisees confess both. 9 Then there arose a loud outcry. And the scribes of the Pharisees' party arose and protested, saying, "We find no evil in this man; but if a spirit or an angel has spoken to him, let us not fight against God."

10 Now when there arose a great dissension, the commander, fearing lest Paul might be pulled to pieces by them, commanded the soldiers to go down and take him by force from among them, and bring *him* into the barracks.

The commander still has no charges that he can press against Paul, but he obviously can't let him go either, or else another riot will start. So, he keeps Paul in custody.

11 But the following night the Lord stood by him and said, "Be of good cheer, Paul; for as you have testified for Me in Jerusalem, so you must also bear witness at Rome."

12 And when it was day, some of the Jews banded together and bound themselves under an oath, saying that they would neither eat nor drink till they had killed Paul.

Once again, do you see the way people are willing to protect their cultural identity?

13 Now there were more than forty who had formed this conspiracy. 14 They came to the chief priests and elders, and said, "We have bound ourselves under a great oath that we will eat nothing until we have killed Paul. 15 Now you, therefore, together with the council, suggest to the commander that he be brought down to you tomorrow, as though you were going to make further inquiries concerning him; but we are ready to kill him before he comes near."

16 So when Paul's sister's son heard of their ambush, he went and entered the barracks and told Paul. 17 Then Paul called one of the centurions to *him* and said, "Take this young man to the commander, for he has something to tell him." 18 So he took him and brought *him* to the commander and said, "Paul the prisoner called me to *him* and asked *me* to bring this young man to you. He has something to say to you."

19 Then the commander took him by the hand, went aside, and asked privately, "What is it that you have to tell me?"

20 And he said, "The Jews have agreed to ask that you bring Paul down to the council tomorrow, as though they were going to inquire more fully about him.

21 But do not yield to them, for more than forty of them lie in wait for him, men who have bound themselves by an oath that they will neither eat nor drink till they have killed him; and now they are ready, waiting for the promise from you."

22 So the commander let the young man depart, and commanded *him*, "Tell no one that you have revealed these things to me."

23 And he called for two centurions, saying, "Prepare two hundred soldiers, seventy horsemen, and two hundred spearmen to go to Caesarea at the third hour of the night; 24 and provide mounts to set Paul on, and bring *him* safely to Felix the governor." 25 He wrote a letter in the following manner:

26 Claudius Lysias,

To the most excellent governor Felix:

Greetings.

27 This man was seized by the Jews and was about to be killed by them. Coming with the troops I rescued him, having learned that he was a Roman.

He doesn't tell the whole truth here, he kind of makes himself look good by saying look what I did to protect him when I realized he was one of us.

28 And when I wanted to know the reason they accused him, I brought him before their council. 29 I found out that he was accused concerning questions of their law, but had nothing charged against him deserving of death or chains. 30 And when it was told me that the Jews lay in wait for the man, I sent him immediately to you, and also commanded his accusers to state before you the charges against him.

Farewell.

So he punts the problem up to higher headquarters and can breathe a sigh of relief.

31 Then the soldiers, as they were commanded, took Paul and brought *him* by night to Antipatris. 32 The next day they left the horsemen to go on with him, and returned to the barracks. 33 When they came to Caesarea and had delivered the letter to the governor, they also presented Paul to him. 34 And when the governor had read *it*, he asked what province he was from. And when he understood that *he was* from Cilicia, 35 he said, "I will hear you when your accusers also have come." And he commanded him to be kept in Herod's Praetorium.

We've covered a lot of ground this morning, almost like the soldiers delivering Paul. I've pressed us really hard because I wanted us to see this one thing clearly: Both the Jews and the Romans wanted to have an exclusive, members-only, club. And both were willing to use violence against outsiders in order to gain or maintain control and conformity. Only members of the inner group were safe.

Paul had membership, by birth, into both groups.

But he did not value it like they did because he had been received into something even greater: the church of Christ.

And ironically, membership into this greater group is actually given away.

You can belong if you're Jewish or if you're Roman. You can belong if you're Panamanian, Portuguese, Peruvian, or Persian. You can belong if you're single, widowed, divorced, young or old, male or female because *diversity is God's ultimate goal*.

The Great Commission is God's command to tell people all over the world about the gospel and when you read the book of Revelation you see, at least four times, a description of heaven where people from every tribe and nation or people group are gathered to worship God... and somehow you can tell that. Somehow, their differences are preserved. They haven't been culturally assimilated, something of their distinction remains and is evident. Which means there are parts of who you are, that need to stay the way they are.

Friends, diversity is hard. It is much, much, easier to be with people who are just like you.

But we started this morning by reading about the church, and the way the church's Jewish leaders rejoiced when they heard about people who were not Jewish coming to Christ. They didn't insist the newcomers had to become Jewish, nor did they insist that Jewish Christians had to give up their culture.

The church provided a place where everyone could belong, as long as they put Christ first, above every other label and identity.

As a Christian, you can keep many of the unique aspects of your family and cultural background – your way of dress, your manner of speech, your habits and holidays and little

family quirks. As long as it doesn't keep you, or anyone else, from coming to Christ, or growing in Christ, it can stay, but it always, always, belongs, like everything else, in submission to Christ.

Coming together for worship with people who are not like you is going to be hard at times, there will be things that don't feel like home, things that don't feel like you, and each local church has to figure that out, how do we worship in a way that feel authentic to all of us? It won't be easy, but it's possible. In a world that is falling apart, fracturing along tribal lines, church is supposed to be a place where different people can come together and worship the same God.

Let's pray.