

A Re-Centering on God: Our Identity

Context

- The earliest manuscripts of this book do not contain **the location "Ephesus" in verse 1**, and it is strange that a location was left out as the rendering of the original Greek would be "**the saints who are also faithful in Christ Jesus.**" **Therefore, the conclusion is that this letter was sent to churches in Southwestern Asia minor and was linked specific to the Church at Ephesus at a later time**
- However, we must note that Paul wrote Ephesians while in prison, and it was written about the same time along with Colossians and Philemon.
 - **This alone should jolt us, seeing that God could use Paul to pen a letter of such influence, while in prison.**
 - **In addition, we should note the types of things that were on Paul's heart while in prison.**
 - **I say this because this says something about how Paul sees himself, or better still his identity**
- Ephesians, in contrast, was written, it seems **from a place of reflection**. Perhaps after finishing Colossians. This letter comes from a place of deep reflection for a man who knows his time is short, who is currently facing the grim reality of persecution, and one who must have sensed by now that the end is not far off.

- The letter to Colossae was **written as a response to growing heresies in the church**, introducing pagan elements that was elevating principalities and powers within the universe. **This is why Paul stresses the preeminence of Christ in Colossians 1:15-21 for example**
- Most of Ephesians is centered around the **theme of God's work in and for us, his power, our identity and its implications**. One theologian describes Ephesians as:
 - "The Letter was written to encourage Gentile Christians to appreciate the dignity of their calling, with its implications not only for their heavenly origin and destiny, but also for their present conduct on earth, as those who were heirs of God, sealed with the Holy Spirit." - FF Bruce
 - Please note **how much of Ephesians is centered on who we are called to be - namely our identity**
- The point of all of these is to help position our hearts in a place where we are open to what God might say to us

Recap & Intro

- Last week, we started by highlighting the **necessity for repentance, as a way of life, if we are ever to take our growth seriously**.
- Why? Because man is so curved in on himself and is often ignorant of this truth
- The reformer, Martin Luther, helped us with that by saying

- *Our nature [is] so deeply curved in on itself that it not only bends the best gifts of God towards itself and enjoys them...but it also fails to realize that it so wickedly... and viciously seeks all things, even God, for its own sake.*

- And to the reality of this crisis, comes God, deliberating acting for us before the beginning of time.
- We concluded on the truth that God is the primary actor in our lives and he works to one end, and one end only
 - And that is our conformity to his nature
 - This is our purpose; this is our destiny, nothing else will suffice and quite frankly, nothing else is truly worth your time, in light of eternity
- If we do not see ourselves this way, more likely than not, how we live will be different from what God desires for us. Our actions and motives will likely be tainted and what will come out of us will likely be wrong. Perhaps this is why Proverbs 4:23 says
 - **Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life.**
- Our goal today is to rightly see ourselves. In light of who God is, and His love for us. I am praying that we will begin to define ourselves with Christ as our center of reference.
 - And as we begin to do that, we will begin to own who we are, and turn away from being curved in on ourselves and turning to God.
 - This is my prayer and hope as we journey together

Text

- Ephesians 1:1-2
 - **1 Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, To the saints who are in Ephesus, and are faithful in Christ Jesus:**
 - **2 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.**

Our Identity

- So the structure of the message today is to draw out **one main point** from this text, **highlight some implications**, and then **lay out some practical things** we can do.
- Paul kicks off Ephesians by laying out the
 - **The proper worldview for Christians,**
 - **Our place in that world view (basically our identity), pointing to the purpose of God and how God is actively working to that end.**
- Last week, we walked through Eph 1:1-2, and the main point we took away was **God is the primary actor in our lives.**
 - I cannot say this enough as all **we will cover today is predicated upon this truth.** Our identity is not based on what we have acquired or achieved by the sweat of our brows or the strength of our backs.

- And when I speak of identity, I am primarily after
 - The core of who you are
 - The essence of your being
 - The core from which flows how you live
 - How you define yourself - **and this is not best seen from how you answer the question “who am I,” but more so from a composite view of how you live**

- An Apostle of Christ

- **1 Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, To the saints who are in Ephesus, and are faithful in Christ Jesus**

- Right from the start, Paul identifies **both himself and his recipients in lieu of their relationship to God.**
 - He doesn't start by speaking of their status or their accomplishments or their dreams or goals

- Paul summarizes his existence as this: **Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God,**

- Paul is an apostle - this is what he has been commissioned to do - but the **force behind who he is and who he has been called to be is God.**
 - What gives meaning to who Paul is, **is the One to whom he is tethered** - Paul is an apostle **of Christ Jesus by the will of God**
 - **Also note that this wasn't something Paul chose. This wasn't necessarily about his comfort or what he prefers, this was by the deliberate action of God**

- The key point I want to draw from this is that **the weight of Paul's identity is not on the word "apostle," rather it is on the action of God.**

- The Saints and the Faithful Ones

- Like we saw last week, the word saints means "set apart." It doesn't refer to upstanding and pious individuals as such. It doesn't refer to how we've gotten our act together
- Rather, it is first and foremost an identification of **who we are now because of our relationship with Christ.** It illustrates two things
 - Firstly, **it is a privilege indeed to be called and set apart unto God.**
 - This is the basis of our identity. **The love that is shown by God in choosing us and setting us apart for himself.**
 - Secondly, **it speaks to our purpose.** We are **set apart UNTO God** i.e. we are **set apart by God, for God.**
 - His goal becomes our purpose. And out of this flows the holiness, which anytime you see that word, please translate it as conformity to the nature of God.
- By the way, this identification (and read that as Paul defining our identity) is repeated throughout Paul's letters
- In Romans 1:7, Paul says
 - **To all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.**

- From this, you can say our identity is “**Beloved, Called, Saints**”
- In 1 Corinthians 1:2, Paul says
 - **To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints [together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours]**
 - And by the way, this is the same church that in chapter 5, he speaks to a level of immorality that should not even be mentioned amongst unbelievers.
 - Paul **has no illusions about the sexual purity in the corinthian church, yet he starts out by reminding them of their identity - who they are in Christ**
 - To be clear, **Paul is not excusing their behavior or saying it doesn't matter...rather he is reminding them of who they are, casting a vision of sorts, so that they eventually become the good tree that bears good fruit i.e. they actually live holy lives.**
- So let me say this loud and clear, and I do hope you hold to this truth:
 - **Your identity is not, and NEVER based on your level of uprightness or your sins or your struggle with sin**
 - Your identity, if you are amongst those that have put their faith in Christ Jesus (i.e. he is both Savior and Lord) is simply this: **a beloved Child of God**
 - And I get this from our text: **To the saints who are in Ephesus, and are faithful in Christ Jesus**
- **You are a beloved child of God.**

- **You are not your mistakes, even though this doesn't excuse them**
 - You are not even what you do, or what you do repeatedly, as long as you are truly placing your hope in Christ
- **You are not your habits**
- **You are also not your accomplishments or accolades**
- **You are not the pride your parents get from you being a proper child**
- **You are not the acknowledgement and recognition you so crave**
- **You are not your struggles, your idiosyncrasies**
- **You are not the unfortunate things that happened to you**
- **You are not your paycheck and the idea of tying our worth to money, as shown in the term "net worth" is truly demonic**
- In defining ourselves we often fall into two traps
 - One is the trap of **defining ourselves by good and positive things** such as wealth, looks, accomplishments, status, etc.
 - The other is **defining ourselves by the negative things** we have experienced or has happened to us such as mental health struggles, financial hardships, flaws and weaknesses, abuse, molestation, rape, etc
- **Either approach is not sustainable**
 - Per the positive identity trap, we all know life has its high and low points, and when we define ourselves say by career accomplishments, success, the moment

we don't get to whatever goal we set for ourselves, we begin to fall into the negative identity trap.

- Per defining ourselves per bad experiences or weaknesses, it has the consequences of **becoming a self fulfilling prophecy** because we see ourselves **only** in that light.

- **We don't see anything else but ourselves in light of those weaknesses, so we even struggle to realize the truth about our belovedness in Christ Jesus.**

- And these inaccurate views of identity has **massive negative repercussions**, and we see it culminate sometimes when celebrities and people we generally think of as successful, end their lives and live a note about being failures. And we look at that and say how are you a failure given how much you have accomplished.
- What I am **praying you see is that you are made for more.**
 - **God is the primary actor in your life.**
 - **He is actively at work to bring you to himself, if you will have him, and conform you to his image.**
 - And your identity is this: **you are a beloved child of the Most High God**

- In Christ

- **Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, To the saints who are in Ephesus, and are faithful in Christ Jesus:**

- In defining our identity, he uses the word **saints**, which means “Set apart” and the word **“faithful”** denoting our wholehearted belief in Christ and the journey towards Christlikeness. And then he adds the phrase **“In Christ Jesus”**
- Now what does this mean?
 - Paul is not merely alluding to the one we believe in (i.e. Christ being the object of our faith), **he is painting a picture and show that our place is in Christ. The totality of who we are is found in Christ.**
 - He is saying **all of our existence and that which gives us meaning is found “in Him”**
- **Just as a fish is meant to be in water, and birds are meant to be in the air, so our place, where we are best suited to exist, where we get meaning, where the beauty of who we are is best shown is “in Christ.”**
- This concept “in Christ” is so central to Paul’s understanding of the gospel and his inspired perspective of God and our relation to him, that **he uses this phrase or its equivalent about 164 times in his 13 letters in the NT.**
 - In **Ephesians 1:3-14**, where Paul delves into what God has provided for us, Paul **uses the phrase or its equivalent about 10 times**
- Basically the phrase **“In Christ” highlights who we are, and whom we belong to. It captures what God has provided for us, and who we are called to be.**
- The language of “In Christ” expresses the purpose of God for you and me.
 - Remember that we said that God is the primary actor in our lives, and he is deliberately at work to bring us to conformity to his nature

- Said another way, **God is after your union with Christ, your union with the Triune God i.e. you are in Him, and He is in you.**

- This is the summary of Jesus' prayer for his disciples and all those who will come to believe in him (cf John 17, and specifically John 17:20-21).

- What I am driving at here is that **your identity comes from being "in Christ" - and that identity is that you are a beloved child of the Most High.**

- And if so far, you are not convinced about your belovedness, look to the cross. Let that old rugged cross speak to you of God's love for you

- Summary

- In summary, your identity **is that you are a beloved child of the Most High God**
- The essence/goal of calling out our identity, is that it aligns **us to God's purpose for us.**
- **Our identity should serve as a beacon always pulling and pointing us to God, to his purpose for us, which is our transformation into his likeness.**

Implications

- Is Christ Lord of my life?
- If we live and breathe and find our being in him, if our identity is that of a beloved Child of God, then one question we have to ask ourselves is this: **Is Christ truly Lord of my life?**
- While we all want to be forgiven of our sins, we must understand that **there is no true salvation without discipleship**
- The question we have to ask ourselves several times is this
 - **Am I truly living my life as an apprentice of Christ? Am I turning away from being curved in on myself and turning to God**
 - **Does repentance (meaning turning to God) feature consistently in the rhythms of my life?**
- Taking myself as an example, I can come up here and put together a seemingly nice sermon, and quote commentaries, theologians, and some dead puritans, **but it doesn't mean that Christ is Lord of my life**
- What I should be doing is evaluating myself every now and then on where I stand by asking questions such as
 - How much is God's directive, as shown in scripture, is truly embedded in my thinking, and my decision making?
 - How frequently do I subject my desires, comfort, and what I want to God?

- Am I becoming less self sufficient and more God dependent?
- Do I value myself and others more on temporary things such as wealth, societal status, achievements and accomplishments?

- Who am I becoming?

- Generally when you look at how we live, and try to extract our identity from our motives, it usually falls into these buckets - what people say about us, what we have/possess and what we are currently doing.
 - **What people say about us** - which speaks to our need for Acceptance, Recognition, and wanting a stellar Reputation
 - **What we have or possess** - which speaks to our hunger for Comfort, Wealth, Status, and perceived Success
 - **What we are currently doing or engaged in** - which speaks to our want for Significance
- Basically we live our lives under the burden and whip of **Acceptance, Recognition, Reputation, Wealth, Comfort, Status, perceived Success, and Significance**
- And these things, in and of themselves, are **all horrible weights and idols, with no real long lasting satisfaction.**

- In fact **the reward for attaining any one or those burdensome weights, is to want more of it i.e. to get back into the rat race** - meaning you are more bound to these idols.
- When we live according to the aforementioned burdensome idols, our mind is auto tuned to the next rung in the ladder
 - And in secular circles, we try to combat this by saying **“celebrate your victories,”** which is not a bad thing to do. But no matter what or how you celebrate, **you end up getting back on that rat race**
 - And we try to package it as **“I’m back on my hustle”** or **“I am grinding away to get to my goals,”** and yet these goals are usually expressions of our deep seated greed.
- When our goals and motives are tailored around Acceptance, Recognition, Reputation, Wealth, Comfort, Status, Success, and Significance, **it eventually all leads to a profound emptiness**
- Why? **Because we are made for God, and spending all of your life chasing anything less than God is just not enough.**
- In light of eternity, most of all we spend so much energy on is going to fade away, completely. In fact some of them will fade away while you are still alive
 - To be clear, I am not saying that the only way to chase something worthwhile is to be a missionary. Not at all
 - You can be a doctor, a marketing strategist, an engineer, own your business, and still be just as pleasing to God as a pastor or a missionary

- It's more about our heart posture and what we are truly after.
- It was Augustine that said
 - **You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you**
- **What we miss in our misguided pursuit is that we are becoming someone else other than who God has called us to be**
- In **solely pursuing these other goals that are not centered in Christ, we are actually becoming the type of person that cannot be a disciple of Christ.**
- **So let me use an example** to explain this passage. Say I am a young man with a spouse and kids and my 3 pronged goals are to have a great marriage, a great home and a great career. For the sake of the example, let's assume that my goal of having a great career means I attain a SVP or C level position within 7 years or something like that or I am working 60+ hours a week to attain some goal of mine. Let's say my spouse has a similar goal as well
- **If by a great home and a great marriage,** I mean I am not cheating on my wife, we go on 2-3 expensive vacations a year, we take pictures of exotic places, post on instagram and our kids are respectful to neighbors ... then yes we can work crazy hours, have nannies take care of our kids and do the things I just listed above
- But if my identity is a beloved child of God and this should pull me to his purpose for me, which is to be conformed to his image, **is that, truly, what a great home and a great marriage looks like, esp in light of who God has called us to be?**
 - Where is the growth in Christlikeness for my spouse, kids, and myself?

- Where is the wrestling with our brokenness and faithfully walking the scripture with the kids, pointing all of our hearts to the sovereignty and goodness of God?
- Where is the acknowledgement of our sins and the hard work of forgiveness and offering grace?
- What about actually facing our need for God and examining our lives in light of the gospel?
- How can we train up a child in the way he/she should go, if we are not actively walking that path and being intentional about our conformity to Christlikeness?
- In Luke 14:26-27, 33, Jesus says these chilling words
 - **26 "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.**
 - **27 Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple.**
 - **33 So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple.**
- The family unit was basically elevated above all other things in this era and this is why Jesus uses it in the example, so for us today, it's probably our careers and sense of personal fulfillment
- The passage is not saying Christ will prevent you from being his disciple.

- So the scripture is saying that when I do not prefer Christ above these things, when you do not renounce all I have (read as I do not place all beneath Christ), then when the rubber meets the road, you will choose something else over him.
- Relating this back to the example, **when comfort, wealth, recognition, status, perceived success, reputation, etc. are the driving factors of my life, I am becoming someone who cannot be an apprentice of Christ.**
 - Why? **Because I am becoming the type of person that elevates those things above him, incrementally so**
 - I will not renounce these things (**comfort, wealth, recognition, status, perceived success, reputation**) because most of my energy is spent on chasing them
 - Christ cannot be my master because I am not actively making him the priority in my life.
 - **I cannot be His disciple because my way of seeing and living life is framed by the burdensome factors of wealth, comfort, recognition, status, perceived success, reputation, etc.**
- So unfortunately, the more I run after these things, the more I become the type of person who cannot be an apprentice of Christ
 - And this happens incrementally
- Of course, all it takes to revert this process is to truly turn away from being curved in on myself and turn back to Him
 - If we truly turn to him, he can use these very same factors to his glory

- **He will free you from the burden of defining yourself by acceptance, perceived success, recognition, etc., and you come to truly rest your faith in him, not in those things.**
 - **He can advance your career in such a way that you wield influence for his sake, if that is what he wills.** And even **if he doesn't your worth is not determined by such things.** Rather your worth is his very blood that he shed on the cross.
 - **So do not hear me say don't work hard or don't advance your career, but please do count the cost.** And there are times to push hard and push forward in your career and make waves
- In summary, I hope we consider who we are becoming in light of the way we are ordering our lives.
 - Just as we are intentional about our career growth, I hope we become more intentional about our growth in God

● Purpose

- In light of our identity, which is you are a beloved child of God, called to be saints, what then is our purpose?
- In the secular world, we would say look at your talents, and then consider where your talents meets the needs of the world or the community around you, and that junction is your purpose.

- In addition, there is a school of thought that when you find your purpose and you are living in it, you will be fulfilled
 - There are some elements of truth in this but not as much as we think. We must be careful to not reduce how God works to formulas
 - The error with these type of approach are
 - Purpose is about what you do or are doing
 - Purpose in this sense is usually something grandiose
 - Let's use Paul as an example here
 - Background = Born as a jew, roman citizen, spoke a couple languages (Greek, Aramaic, possibly some latin and maybe some hebrew), probably from a middle class family as he was highly educated
 - Talents = gifted speaker, intellectual giant
 - Passions = the law of God, learned under Gamaliel
 - Natural purpose = Be a pharisee
 - What did he end up as = A front runner for a cult like religion and be a tentmaker to support himself. He is beaten more than once, almost living life like a vagabond, with no real 10-15 year goal of his life. He is imprisoned, and rather than using that time to rethink his life, he keeps talking about

this new cult like religion termed Christinaity, and he ends up being killed,
probably had no retirement funds and no good funeral service

- Does this sound like a great purpose statement?

- If we are being honest and if we were to evaluate Paul based on the same
factors we usually evaluate ourselves by, his life seems like a waste

- But we know better - because we see things from the vantage point of eternity,
and more so from the lens of what God considers important

- In Rev 21:14 in describing the new jerusalem, it says And the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.

- This should say a bit about how God views Paul's life

- First of all, purpose is more about who you are becoming and never about what you are doing. Secondly your purpose is simply this:

- **To glorify God and enjoy him forever** or said another way

- **To be conformed to the image/likeness of Christ**

- What you do and your career are outposts or expressions of this purpose. If you have put your faith in Christ, this is your purpose. There is nothing else

Re-centering on God: Simplicity

- So from the implications we have drawn, we have much soul searching to do - a lot of questions to ponder on. In addition to that, what then can we do practically to help us in this fight
- An Eternal Perspective
- On perspective, my hope is that we become people who view and judge things from the lens of the sovereignty of God.
- By this I mean the following
 - Since God is sovereign, we train ourselves, over time, to see every situation we are in as an opportunity to become more Christlike
 - Our decision making must have at its core the sense of who will I start becoming if I take path A as opposed to path B, and vice versa
 - Our definition of success must transcend the secular views such as
 - “living the life you deserve”
 - “being at peace and satisfied in the effort you put in”
 - “being better than what you were yesterday”
 - “progressive realization of your goals and expansion of your happiness”
 - Our definition of success must be centered on his purpose for us i.e. **how am I being conformed to the nature of God**

- Slowing Down

- Last week, we talked about the need to slow down and that is the same application I have for this week
- In his book Celebration of Discipline, Richard Foster writes “In contemporary society, our Adversary majors in three things: **noise, hurry, and crowds**. If he can keep us engaged in “muchness” and “manyness”, he will rest satisfied.”
- Our enemy **majors in distractions so you do not notice how you are becoming something else other than Christ.**
- Without **slowing down and reflecting, you do not see how you are increasingly being curved in on yourself.**
- The solution is to be intentional in our slowing down.
- Many of us are speed addicts, and we have to tackle this addiction to “noise, hurry and crowds,” **with the same intensity an alcoholic tackles his/her addiction**
- So here is the homework - and it is a practice of simplicity. There is more to the matter of simplicity but for today, let us start here:
 - Take out at least 30 minutes every day of this coming week, and be in solitude and silence. By this, I mean find a place where the internal and external distractions in your life is significantly reduced
 - Then consider questions like these

- Looking at the past 12-24 months of my life, what do the following factors say about how I define myself
 - What I spend most of my time on
 - My motivations
 - My goals
- What do the answers to the aforementioned question say about who I am becoming?
- Who am I becoming from the way my life (including time) is currently ordered?
- Pick a scripture like Psalm 139, Eph 1:1-14, John 17, and meditate on it. What does the scripture you pick say about how God sees you?
- Write what comes to mind in a journal and pray as God leads you