“Who We Are in Christ”
Colossians 1:1-2

Last week we kicked off this new series in the book of Colossians by going back and doing a sermon from 1984. Even though the illustrations were not updated, it sure did seem very applicable to today! I did look up how much Scientology people are expected to pay for their classes now – the intro ones cost only $35 but according to those who have come out, don’t expect to pay less than $1/4 million minimum for your enlightenment through books, classes and audits which are $800 an hour. That particular sermon had 7 main points but no sub-points. I said that was not the usual back then but something that continues to happen naturally once or twice a year. So you can imagine my laughter this week when I sketched out 7 main points and no sub-points for our message today. It just happened and there was attempt to do it!

The book of Colossians is a letter, written by the apostle Paul while he was in jail, to the church in the city of Colossae. The letter was also to be shared with the church at Laodicea. Paul had not started either the church at Laodicea or Colossae, nor had he visited either city. The church at Colossae was started by Epaphras who came to faith under Paul and is first introduced to us in Colossians 1:7. Naturally Epaphras shared with Paul some of the difficulties that were afflicting the new church, especially some false Christian teachers who were pushing deceptive teaching. These people claimed to have special hidden knowledge. They considered the Colossian Christians to be simple and not yet enlightened like they were. So they offered a different, or changed, gospel with worship of angels and special rules & ceremonies people had to do. We’ll talk about the exact nature of this deception and what it looks in a future summer.

But what we want to recognize is that the people in these churches were starting to face a danger much worse than the outward opposition of society. The deception was magnified because the Colossian Christians **didn’t consider themselves significant just in Jesus.** Most likely, they came out of poor and uneducated classes BEFORE they came to faith & societal scorn now grew worse. Now, some people IN the church who they naturally looked up to are also telling them that they don’t measure up, they aren’t getting God’s fullest blessing and they really need something more in their lives – something these false Christian teachers claim they have personally found. **Was this the quick way to an easier life?** This is the same temptation satan offered to Jesus – just bow down to me and all the Kingdoms of this world will be yours – no having to go to the cross, confront opposition, and forfeit your rights. **Who doesn’t want an easier life now? Who are they to argue with those who seem to be doing better than they are?** All their life they were reminded that they are just simple, uneducated people. Maybe this new teaching and religious actions are what they need to be considered wise, educated and looked up to. Interestingly God doesn’t have Paul immediately attack the problem. Instead, He has Paul begin by celebrating what they are doing right. In a similar way today, if you are feeling an unease about what is happening around – whether in the world, our nation, your job, life or relationships – **just focusing on the problem will not give you the insight and wisdom from God that you desire.** It is through seeing God’s greatness and what He is doing in our lives that helps us see who we really are in Jesus. Let’s look into who we are in Christ!
READ v 1-2. These verses are just the greeting part of a letter at that time: **who it is from, who it is to and an initial greeting.** We’ve touched on a number of the themes here recently, especially as we tackled a similar introduction to the book of 2 Peter. So today we are going to focus on 7 privileges we have when we follow Jesus as our Savior and Lord. These privileges give us a unique identity – they show us who we are in Christ. **So let these privileges encourage you and give you greater strength in overcoming the specific challenges in your own life.**

PROPOSITION: Every true believer has these 7 privileges from God when they genuinely follow Jesus as their Lord and Savior which show us who we are in Christ.

I. **God’s people**

The first privilege we have in Jesus is that we are now a part of **“God’s people”**. READ v 1-2a. As v 2 starts, all those in the Colossian church are called **“God’s holy people”**. So we can confidently say, all true believers in Jesus Christ are **“God’s people”**! God has chosen us to be on His team, not because we are more worthy or more committed than others, but because we have humbled ourselves and desire to follow the one true God of this universe. We will mess up, wander away and complain at times – we won’t know all the answers now or have wealth, popularity, health or an easy life now. But we are on God’s team – we are God’s people – and that comes because of what Jesus did by dying on the cross to pay the penalty of our sin, God doesn’t give up on us. He has adopted us as His children.

Do you regularly marvel in the fact that YOU are one of God’s people? That means God is watching over us. We aren’t just protected when we pray for protection or when we do some spiritual thing, but Jesus protects and watches over us all the time simply because we are His people! As God’s people, Jesus is directing us to live a worthwhile life in light of eternity. It is not just pastors, popular, knowledgeable or rich people that God uses in significant ways – but all of His people. Jesus is constantly directing all of us to make more out of our lives than we could do on our own. Being one of God’s people gives us a higher status, privilege and acceptance than any earthly award or achievement. Rejoice – because you can never be “a nobody” if you are following Jesus in faith!

II. **We are holy**

The second privilege we have in Jesus is that God has declared us **“holy”**. READ v 2a. The Colossians are **“God’s holy people”**. Remember when Paul calls the Colossians **“holy”** here, when he has never personally met them! Holiness is a privilege God gives us, not an attitude of superiority we get by comparing ourselves to others. The word **holy** includes both the privilege of being set apart for God’s great purposes as well as being totally righteous. But our actions thoughts, actions and words aren’t always holy! So how can God call us **“holy”** or what some of your translations say **“saints”**? Because God looks at us by what we will become rather than what we are now or what we were before! God does that by placing Jesus’ righteousness on us as we put our lives in Jesus’ hands! Simply coming to Jesus in humble faith is giving the Holy Spirit permission to work in each of our lives to develop more “Christ-like” attitudes, perspectives, desires and actions. And that doesn’t come from a life of ease, popularity or riches as Hollywood & sports stars regularly show us.
Some of the most profound thanks you will hear from someone is “Thank you for believing in me when I didn’t.” That refers to times when we persevered, sacrificed, helped & guided another so they could do and be more than they imagined. Do you realize that when God looks at us in our “unholiness” and calls us “holy” or “saints”, He is seeing the profound transformation He will complete in us through Jesus! Wow!

III. We are God’s ambassadors where we live “in Colossae” 2 Cor 5:17-21

The third privilege we have in Jesus is that God is going to use us in an eternal way right where we live. READ v 1-2a. They are God’s holy people specifically in Colossae – a city that has been declining in importance for years – but is where they live and work. One would think a person would need to go to a bigger, faster-growing, significant city if they really wanted to do something significant for Jesus. We can easily be tempted to think similar things today. But God has called us to be His holy people right where we are now – a family that doesn’t appreciate us, a job where we have the least significant, a town or school where we are hardly known. None of these slows God down because He is God – Almighty, All-powerful, All-knowledgeable. Isn’t that an incredible thought – we don’t have to be famous, spectacular, or better than others for God to use us in an eternally significant way right where we are today! In other words we do not need to find significance somewhere else, but God will make our lives eternally significant right where we are as we humbly obey and serve Jesus!

Turn back in your Bibles to 2 Corinthians 5. One way to picture the awesomeness of this is to picture an ambassador. An ambassador is a person who represents their home country (or organization) in another place. The ambassador’s value and standing doesn’t primarily come from what they have personally achieved but it mainly comes from the country they represent. READ 2 Corinthians 5:17-21. You and I are each God’s ambassador right where we are. God wants us to share the good news of Jesus (through our words, actions and life) to those people who we are around. God is speaking through us – we are just His spokespeople, His ambassadors. Our past wrongs don’t disqualify us nor does our reputation, finances, intellect, schooling, or abilities hinder God’s work. Imagine God has appointed each of us as His ambassador RIGHT WHERE WE LIVE NOW – what job we are at, what school we go to, what activities we are a part of, what neighborhood we live in and what extended family we were born or adopted into. God uses each of us in a unique way right where we are now.

Paul understood this incredible privilege and it is reflected in v 1, turn back to Colossians 1:1. Paul considers it a special privilege to be called by God as an apostle of Christ Jesus. Not because it makes Paul higher than others, but simply because it is what God has done – Paul wasn’t with Jesus for 3 years, he didn’t go to a special apostles school nor did people elect him to that position. In fact, here in v 1, Paul considers Timothy equal to him and Timothy is simply described as a fellow Christian – “our brother”. Everyone of us in this room have been called by God – we’ve been called to “Christians” – followers of Jesus who are ambassadors right where we are right now! We are God’s holy people representing Him right here in Central Vermont! God’s so powerful He uses us more than we can see.
IV. We are a spiritual family of siblings

The fourth privilege we have in Jesus is that we are in a spiritual family of siblings — "brothers and sisters." READ v 2a. Paul describes those in the Colossians Church as "brothers and sisters" in the spiritual family of God. We were not born into the same family or ethnicity but we have all been adopted into God's family through Jesus Christ. Now some of your translations just have "brothers" here. Saying "brothers and sisters" is not some compromise to culture, but is rightly bringing out the intended meaning of the Greek word adelphoi. Not only was this word used for both brothers and sisters, but it was also widely used to describe relationships in the ancient world that had nothing to do with biological families! Various groups in the ancient world used this word to stress the intimacy of relationship within these associations. Members of a group called one another adelphos as a way of indicating that the association was a "second home."

As "brothers and sisters", we are all on the same level in the family even though we will all be different in personality, maturity, responsibility and age. No one gets to choose their brothers and sisters biologically. But every society recognizes the privilege and responsibility of being brothers and sisters. Novels and soap operas are full of examples of brothers and sister who fight with each other, but then come together in crisis to help each other out. It doesn't matter how mature, famous or rich a Christian is, we are still on the same plane in God's eyes. In Jesus, we have the privilege of never being alone, even though we can feel that way sometimes.

V. Our faithfulness is noticed and rewarded

The fifth privilege we have in Jesus is that our faithfulness is noticed and rewarded. This is the opposite of the 4 items I have already mentioned which all come from God – here the recognition and appreciation comes from God. Notice in v 1 that "the faithful brothers and sisters in Christ". While calling his readers "holy" is typical for Paul, addressing them as "faithful" is not. This faithfulness is something positive they have done which God has noticed and will reward abundantly. Paul chooses this unusual word to remind his readers of their need to continue to maintain that allegiance to the gospel message they have been taught (1:5–7; 2:6) despite the opposition they face on the outside and now the false teaching from some within the church. God is a debtor to no one. There isn't anything positive we genuinely do for Jesus that will not be rewarded!

VI. We have a personal relationship with Jesus

The sixth privilege we have in Jesus is a genuine personal relationship with God. READ v 2a. Our last phrase in this section is "in Christ". What does it mean to be "in Christ"? This is one of the most common ways the New Testament refers to our genuine relationship with God the Father through Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit. How can we mere mortals be "friends of God"? It is through Jesus – but even deeper, it is "in Jesus" – in relationship a genuine relationship with Jesus. As we read in 2 Corinthians, we are a new creation – the old has gone. Archaeologists tell us that many of the nameless slabs in the catacombs of Rome have no name but simply the words "in Christo" (in Christ). There is a radical newness and
joy God gives us through a genuine relationship with Jesus. Being in Christ has always been ample reason to celebrate as Paul and the ancient Christians did, and it is the same for us today. This is a wonder of wonders! If someone says you or I are a simpleton (they probably used stronger language), we know we are also “in Christ” which is far more important eternally. If someone tells you or I we are failures, we know we are also “in Christ” which is far more valuable that the greatest earthly awards. So important was this that just in Paul’s letters you will find “in Christ” 33 times and the longer “in Christ Jesus” or “in Christ Jesus our Lord” 48 times. We can not marvel too much that our real standing in eternity is “in Christ” and it doesn’t get any better than that – we will even be above angels!

VII. We are recipients of God’s blessings “grace and peace”

There is one more sentence we have in our passage today. READ v 2b. The seventh privilege we have in Jesus is to receive God’s special blessings. Grace and peace here are both blessings that come from God. “Grace and peace” are words that are always encouraging to think about. Grace (charis) is a Christianized version of a greeting (chaire) commonly used among Greek speakers. It refers to God’s undeserved favor. So asking for grace for another person is actually asking for God’s favor and blessing on them. Peace (shalom) is the typical Hebrew way of greeting people. It actually means wellbeing of which peace is a major component. So when we are asking for peace for a person we are asking that they have real well being in its fullest sense. Paul is asking God the Father to give his fellow brothers and sisters in Christ more of God’s favor and more well-being inside them. These are all gifts we can not do for ourselves and the grace and peace we try to do humanly rarely last. This grace and peace is felt most in the most difficult times in life. How incredible it is to think God is constantly doing more in our lives than we ever deserve, leading us to greater inner peace than our circumstances allow and bringing good out of even the worst aspects of life in a sinful, broken world.

In satan’s temptation of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden – if you and I are going to be deceived, we must first be convinced we are missing something. That is not hard to do when we accurately look at our bad actions or attitudes, face our problems or become consumed by our relational conflicts. But continually remembering who we are in Christ – most all of it has nothing to do with what we do – brings an incredible stability in our lives as we go through life – both its storms and its joys! Who you and I are in Christ is not works oriented – it is grace oriented. Who we are in Christ motivates us to serve Jesus more sacrificially. Who we are in Christ lessens the satanizing of satan (the accusing of the accuser) and the temptation to think we need more than Christ. We are all someone special – IN CHRIST!