

Introduction

Who are you?

This is such an interesting question especially in our current culture. This is an odd moment in our country and in other parts of our world where we have both elevated identity and obliterated identity, both at the same time.

On the one hand, identity is huge in our culture, especially when it comes to the idea of identifying who is marginalized, who needs to receive preferential treatment, and who is privileged. Age, gender, sexuality, socioeconomics, and ethnicity are all descriptors our current culture appends to our identity statements. By today's standards I should be identified as a cis-gendered, middle-class, white, privileged male. Acronyms and abbreviations rule the day. This matters in college admissions, loan applications, job interviews...so many areas of our daily interactions.

Yet at the same time, in our current culture, identity is malleable. It can change. One day you can identify as one gender, the next a different gender. Jokes abound on social media and late-night talk shows about this, but even identities like ethnicity and physical characteristics at times seems to be based on dreams not DNA. Identity appears to have no rigid forms, no objective realities that it must conform to—it is beholden only to the self-assessed reality each person desires to live in.

Living in a moment where identity is elevated and obliterated is definitely an odd moment!

I start a sermon that is mostly about our identity with these observations not because I want to dive into each of these topics directly, but because I think we all feel the stirring and shaking nature of this moment where our descriptions, norms, and language is being stretched and broken in ways that feels very uncomfortable and concerning. Where identity has become confusing. I also start here because—while there is much to discuss, debate, and even defend against in this current wave of change around identity—identity matters to all of us, deeply. And I think we often forget how odd and tricky the idea of identity always has been.

If I was to ask you about yourself, I would get an entirely different answer on your identity depending on the circumstance. If we were at a trade show, you would likely say something like, “Hi, I’m Jane Smith, Vice President of Sales at Acme Industrial.” You would want me to know how we might connect through our roles in our companies and how best to find mutual ways to help each other. Yet if I was standing next to the very same man at a youth t-ball game, he would most likely tell me, “Hi, I’m Jane, little Johnny’s mom.”

If I am in a conversation about education people will quickly make sure I know if they are the homeschooling family, the private school family, or the public-school family. During COVID I would hear if you were a vaccers or a non-vaccers. If we are talking about how people spend their time during the day I will find out if you are a stay-at-

home mom, a realtor, a teacher, an architect, a contractor, or currently “under employed.” If we are talking about sports I will find out if you are a Green Bay packers fan, or...not a Green Bay packers fan. That is really the only category that matters in the NFL, sorry Jack.

Not only will we describe our identity differently in each situation, but we will carry ourselves differently depending on the way the identity needs to be construed. In a business environment as an employee we will act in one way—a certain level of decorum and composure—but you put the same person at a sporting event or a concert and their identity in that moment changes how they act in many ways. We’re talking body paint or air-drumming!

It can even be the perception of your identity that can change you in a moment. This is one of the most fascinating things about being a pastor. I can be having a great conversation with someone just about their life and family and goals—with curse words peppered in every third word—and the moment they find out I am a pastor they change. Their own perception of their own identity—perhaps as “unclean” or an “outsider” or something like that—when compared to standing next to some who they somehow view as “holy” or “set apart” instantly changes their vocabulary. It’s really weird—especially I’m not really standing there judging them nor feeling offended.

Add to all this that your identity really does change over time. One year you were a first grader in Mrs. Zahm’s class and the next you were a second grader in Mr. Jensen’s class. You are single, interested, single, committed, single, engaged, and married. Flip-flop-flip-flop. My wife has been Katie Herdegen, she almost didn’t get out Brazil because her license didn’t match her passport that said Catherine Marie Herdegen (lax Boise rules in the 1990s), and now she is known as Katie Eagy. I love it now that my kids are grown that when I go into their places of work or school and interact with clients or teachers they are not my kids but I am “Hannah’s dad, Gabe’s dad, Abigail’s dad, Gideon’s dad, or Hosea’s dad.” I am known by *them*.

Identity is a big part of our life, and for good reason. Who you are matters! We should not be surprised, then, that a world who does not know and treasure God is looking for and trying a thousand ways to identify themselves in the most advantageous way they can find. They are looking to these different identity statements to seem important, to feel cared about, and to be loved. They want to be known and loved—and are looking for how to find that. We may see how woefully odd and broken their attempts are, but they are looking for something very normal. Something you and I have found and know in Jesus Christ.

Ephesians Introduction

Our next sermon series is going to tackle this idea of identity again and again. Identity is a core idea to all of Scripture, it is a very big idea for Paul, and it oozes out of everywhere in the letter to the Ephesians. That is our next letter that we are going to tackle together, Paul’s letter to the Ephesians. Hopefully you will find it interesting to compare this letter to his letter to the Romans that we finished looking at this last fall.

They are in such different circumstances, the concerns for each group of believers is very different, and Paul's way of helping each group really hinges on his relationship to them. But in each letter Paul is pointing to a same, glorious identity. **That we are in Christ Jesus.** That is what we will see throughout this study.

As we talked about in our Romans series, the Romans were a group of people who Paul had some connections with—remember the long list of names in the last chapter—but by and large he didn't know them and was sending his letter to them that he might pave the way for his hoped-for visit in the future. The letter to the Ephesians is much different. These are people Paul knows very well! We will talk about this more as we get into our series, but Paul spent a lot of time in Ephesus on his missionary journey. On his way back from Corinth he spent almost two and a half years there, and he had a deep love for the Ephesians and their church leaders.

We have talked about the different ways to approach sermons—how we can talk about an entire book or letter all at once, how we can go chapter by chapter, how we can take medium-lengthed chunks of Scripture at a time or how we can drop down into much smaller pieces. This time we are going to look at medium-length chunks and smaller sections of Ephesians and try to wring all the juice we can from each idea. We will be in the letter to the Ephesians through this summer right up to our fall launch time in September, so we will definitely be taking our time.

Ephesians 1:1-2

Paul starts his letter to the Ephesians like this:

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

Even here, we can see how identity plays a big role. Paul starts out with his own identity—he is an apostle. The word apostle simply means messenger, yet as we all know it takes on a special meaning for the original eleven disciple of Jesus (Judas missing from that group) and Paul. Paul even helps explain how it is unique here.

He is “an apostle of Christ Jesus.” Not only is he a commissioned messenger, but he is fully owned and commissioned by none other than Jesus himself. That is what it means to be “of Jesus,” and it is Jesus and his message that Paul is bringing to everyone. And in case you wonder where you go to sign up for that job, Paul says it is “by the will of God” that he was made this messenger. It was not his own desire, but rather God's choice that made Paul this. When we see Paul's life and the life of the Apostles and how hard it was, it makes sense that it was God himself who would have to convince you to sign up for what they did.

Importantly here, Paul is exercising this role as a messenger and envoy to a particular people, the Ephesians, and specifically to the “saints” and the “faithful in Christ Jesus.” Saints may sound funny to us, and if you have a Catholic background it is hard to

imagine how it can be used of me and you, but it is one of the New Testament authors' favorite words for us as those who follow Jesus. We are the holy ones—that is what saint means. This is part of our identity. In Jesus, through his righteous life, his death, burial, resurrection, and ascension to the throne of God in heaven the Ephesians and you and I have been made holy. We are now fitting sons and daughters who are beginning to be transformed so we can walk in the presence of our Holy God and be enjoined to him today by his Holy Spirit. This is no small part of our identity!

Yet Paul continues, and here we begin to see the breadth and magnificence of the identity that Paul is going to unfold for us in this letter to the Ephesians:

To the saints who are in Ephesus, and are faithful in Christ Jesus.

You and I would expect him to say, “who have faith in Christ Jesus.” But that isn’t what he says. He says the Ephesians, that you and I, that all believers are “faithful in Christ Jesus.” We have the quality of having faith and demonstrating faith, “in Christ Jesus.” He is not talking here about an action that we have taken, as I think we so often think when we just gloss over this statement. (That statement is true that we put our faith in Jesus.) Here Paul is talking about an identity that we have—he is saying we ARE “in Christ,” which is WHY we are able to live faithfully. And this is one of his main points throughout chapter two and he comes back to it again as we jump down to Ephesians 1:3.

Before verse 3, though, we have Ephesians 1:2, where we have this beautiful prayer that Paul wishes upon the Ephesians. **He wishes them grace.** This is very similar to what he says in Romans 1:7, 1 Corinthians 1:3, 2 Corinthians 1:2, Galatians 1:3, Philippians 1:2, 2 Thessalonians 1:2, and Philemon 3...many of his openings in his letters. It’s kind of his go-to prayers! He is giving the Ephesians a prayer where he asks for God’s grace—God’s unmerited favor of providing salvation through Christ—for the Ephesians. He wants them to have peace, this idea of Shalom that John Mitchell talked about several weeks ago that only comes through Jesus. Grace that comes from God’s good work and that results in peace in our life.

Ephesians 1:3

But in simply identifying who the Ephesians are—those who are holy and who are now found faithful because of their identity in Christ—and in thinking about his prayer for God’s grace, Paul can’t help but break into a eulogy, a statement of good words about God.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, (Ephesians 1:3, ESV)

This should really say “**blessed is.**” This is a statement, not a hope or wish. Paul is declaring the beauty of who God is. And this is not a small statement! Ephesians 1:3 starts a sentence that runs all the way through Ephesians 1:14. We will run into that often in Ephesians. Paul’s sentences are the things of nightmares for junior high

composition teachers. His third sentence in the book takes us all the way to the end of chapter one and runs from Ephesians 1:15–23.

In this first chapter, in just three sentences, Paul puts together a: “kaleidoscope of dazzling lights and shifting colors” as one scholar has said (Robinson, 19 as cited in Hoehner, 159).

The beginning of Ephesians is a section jammed with the glory of God expressed in so many words that it should astound us and humble us with the scope of what God has done in his love for us! As one commentator has said:

“The abundance of words does not denote verbosity [on Paul’s part], but instead it is an attempt to use a multiplicity of words to praise God for his supernatural plan and acts that are almost beyond description.” Harold Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 159

This is why we will spend four weeks on just this first sentence! But look again at what Paul says here:

Blessed [is] the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, (Ephesians 1:3, ESV)

Paul is giving a very typical Hebrew blessing here, but he has made it all about Christ Jesus. It is very similar to what we find in the Old Testament, places like Psalm 72:18:

Blessed [is] the LORD, the God of Israel, who alone does wondrous things. Blessed be his glorious name forever; may the whole earth be filled with his glory! Amen and Amen! (Psalm 72:18–19, ESV)

Here, what Paul is saying is this:

(go back to Ephesians 1:3):

Who is giving these benefits? God. God here is both the object and subject. He is the object of the praise that Paul is declaring, and he is the subject of the blessings that are being given.

Who is he giving these blessings to? To believers. To the Ephesians. To me and you.

What has he blessed us with? With every spiritual blessing. No wonder Paul is going off on a very long sentence. That is an incredible reality! Imagine, every spiritual blessing. I don’t know if you and I have a category for what all that would entail. No doubt that is part of what Paul wants us to begin to understand through this letter. And no wonder he can barely contain himself and is going to use such a mountain of phrases that commentators have to mention the amount of words and images used here. Yet there is something we will have to watch out for:

Where has God blessed us, all believers, and the Ephesians? In the heavenlies. You could take this to be a further description of blessings, but the word “spiritual” has already told us these are God’s blessings. In the heavenlies would be redundant in that sense. Rather, it seems that this points to where God gives us these blessings. The reality is we may not see all these blessings today, here on earth. But we are promised them all someday! You can see how if you skip that one section how quickly something like a prosperity gospel can start to creep into your life. Christians, the Ephesians, anyone could accidentally be left discouraged by the very thing that is moving Paul to praise and should move me and you to praise as well. If we expect we can see all these realities in full, today, we are missing what Paul is saying. This is a reality that is true and sure, as sure as our God has raised from the dead (in fact it is tied to that truth), yet we only see it in parts today. We only have the down payment, as Paul is going to say later in Ephesians 1:13–14. But it is praiseworthy today!

But this morning, where we want to stop and where we want to focus is this last reality. **How has God blessed us?** In Christ Jesus!

In Christ

This phrase, in Christ, is an amazing statement. Paul has already used it once in Ephesians 1:1, and already is back to this statement in Ephesians 1:3. I love this statement by Jerry Bridges:

“**Union with** Christ, to be “in Christ,” is the most basic identity of a Christian, so much so that all other answers to the question “who am I?” are based on, or draw from, that identity.”

Jerry Bridges

We see this so clearly throughout Paul’s letter to the Ephesians. In just this one letter alone, Paul uses the exact phrase “in Christ” thirteen times. But if we also count phrases that mean the same thing like “in whom,” or “in the Lord,” or something similar Paul uses this idea thirty-nine times—and most of those are in just the first three chapters before Paul turns to give us practical examples of how this identity of being in Christ is lived out in chapters four through six. Even more so, the phrase and Greek word for unity, being one with Christ, is used only here in Ephesians 4:3 and 4:13.

There is a reason why our title for our Ephesians series is “In Christ”—this letter is screaming that our most basic and most incredible identity is that we are in Christ.

But what does this mean?

That is what we will be seeing through much of chapters one through three, and then we will examine with Paul the implications of this identity on all areas of our life in chapters four through six. Today I want to begin to whet your appetite for a glimpse, a

moment of savoring, to see what our savior has done for us by making our identity “in” him.

This is not a concept that is confined to just Ephesians. Listen to some of the ways other passages in Scripture talk about our identity in Jesus.

He gave us [grace] *in Christ Jesus* before the ages began. (2 Timothy 1:9, ESV)

Our identity of being “in Christ Jesus” means God gave me and you grace before time ever began. God looked upon us and said “Grace,” not “Condemnation.” What sweet comfort that should be for us to know that God’s mercy was not dependent on anything we did, but rather God’s choice to give us grace as we are identified in Christ.

For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor heights nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God *in Christ Jesus our Lord*. (Romans 8:38–39, ESV)

In Christ Jesus we are loved by God with a special kind of love. An inseparable love. Nothing—nothing outside of us in this world, nor anything in heaven, with no amount of power can separate us from God’s love for us. God’s loving kindness is an enduring, pursuing, and never-failing kind of love. And that is true because of our identity in Jesus. How amazing is that!

For our sake God made Christ to be sin who knew no sin, that *in him* we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Corinthians 5:21, ESV)

God has done two amazing things for us by making our identity in Jesus. First, he placed our sin on Jesus that he might justify us by taking our punishment—death—on the cross. And second, God took all Jesus’ perfect righteousness and now, when he sees us, he sees us truly in Christ and sees his righteousness in us and smiles at us.

If anyone is *in Christ*, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. (2 Corinthians 5:17, ESV)

In Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. (Galatians 3:26, ESV)

Being in Jesus means we are not just something changed, but we are something entirely new. We are a new creation and, in making us this new thing, God has brought us all into right relationship with him again as beloved sons and daughters.

All the promises of God find their yes *in Christ*. (2 Corinthians 1:20, ESV)

Just when you wonder if our identity in Jesus could make things better, God declares that all of his promises, every good thing he has ever promised to his people through his covenants with them, from Adam to Noah to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to David and to

Jesus are all for me in you because we find our identity in Jesus. In fact, not only will God give us all his promises in Jesus, but he promises:

My God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory *in Christ Jesus*. (Philippians 4:19, ESV)

We receive God's promises in Jesus as well as his provisions for our daily need every-day. Not only will all our physical needs be provided for in our identity in Jesus, but even our spiritual and emotional needs:

The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds *in Christ Jesus*. (Philippians 4:7, ESV)

This is by no means everything Scripture says. And if we turn to Ephesians and only grab a couple of the statements here we see that it only gets better and better!

God chose us *in Christ* before the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1:4, ESV)

Just this next week we will look at the amazing reality of our God who chose me and you before he created any of this. You were not an afterthought nor was your salvation a begrudging necessity. God created and set in motion all things, including the need for Christ—God himself—to become embodied forever as the God-man and live amongst us, die our death, and raise in power with YOU and ME in mind! He saw us, knew our weaknesses intimately, and still loved us and provided for us.

In Christ we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses. (Ephesians 1:7, ESV)

We are redeemed and we are forgiven *in Jesus!* And all of this secures a glorious hope of a marvelous future:

God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly places *in Christ Jesus*. (Ephesians 2:6, ESV)

Even today, one of the amazing spiritual blessing we have is that we are seated with Christ as beloved sons and daughters, priest-kings and priest-queens of the most high God and our future worshipping and living before his face is secured forever!

This is utterly transforming!

Not only does this identity in Christ have a marvelous multitude of outcomes and purposes in God, but it is also utterly transforming! Paul is not going to let us forget that—and the last half of Ephesians is connecting our new identity with that identity worked out in our lives.

"A new life in Christ leads inevitably to a new lifestyle, with a new value system and new moral standards...Jesus sets before us a choice between two value

systems—his own and the world.” John Stott, ['In Christ': The Meaning and Implications of the Gospel of Jesus Christ - C.S. Lewis Institute \(cslewisinstitute.org\)](http://cslewisinstitute.org)

The world is concerned with appearances, conformity to conventions, rules and regulations. But Jesus goes straight to our hearts and declares we are to have a pure heart or says to us “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” (Matthew 6:21)

The world says things like, “Sex is for fun, enjoyment without commitment.” But Jesus says, “Sex is for love and enjoyment within commitment.” (Heb 13:4) The world says, “Give as good as you get.” And Jesus says, “Love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you, do good to those who hate you, overcome evil with good.” (Matthew 5:43–45)

“Our concern as followers of Jesus is neither with a religion called “Christianity,” nor with a culture called “Western Civilization,” but with a person, Jesus of Nazareth, the one and only God-man who lived a perfect life of love, died on the cross for our sins, bearing in his own person the condemnation that we deserve, was raised in triumph from the grave and is now alive, accessible and available to us through the Holy Spirit. He is also coming again one day in sheer magnificence, that every knee should bow to him. That is the Person with whom we are concerned.” John Stott

Conclusion

There is so much more we are going to look at regarding our identity in *Christ Jesus* throughout this study!

My goal this morning is to get you wondering at the marvelous glory that is your identity in Jesus. I have often heard people try to encourage believers that we should simply think of ourselves not just as engineers but as “Christian engineers,” or “Christian parents,” or “Christian friends.” But this can limit down our identity to a self-proclaimed alliance, which can at times have a religiosity to it that hides the reality. We are not concerned with religion, as John Stott said. We are concerned with a person! Our identity as being in Christ is so much deeper than just our choice because it is grounded in the God who has brought us, me and you, into this identity through his amazing work alone.

I also want to encourage us, perhaps, if possible, to find some compassion for a world that is desperately trying to find their identity. A world, that in their blindness, is looking everywhere but the one place they can find their true identity. They are looking to their sexuality, their family history and status, their physical body, and even their ethnic heritage. All these uniqueness-es are part of the beauty of who God created us to be and to point us forward and to find our true identity *in Jesus*. And we have a responsibility to share the beauty of who Jesus is and how he is our identity.

Today should leave us wondering what it means to be *in Christ* with a glimpse of all the beauties God have given us in that glorious reality. I pray that this is one of the beautiful things we see in Ephesians. Ephesians is one, long, gospel message meant to make me and you fall on our knees week after week as we behold what God has done for us.

At the unconscious and most decisive level, to be in Christ Jesus is God's sovereign work alone:

From God are you *in Christ Jesus* (1 Corinthians 1:30, direct translation)

But at the conscious level, being *in Christ Jesus* is of our own action, and it is through faith. Christ dwells in our hearts "through faith" as Ephesians 3:17 says. The life we live in union with his death and life we

Live by faith in the Son of God (Galatians 2:20, ESV)

We are united in his death and resurrection "through faith" as Colossians 2:12 also says.

Union with Christ—finding our identity in him—is the ground of everlasting joy, and it is offered free.

(Paraphrasing Piper, [The Stupendous Reality of Being "in Christ Jesus" | Desiring God](#))

Call & Communion

Come this morning to this Jesus!

Benediction

For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor heights nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God *in Christ Jesus our Lord*. (Romans 8:38–39, ESV)