

“LEARNING YOUR TRUE IDENTITY & PURPOSE” **(Ephesians 1:4-6)**

This morning I want to talk to you about learning your true identity and purpose. Identity has become an increasingly popular subject in recent years as people seek to discover who they really are and why they are here. Our identity is driven, in large part, by our basic human needs to feel valued and wanted and accepted and included – and throughout the course of life our identity changes and fluctuates. When I was in grade school I was on the chubby side, and although I don’t remember being teased about it, I was aware that I looked different than the other kids, and as I look back now, I’m sure that was a big part of my identity. Somewhere along the line I went through a growth spurt and suddenly I wasn’t chubby anymore. In my new body I discovered I was good at basketball and basketball became my identity throughout much of high school.

We base our identity in any number of things – in our abilities, in our accomplishment, in our appearance, in our job, in our hobby, in our politics – yet all of these identities are temporary and subject to change – they are not the core of who we really are. When all these things are stripped away, what is my true identity?

In Rick Warren’s popular *Purpose Driven Life* book, his opening statement is: Life is not about you – it’s about God and His plan and purpose for your life. Once you understand who you are from God’s viewpoint, life takes on a whole new meaning and purpose – and our identity and purpose as a Christian is no better laid out than in our passage today in Ephesians 1, and the key phrase that defines our identity is the little phrase “in Christ.” All other forms of identity become secondary to being in Christ. Paul puts it this way in Galatians 3:27-28... “For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” Once you understand your true identity in Christ, all other identities fall to the side, and everything in life is viewed through the lens of being in Christ.

Many Christians live as though their identity is simply being saved – you’re saved, you’re on your way to heaven, but between now and heaven nothing much changes. But the Bible says that in Christ you are a brand-new creation – a radical transformation has taken place, and you have a whole new purpose for living. All of this rooted in your identity in Christ.

Last week we began a study of the great book of Ephesians, and we saw that the book is divided into two sections – chapters 1-3 describe who we are in Christ, and chapters 4-6 talk about how we are to live in light of who we are. It’s all about identity. In verse 3 Paul sets the theme for the book when he says... “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.” Through the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ we as believers have been given every spiritual blessing we need to thrive and prosper in the new life to which we’ve been called.

In verses 4-14 Paul begins to describe our spiritual blessings and gets so caught up in the wonder of all we’ve been given that he doesn’t stop to take a breath – verses 4-14 in the original Greek language are actually one long sentence without a period. For the next three weeks I want to slowly ponder these verses with you – to rush through them would miss the depth and width of all there is to learn.

Verses 4-14 can be divided into three sections, each describing the spiritual blessings that come from each person of the trinity. Today we'll look at verses 4-6 to see our blessings from God, next week we'll look at our blessings from the Son in verses 7-10, and then the following week our blessings from the Holy Spirit in verses 11-14.

Let's begin by reading verses 4-6... "For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves."

These three verses are loaded with deep, profound truth, and answer two of life's basic questions: Who am I and why am I here? Paul describes two things that mark our identity in Christ – we are chosen to be saved and we are adopted into God's family. He then describes two purposes for which we are chosen and adopted.

The first mark of our identity is that **we are chosen**. Verse 4, "*For he chose us in him.*" Our identity as believers begins with God choosing us to be saved. When I think of being chosen, I automatically think of how we chose teams on the playground growing up. Remember that? Usually, the two best athletes would be the captains and they'd take turns choosing people to be on their team. Garrison Keillor, the great storyteller, recounts his experience of this choosing process: "The captains are down to their last grudging choices: a slow kid for catcher, someone to stick out in right field where nobody hits it. They choose the last ones two at a time – 'you and you' – because it makes no difference. And the remaining kids – the scrubs, the excess – they deal for us as handicaps. 'If I take him, then you gotta take him,' they say. Sometimes I go as high as sixth, usually lower. But just once I'd like Darrel to pick me first and say, 'Him! I want him! The skinny kid with the glasses and the black shoes. You, c'mon!' But I've never been chosen with much enthusiasm."

We naturally assume that God chooses people the same way – He scans the universe looking for the brightest and best – the cream of the crop – people who have the most to offer – but the Bible says that God delights in taking the least likely person and saying, "I choose you." God chose you not because you deserved to be chosen – He chose you because He wanted to. Ephesians 2:8 says... "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God."

It's important to see that God initiates salvation – I don't choose Him, He chooses me. This is seen throughout the Bible in the way God chose people to serve Him. God chose Abraham. Abraham did not wake up one day and say, "Lord, I have a great idea to save the world. I will start building a nation and we'll show the world what it means to be right with you." Abraham was living a pagan life when God chose him to receive His covenant promises and bless the world through the coming of the Messiah. Moses didn't volunteer to lead God's people out of Israel – God chose him. God chose David, the youngest and least likely of all his brothers to become king.

In each case of calling someone to service, God took the initiative, so it should come as no surprise that God takes the initiative in choosing people to be saved. Paul will describe in Ephesians 2 how before Christ we were dead in our trespasses and sins, we followed the fleshly desires of this world, and deserved God's judgment – but God, in His grace and mercy, saved us and made us alive in Christ.

All this communicates that you are incredibly valuable to God – He loved you in spite of your sin and failure, and took the initiative to save you and make you a part of His family. Your value is not derived from the temporary, fleeting things of this world, but in the fact that God loves you and rescued you from eternal damnation to you His own. God picked you with enthusiasm. Your identity begins with the fact that you are chosen by God.

Our value is further declared by the next phrase describing when God chose us – “God chose us in him before the creation of the world.” This reinforces the idea that God’s choosing us was His initiative and His determination – He made His decision before we were ever born – which obviously means that we had nothing to do with it. Every blessing that we have comes purely from God’s grace.

Psalms 139 declares that God knew all about you before He knit you together in your mother’s womb. God told Jeremiah, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations” (Jeremiah 1:5). God has a plan and purpose for each person He chooses, which adds incredible value to life – we’re not just a conglomeration of cells, but are divinely created and designed for a purpose which Paul will talk more about in 2:10 where he says we are created for good works “which God prepared in advance for us to do.”

The idea of God choosing us makes some people uncomfortable because it brings up a number of questions. One question is: “Does God choosing some people mean that He intentionally doesn’t choose other people?” But the Bible never teaches that. It teaches that it is God’s desire that every person be saved. Peter says, “God is not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9). Rather than asking, “Why doesn’t God save everyone?” a better question is, “Why does He save anyone at all?” None of us deserve salvation, yet in His grace gives us what we don’t deserve.

God wants everybody to be saved, but He knows that not everyone will. Instead of making us robots, the Bible teaches that God gives us free will to accept or reject Him. This leads to another question: “How we have a free will if God chooses us?” Christians have debated this very question for 2000 years, and it will be debated until Jesus comes again.

Charles Ryrie, the great Bible scholar who wrote the Ryrie Study Bible, discussed this very question in one of his theology classes in seminary. He took out His Bible and for 30 minutes read every verse and passage that talked about God’s sovereign choice of believers. After reading these verses, the class was left with no option but that our salvation requires nothing on our part – it is all of God and we have no free will.

Then Professor Ryrie took his Bible and for the next 30 minutes read every verse and passage that talks about free will and our responsibility to believe in Christ. The conclusion that every honest Bible student comes to is that both God’s sovereign choosing and man’s free will is taught in the Bible – and this side of heaven we will never be able to fully explain how this can be so.

What helps me personally is the fact that God alone knows who is chosen – I don’t – and since I don’t know, I teach and preach free will – that you must decide to trust Christ. This is why Jesus commanded us to go into all the world and preach the gospel. Since I don’t know who is chosen and who isn’t, I just keep sharing the gospel. D.L. Moody summed it up best when he prayed, “Lord, save the chosen, and then choose some more.” Our job is not to guess who is chosen, but to proclaim the good news of salvation in Christ to everyone.

Harry Ironside, a great preacher of yesteryear, put it this way, “On this side of eternity, the gates of heaven have a sign which says ‘Whosoever will may come.’ Jesus invites everyone to come to faith in Him. Once we reach heaven, we will see things from God’s perspective and a sign of the other side of the gate will read ‘Chosen in Christ before the foundation of the earth.’ And we will marvel that God had His heart fixed on me before the world came into being.”

I think Ironside nailed it perfectly. This side of heaven, not knowing whom God has chosen, we must keep our focus on “Whosoever will may come.” That’s our emphasis. The fact that God chose us is not meant to confuse us, but to comfort us and to demonstrate the awesome depth of God’s love for us. Rather than try to figure it all out, we simply need to fall to our knees in worship.

Next, in verse 4 we see **the purpose for which God chose us**... “For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight.” God has a very definite purpose in mind for those He chooses, and this is that we might be to be holy and blameless in His sight. God takes us where we are – unholy sinners separated from Him – and He begins a life-long process of transforming us so that one day in heaven we will be presented to God as holy and blameless.

The word “holy” means “set apart, different, and distinct.” When God called Israel, He said, “I’m setting you apart as a holy nation so that other nations will notice that you’re different and be drawn to me.” In the same way God chooses us to be different and stand out from the world in the way we live, the way we talk, the way we treat people – so that people will see that there’s something supernatural about our lives and reach no other conclusion but that it is God working in us.

He also chooses us to be “blameless,” which means “without blemish.” When the Israelites in the Old Testament brought their sacrifices to the temple, their animals had to be without blemish or defect. Ephesians 5:27 says that Christ gave Himself up for the church “to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless” (Ephesians 5:27).

Becoming holy and blameless is a process called “sanctification” that begins the moment we are saved and is completed the day we stand before God in heaven. The Bible talks about three stages of sanctification. The first is *positional sanctification*, which means that the moment we are saved and “in Christ,” God looks at us as though we had never sinned. Because Christ is holy and blameless – and because He is the pure lamb of God without spot or blemish – when we are in Christ God sees us as holy and blameless and without blemish.

The second stage is *progressive sanctification*, which means that this side of heaven, we are in the process of becoming more and more holy and set apart to God. Whereas before salvation we were slaves to sin, we now have power over sin. We will never be free from sin until the Lord comes, but through His power we will sin less and less. As we walk with the Lord, our desire to sin decreases and is replaced by a desire to be holy. Every true Christian, while not perfect, will change over time. When God saves us, He accepts us just as we are, but He expects that we won’t stay as we are – but be transformed each day to look more and more like Christ and reflect Him to the world.

The third and final stage is *complete sanctification*, when we stand before God the Father in heaven and are presented to Him by Christ as perfectly holy and without blemish – and God saw all of this taking place before the creation of the world.

In verse 5 Paul describes a second mark of our identity as believers – **we are adopted**... “He predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will.” God not only chooses us to be saved, but He makes us a part of His family and He does that through adoption. Paul says, “He predestined us for adoption.” Predestination means that God determined ahead of time that certain things would occur, and here it says that God predestined us – those He chose – to be adopted as His sons through Jesus.

Adoption is the act by which a child is legally made the child of parents with whom they share no natural relationship. God does the same thing when He places us into His family. John 1:12 says, “Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.” The Bible says that we are born into the family of Adam and are sinners by nature. But upon receiving Christ, as John 1:12 says, we are born again and placed into God’s family by adoption.

Notice verse 5 says that He adopted us “in accordance with His pleasure and will.” Paul just can’t get over the fact that God chose and adopted us out of sheer delight and pleasure – He didn’t have to do anything – He did it because He wanted to.

Being adopted means into God’s family that we enjoy some amazing privileges. First, it means that **we enjoy a close, intimate relationship with our Heavenly Father**. God is not some distant being far removed from us, but is near to us. Galatians 4:6 says, “Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, “Abba, Father.”” Once adopted, God sends the Holy Spirit to live in our hearts so that we can feel and experience His presence.

The Spirit leads us to cry out “Abba, Father.” “Abba” was the word used of a small child who enjoyed a close, loving relationship with their father, and would call him “Abba,” meaning “daddy.” In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus called God the Father “Abba.” As God’s adopted children we enjoy the tender love of our Heavenly Father who is attentive to our daily needs, who protects us from harm, and who is attentive to our prayers. He invites us to approach His throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

But there’s more... as God’s adopted **children we enjoy all the rights and privileges of being in God’s family**. Galatians 4:7 says, “So you are no longer a slave, but God’s child; and since you are his child, God has made you also an heir.” In the Roman culture Paul’s day, if a wealthy man did not have children, he would sometimes adopt one of his slaves, and his slave – who possessed nothing – would instantly become heir to the entire estate of his master. In the same way, Paul says, as God’s adopted children, we get everything He has – we get full, abundant life in this world, and we get eternal life in the next.

But there’s more... as God’s adopted children **we enjoy the fellowship of fellow brothers and sisters in Christ**. One thing you’ll notice throughout the book of Ephesians is the word “us.” God chooses and adopts people of every background, race, and gender and incorporates them into His family. Whenever I’m traveling somewhere and meet a fellow believer, there’s an instant connection. I may not know them from Adam, but I’m related to them in Christ – we share the same salvation, the same spiritual identity, the same common purpose, and the same destination.

God did not choose and adopt us to live the Christian life in isolation – He designed for us to live out the Christian life together as brothers and sisters in Christ. There are no Lone Ranger Christians. Church is not optional, but vital to our identity – and the Bible exhorts us to continue meeting together, loving and supporting and encouraging one another until the Lord comes again.

In verse 6 Paul states the purpose of our adoption into God's family – and that **purpose is to praise God's glory**... “In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves” (5-6).

God's goal in choosing us and adopting us is so that we might worship Him and praise Him for His glorious grace. Grace is a rich word that means God's love and mercy bestowed upon those who are unworthy and undeserving. In His grace, God is willing to forgive us and bless us abundantly, in spite of the fact that we don't deserve to be treated so well or dealt with so generously. Once we understand who we were without Christ and who we become with Christ, the most natural thing in the world is to worship and praise God.

God created us to be worshippers, and if we don't worship God, we will worship something else. Worship is hard-wired in us, and we long to praise people and things. You go to Hawaii and say, “That was awesome – the weather, the beach – it was paradise.” Or you praise an object, “You should see the truck my neighbor just bought,” and you describe all the details. We also lavish praise on people, “You should hear this guy sing... you should see this movie – it will blow your mind... this quarterback is the best I've ever seen...” We are created to worship.

Who better to worship than the God of the universe who gave you breath, the one who created Hawaii, created those who designed and built trucks and who wrote books and produced movies? Who better to worship than the one who chose you out of the mass of humanity to be saved and who adopted you into His eternal family out of His pleasure and will? How can we not but worship?

Worship not only gives God the glory He deserves, but God designed worship to *bless us*. He knows that true satisfaction and joy comes from being rightly related to Him, and by knowing who He is and who we are. Worshipping created being and created things eventually leaves our souls empty because they were never designed to be worshipped. God wants us to be truly satisfied and happy, and when we worship our souls are filled with wonder and gratitude – and we fulfill the purpose for which God chose us and adopted us into His family.

Queen Victoria ruled over England from 1839-1901, and when she was a young girl, her parents kept her from knowing that she would one day rule over England. One day her teacher inadvertently let it slip that she would one day be queen, she after the news soaked in a bit, she told her teacher, “From now on I will be good!” From that point on, no matter where she went or what she did, Victoria was governed by the fact that she would one day sit upon the throne of England, and the knowledge of her identity and destiny gave her life purpose and meaning.

That's what this passage is meant to do. Our identity is wrapped up in the truth that life is not about me – it's about God. And out of love and mercy, God chose me to be holy and blameless in Christ, and adopted me into His family so that I might praise Him for all eternity. Once I know your identity and purpose, life takes on a whole new meaning – I know who I am and why I'm here – and every day reflects my identity and purpose.