

Ephesians Series: Our Identity, God's Plan Eph. 1:1-14 5/3/20

Who are you? When you think about your identity, you might think about things like your occupation- "I'm an educator." "I'm an administrator." "I'm a medical worker." "I'm a business owner." "I'm a student." Or, "I'm retired." You might also think about your gender- "I'm a man." "I'm a woman." Or, "I'm a boy or a girl." You might think of your marital status, your ethnicity, your age, or being a parent or grandparent.

Other parts of your identity were probably formed to a great degree during your childhood, where you heard adults or other kids say things about you: "Boy, is he dumb!" "She has a lot of musical talent." "He is a great athlete." "She will never amount to much." Or, "His ears are too big!" We easily internalize those early assessments of ourselves and they become part of our identity. And our identity shapes a lot of our actions and reactions as adults! So, who are you, really?

This morning we begin a series of sermons from the book of Ephesians, a letter written by the Apostle Paul to an early Christian church. We encourage you to read through the 6-chapter letter each week during the series, by reading a chapter each day! If you do that, you'll have a pretty good grasp of this whole book by the time we finish up in June!

In the first chapter, in the midst of an exclamation of praise about God's good work, Paul lists several parts of our identity that you may not

have thought of! They are potentially life-changing! Listen for them as I read, beginning in chapter 1, verse 1 of Ephesians.

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

³Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, ⁴just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. ⁵He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, ⁶to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. ⁷In him we have redemption through his blood, (and) the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace ⁸that he lavished on us. (Eph. 1:1-8a)

Paul is very excited about God's work in the world, and specifically God's work in us through Jesus Christ. Let's look at a few of the ways Paul talks about how that work impacts our identity.

³Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, ⁴just as he

chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. (Eph. 1:3-4)

In verse 4, Paul says that we are chosen, chosen before the foundation of the world! When I was a kid, we played a lot of baseball and football in my neighborhood. We would pick team captains, and then the captains would alternate choosing kids for their teams. I was usually the smallest kid there for my age, but I could play! Unfortunately, because of my size, I was rarely chosen first or second, but rather somewhere toward the middle or end. And so waiting to be chosen was an uncomfortable time for me!

But here in Ephesians, the whole point of God choosing us is that it has nothing to do with our size or intellect or talent or beauty or hard work or even our good deeds! As we'll see later in the passage, it's all based on God's grace- his undeserved favor! And the fact that we've been chosen by God, for God's own purposes, means that we can't mess it up! It gives us a sense of security. We can rest in the fact that we've been chosen by God! Now, that's not the end of it. We have a part to play, too. We choose to follow God. But it begins with God choosing us. We are chosen! Therefore, we have value and purpose!

Next, Paul says that we are holy. Uh oh! What is that about? The word “holy” in the Bible simply means that we are set apart. For example, the priests in the Old Testament were set apart for God’s service. The furniture and furnishings in the temple were holy- set apart for God’s service. God has chosen you for a purpose. There is work that God has for you (and only you) to do, and you have been set apart to do that work. In that sense, you are holy!

And you’re blameless. Now before you get too big-headed about being blameless, remember that this word “blameless” is the same word used in the Old Testament for the animals that were offered as sacrifices to God! They were to be the very best- “without blemish.” Because of what God has done for you in Jesus Christ, you now stand before God with all your sin removed! In God’s eyes, you are blameless!

Chosen, holy, and blameless. Not a bad start to a solid identity! But there’s more! ⁵*He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will,* ⁶*to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.* (Eph. 1:5-6) You are adopted. In Paul’s day human life was cheap. Torturous capital punishment was widespread. Slaves could be killed by their masters without consequence. And infants were often abandoned to the elements when they were deformed or sick or the wrong gender. Sometimes these

abandoned children were found by others, who took them into their own homes. And eventually, they might be adopted into those families or other families. There was a lengthy ritual for adoption, and at the end of it, the child received the family name, and was given all the rights and privileges of the biological children. It was a wonderful thing to go from being unwanted and abandoned to being a beloved son or daughter!

That practice of adoption lies behind Paul's description of us as adopted. We are now God's children, with the full rights and privileges that go with that! You are a son or daughter of God.

Let's keep going. ⁷*In him we have redemption through his blood, (and) the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace* ⁸*that he lavished on us.* (Eph. 1:7-8a) Paul says that we are redeemed. That's a rich word in the Bible. It includes the idea that we have been bought, as slaves were bought or redeemed. Paul says the price for our redemption is the blood of Christ, so it was costly, wasn't it? And redemption also involves being transformed or changed.

England's Winchester Cathedral was begun in 1079 and completed several centuries later. It had beautiful stained glass windows, showing typical scenes from the Bible and Christian history. In the 17th century, Oliver Cromwell's army destroyed many of those windows and the interior

of the cathedral during the English Civil War. After the hostilities had ended, local people gathered up shards of glass from the window and stored them. Years later, a cathedral worker offered to re-assemble the window. But he knew it would be hopeless to try and re-create the original window. Instead he created an abstract collage, using pieces from the original windows, a gorgeous design that can still be seen today! (SLIDE) He managed to create beauty out of brokenness. That's what redemption means. God takes us with all our brokenness and creates beauty out of our broken lives. You are redeemed!

Let's finish. Lastly, we are forgiven! That means that our sins are no longer held against us by God, so that we have the opportunity for a new relationship with him. Our sins are forgiven! They are gone! We remind ourselves of that most Sundays, when we hear the words of the Assurance of Pardon after the Prayer of Confession. "In Jesus Christ we are forgiven! Thanks be to God!"

In addition to being made right with God, being forgiven means we can let go of the guilt feelings we carry around. And some of us have carried them around for decades! But, if the offenses we have committed have been forgiven, then they no longer exist, so why carry them around anymore? The price for them has already been paid, so we don't need to pay for them any longer. That doesn't mean we don't need to ask

forgiveness from those we've harmed and make amends where we can. We should do that. But we no longer need to be burdened with guilt. We are free to set down its load.

OK. Let's see what we've got. According to Paul, you are chosen, holy, blameless, adopted, redeemed, and forgiven! That's a pretty great foundation for an identity, isn't it?

A few years ago, the Associated Press ran a moving story about a name-changing ceremony for girls in Mumbai, India. At birth all 285 girls had been named Nakusa or Nakushi, which means "unwanted" in Hindi. This name is widely given to girls across India where families often value sons more than daughters. Female babies are aborted or neglected at an alarming rate.

Can you imagine going through life with the name "Unwanted?" What would that do to your sense of self, to your confidence, to any hope for the future? What a burden to carry! The renaming ceremony was an attempt to give the girls a new identity.

"The 285 girls- wearing their best outfits with barrettes, braids and bows in their hair- lined up to receive certificates with their new names along with small flower bouquets." The girls chose new names that meant "prosperous" or "beautiful" or "good" or even "tough!" New names. New

identities. One can only imagine the difference it made for a girl to be called “Beautiful” or “Good” by her teachers and classmates instead of “Unwanted.”

Brothers and sisters. You have been given a new name and identity in Christ. No longer “failure” or “sinner” or “deadbeat” or “dumb” or “unattractive” or whatever it is for you. No! Now you are called chosen, holy, blameless, adopted, redeemed, and forgiven! Continually remind yourself of this new identity so you can internalize it. And then go and live like it!