

Gospel Identity

Ephesians 1:1-14; 2:11-22

Throughout our lives we hit different seasons where we're forced to ask searching questions about who we are. The teenage years are often the first time we run into this, as you become increasingly independent. You're no longer just so-and-so's kid; you are you. So who are you? How do I understand my value, my significance, my story, my heritage, my identity? How does that shape what I'm going to do, how I'm going to live, who I'm going to become?

And then there's the mid-life crisis stage, where having answered those questions when we were younger, and having set certain expectations and dreams about what our life would be like, we come upon some unexpected event or some major life change or are somehow awoken to the reality that we aren't who we thought we were. We look back in regret and disappointment on all we thought we would accomplish by now—finding a spouse, having a child, landing an executive level job, owning a house. Or we look back on all that we once had but now lost, maybe through a tragic health crisis, or a career-ending layoff, or the simple course of time that leaves us with an empty nest and expensive tuition bills. And we wonder, is this what I worked so hard for? Is this all there is? We become completely disoriented about who we are.

And then there's the end-of-life identity crisis. Where there's no more road in front, no longer any opportunity to do things different. All you can do is look back and evaluate. And again we ask ourselves, Who am I? Who was I? Did it really matter? How did I spend my life?

And the temptation in all of these stages and in all of life is to try and find our identity in what we do (or failed to do), in what we have (or don't have), in what others think of us, or in what others have done to us.

But as the book of Ephesians tells us, if your faith is in Jesus Christ, "You aren't what's been done to you but what Jesus has done for you. You aren't what you do but what Jesus has done. What you do doesn't determine who you are. Rather, who you are in Christ determines what you do."¹

Our identity is shaped by the gospel of Jesus—by the good news of what God has done to establish his kingdom and deal with our sin through the life, death, and resurrection of his eternal Son, Jesus Christ. And this is true not just for us as individuals, but for us as a community, as church. Who we are flows out of who Jesus is and what he's done for us—our identity comes from our union with Christ. And who we are shapes what we do—our activity is shaped by our identity. So as we spend the month of January taking a close look at what it will take for us as a

¹ Mark Driscoll, *Who Do You Think You Are?* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2013), 3.

church to move toward the vision God has given us—to be a gospel-centered community living each day on mission for Christ—the question of identity is crucial to answer.

It's incredibly easy as a church to find our identity, our significance and value, in *what we do*—all the commands and rules we keep, the long list of programs we offer, the busyness of our activities, the style of our music, the size of our missions commitment. Or maybe we find it in what we *fail* to do—ministries we don't offer that we obsess about, things we don't do a good job with, all the things we want to see changed. Or perhaps we find our identity in *what we have*—our building, our budget, our staff, our congregation size—or in what we *don't* have—more people, more staff, this family, that pastor, that kind of building. Perhaps we find it in *what others think of us* or even *do to us*—priding ourselves in the praise we receive or wringing our hands nervously over a sour reputation. The problem with approaching identity this way is that it is all about us, not God, which deprives him of his glory, deprives us of what's truly good for us, and distracts us from our mission, keeping us focused on ourselves.

So how does the gospel shape our identity? How does it inform the way we go about living out our vision—to be a gospel-centered community living each day on mission for Christ? How does it help us think of church less as something we go to, and more as something we *are*—a family of missionary servants, empowered by God's Spirit to make disciples for Christ?

That is our task this morning—to think together about these questions and their practical implications. And the book of Ephesians will be our guide.

The book of Ephesians is a letter written by the apostle Paul to a church in the ancient city of Ephesus. And it has much to teach us about how the gospel shapes our identity, who we are in Jesus Christ—our identity not just as individuals, but as a church. In fact the phrase “in him” or “in Christ” or some variation of that is used at least 23 times in the book. And our essential identity, as this book frames it, is that *we are a new people in whom God dwells and through whom he displays his glory*.

More practically speaking, through our union with Christ, we are a *family of worshipers*, of *learners*, of *servants* and of *missionaries*,² in whom Christ dwells by the Spirit, and through whom he displays his glory, his beauty, his incomparable worthiness. And embracing this identity—a *family of worshipers, learners, servants, and missionaries* who by God's Spirit bring glory to Jesus—has everything to do with how we move toward our vision. It affects our motivation, our expectations, our goals and dreams. We need to embrace who we are in Jesus if we are going to live faithfully as a gospel-centered community on mission for Christ.

So we're going to think about these five realities of who we are in Jesus (family, worshipers, learners, servants, missionaries) and what practical difference it makes with respect to our vision. And we'll begin with *family*. In Jesus, we are a new people, a new family of God.

A New Family

One of the ways the book of Ephesians helps us understand who we are is by contrasting it against who we used to be apart from Christ. Chapter 2:1 reminds us, “As for you, you were

² Though the ideas are native to Ephesians, these particular categories are drawn and adapted from Soma Communities, “Soma School Notes.” Available at: <http://somatacoma.org/mediafiles/soma-school-notes.pdf>.

dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects [or children] of wrath” (2:1-3). Rebels who lived life on our own terms, to our own spiritual death and the just judgment of God.

Furthermore, as Paul writes to a predominantly Gentile or non-Jewish church—those whose heritage does not enjoy the covenant promises that God made to ancient Israel in the Old Testament, Paul reminds them in 2:12, “Remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world.”

That is a pretty bleak identity. But it captures so well the disorientation, the loneliness and shame, the rebellion and foolishness of life apart from Jesus that still marks our world today. Of life where our identity *is* in what we do, what we have, what we long for, but where none of that is enough. We stand before the Father as “children of wrath,” deserving his just judgment, “without hope and without God in the world.” Now, if you’re here with us and you’re just kind of exploring Christianity and trying to figure out what all this means, that sounds pretty harsh. But Paul is being brutally honest about the disappointment and judgment of life apart from Christ, because he wants to us see the incredible, life-changing truth of finding our hope and identity in Jesus.

In Jesus, God is doing something new in this broken world. The book of Ephesians opens with a psalm of praise about God’s incredible plan of salvation that has now come to its climax in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We heard it earlier in 1:3-14. God has been at work since before the foundation of the world to choose a people for himself, by his grace, to redeem us from our sin, to forgive us and adopt us into his family and make us heirs of his kingdom. He’s done it all according to the purpose of his will, and for the praise of his own glory—in order to magnify his own name and worthiness. And at the center of it—of this grand plan of God that has spanned all of time and history—at the center of it is Jesus Christ, whom God set forth (v. 10) “as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth” (1:10, ESV).

In Jesus God is putting a broken and rebellious world back together. And he’s starting by taking broken people, a people who are “dead in their transgressions and sins” (2:1), and making them alive together with Christ (2:5). Not only is he putting our individual lives back together, he’s putting communities and all humanity back together. Chapter two tells us how he’s taking two groups of sinners—Jews and Gentiles (non-Jews), who are divided and “hostile” toward one another, and is creating in himself “one new man”— a new humanity, a new people, a new family. Ephesians 2:14 says of Jesus, “For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility” (2:14-16).

God is making one new family in Christ. And we are invited into that family, not because of anything we have done, but as Paul says in ch. 2:8-9: by God's grace through faith in Jesus—believing in Jesus. Grace is God's undeserved favor, being given something wonderful when we deserve something terrible. It's the picture of sitting in the dungeon, isolated and alone, awaiting execution because of your high treason against the king, and receiving notice that not only have you been pardoned, but that you have been legally adopted into the king's own family—you are forgiven and you are accepted, you are no longer under judgment and you are no longer alone. You are loved by the Father forever. And it's not because of anything you've done, but because the king's own son chose to put his head under the guillotine in your place. That's grace. And it's by grace that God makes us into a new family, a new people, if we believe.

So the question is, What does it look like to live like family? Or more specifically, *like a family of forgiven and rescued sinners whose identity is secure in Christ*? And how do we move toward our vision as a family, brothers and sisters in Jesus? That's what the language of community in our vision statement is referring to—"a gospel-centered *community*." You can read there if you like, a gospel-centered *family*—a family that flows out of the gospel and points back to the gospel.

A family loves one another. Cares for one another. Bears one another's burdens. Tells the truth to one another. Doesn't take advantage of one another. A family is humble, patient, and forgiving—if Grandma burns the rolls every year at Christmas, you don't go looking for a different Grandma next year around. But even when a family does make mistakes—when we do take advantage of each other, or somehow hurt or sin against one another, then a family works hard to preserve that unity. We fight for reconciliation when conflict divides, taking the gospel of Jesus seriously—that if the grace of God in Christ was sufficient to deal with our sins against God, it is sufficient to deal with the sins we commit against one another.

Not to be overly graphic here, but if you lose your finger in a construction accident, the goal is not to leave it there lying on the ground, but to get it reattached as quick as possible. Yet so often we're content to let members of our own body lay wounded and neglected, rather than moving toward them in humility and repentance, in accordance with our identity as a family (cf. 4:17-32).

A family needs one another. Not simply because we can accomplish more together (which we can), but because *we genuinely love one another, and need each other to help us cling daily to the love and grace that we have in Christ*—the head of our family. In Christ we are a new family that not only flows out of the gospel, but points each other back to the gospel for our a constant reminder of our identity, security, calling, and hope.

But we do not exist as a family simply for ourselves. As God's new people in Christ, we have a purpose, a calling, and the next four identities will help us understand what that purpose is.

Worshippers

Second, in Christ, we are *worshippers*. We're a family of worshippers, whose chief goal is to make much of God and his glory.

To "worship" means to treat something like God—to delight in and depend on someone or something as our ultimate joy and hope. Worshiping God is central to our identity as the new

family of God. Displaying God's glory was the explicit aim of God's great plan of salvation in the book's opening psalm, in 1:3-14 again. Three times Paul tells us the purpose of this salvation plan, and all three times it goes something like this: "to the praise of his glory" (1:6, 12, 14). Similarly, the glory of God is the aim of Paul's prayer at the end of ch. 3: "to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen." Being members of God's new family is not about us—it's about God.

And one of the ways that Ephesians makes this point is by showing how the church is *a new temple of God*. Listen to how Paul describes our identity in Christ at the end of chapter 2:

Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit. (Eph. 2:19-22)

In the Old Testament, the temple was the building where the God of heaven dwelt with his people on earth in a special way. It's where the people of Israel went on earth to meet with the God who was in heaven, to behold his beauty, to receive his mercy in the sacrifices offered for sin, and to worship him and give him glory. We're told over and over how the temple of God was filled with his glory (1 Kgs. 8:10-11; cf. Exod. 40:34-38).

When God took on human flesh in Jesus, there was no longer any need for a temple building: Jesus' body was the special presence of God on earth, the fullness of his glory (Jn. 1:14). And as the new people of God united with Christ and indwelt by his Spirit, we are that body, that temple, "the fullness of him who fills all in all" (1:23; cf. 2:19-22; 3:17; 4:4, 11-16).

The temple is all about *God's presence* and *God's glory*. So as we said earlier, in Christ *we are a new people in whom God dwells and through whom he displays his glory*. We are a family of worshippers who display God's glory (cf. 3:9-10).

So what does that look like, practically speaking? First, it means that worshiping God in Christ is not about going to a special place (e.g. a building)—*we are the special place*. Wherever we gather and wherever we go, God is among us to make himself known, to extend his mercy, and to display his glory through us.

Second, it means that whatever we do—whether we gather together under God's Word and respond in prayer and song (like we're doing right now), or whether we link arms and go out to serve the Lord together in the community (both are worship, treating God like God)—it means that whatever we do, it's not ultimately about us, but about him and his renown. It must be shaped by his word and aimed at his glory.

Every one of us faces the temptation of hijacking a ministry or holding this or that aspect of our church life hostage in order to make it about me—my desires, my goals, my preferences, my values, my needs. And in order to protect our idolatrous desires, we gladly demonize the alternatives so as to make what we want look good. Some of our hearts are so dark as to take something so God-honoring as preaching his Word, or singing his praise, or telling others about him, and to use those things to get others to make much of us. To seek our own praise.

But if we are to be a community shaped by the gospel, whose identity as worshipers is rooted in Jesus Christ, then being true to who we are means surrendering to God and his Word, trusting the power of his Spirit to do so, and making our chief aim in life to know and delight in him, even as we make his glory known. It's not about us; it's not about Westgate; it's about God. God dwells with us to display his own glory.

Learners

We are a *family of worshipers*, in whom Christ dwells and through whom he displays his glory. Third, in Jesus we are also *learners*. Or another word for that: *disciples*.

One of the sometimes frustrating realities of being recipients of God's redeeming work is that there is still more redemption to come. There is an age to come, with an inheritance waiting for us there (1:13-14, 21), and in that day we will stand before God, face to face, as perfect reflections of his glory and complete trophies of his grace. That inheritance is secure for those who trust in Christ, guaranteed by the Holy Spirit (1:12-14). But it is not yet here.

Which means, that as a family of worshipers, in whom God dwells and through whom he displays his glory, none of us have arrived. We all still sin, we still let people down. We still live in a fallen world. We still make stupid mistakes and act selfishly. And so following Jesus as his disciples means we must be continual *learners*, eager to look to God's Word and be changed by God's Spirit in order to look more and more like Christ.

In chapter 4, Paul talks about the necessity of working together—as one family—to mature in Jesus, and so display his glory. And Christ has given gifted leadership in the church for this very purpose. Look at 4:11 with me:

It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. (4:11-14)

There's that temple language again—the *fullness* of Christ, the display of his glory. We must be continually changed by the gospel of Jesus in order to be that display of glory. To grow more deeply in our love for Christ and our hatred for sin, and so to reflect the character and image of Christ to one another and the watching world (cf. 4:21-24).

So as we move toward our vision, are we doing so as learners? Learners who recognize we have not arrived, who submit to God's Word, who depend daily on the grace of the gospel, who look to God's Spirit to change us, and who look to one another to be help us grow and become equipped for the mission he's called us to? Notice in ch. 4 that it's not those who are gifted that are doing all the work of ministry; rather, those who are gifted "prepare God's people for works of service." We all have a role to play in serving God together. Which brings us to our fourth and fifth identities in Jesus.

Servants

In Jesus, we are a *family of worshipers and learners*, but also of *servants* who express God's love to others by laying our lives down after the pattern of Christ. That's the fourth identity: servants.

Ephesians 5:1-2 says, "Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God." Essential to our identity as God's family, God's children in Christ, is following his pattern of life-giving, sacrificial service.

To be a servant is not a particularly glorious vocation. The word that the New Testament often uses here is perhaps better translated "slave" or "bond-servant." But as J.I. Packer has said, "Whether being a servant is a matter for shame or for pride depends on whose servant one is."³ By God's Spirit we have been united with the one "who did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45).

Being a servant is all about denying ourselves in order to bless others. Our natural tendency is to protect self, even to promote self; we're more comfortable when others work hard to serve and bless us. Being a servant messes up our world. It messes up our plans. Very rarely do those in need call ahead to schedule their crisis or service opportunity. The question is, Do we love our schedule more than we love our neighbor? Do we love our comfort more than we love Christ? Or do we look at the gospel and see the incredible love and lengths to which Jesus not only inconvenienced himself for us, but laid down his very life, not only in the excruciating pain of the cross, but in the incomprehensible horror of taking on himself God's just judgment against our sin—do we look at the gospel and the love of Christ, and joyfully express that love toward others by our sacrificial service?

As we move toward our vision, we must do so with a servant's heart and servant's hands—being willing to be inconvenienced and get dirty in helping others know the love and beauty of Christ. Whether that service expresses itself in our marriages and families, which is what Paul calls us to in chapters 5 and 6, or whether it expresses itself to others in the body and those outside the body, as Paul illustrates with his own life in chapters 3 and 6, service is essential to our identity as a family in whom God dwells and through whom he displays his glory.

And closely related to this is the fifth identity in Christ: we are missionaries.

Missionaries

In Jesus, we are a *family of worshipers, learners, servants, and missionaries* who spread God's glory through our message and love (1:10; 3:7-10; 4:11-13; 6:10-20).

Next Sunday we're going to take a closer look at what we mean by mission—what God has called us to and how he calls us to go about doing it—to make disciples for Christ. But mission is not just something we are to do; it's essential to who we are in Jesus.

In the Gospel of John, when Jesus commissioned the apostles to be his ambassadors and tell the world about the life-changing salvation available only in him, he said to them, "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you" (Jn. 20:21). And as we read earlier in Ephesians 4, it's not those who

³ J. I. Packer, *Knowing God*, 20th Anniversary Edition (Downers Grove: IVP, 1993), 37.

are gifted that do all the work of ministry; rather, those who are gifted “prepare God’s people for works of service.” We all have a role to play in advancing God’s kingdom; we are all missionaries in whatever sphere of influence God gives us.

We usually reserve the term “missionary” for those who serve God vocationally in cross-cultural contexts. And that’s fine, as long as we don’t fool ourselves into thinking that our calling here is somehow different. And I’m not talking about how we make a living, but how we use everything we have and do to make Christ known to those who are facing eternity in hell.

Again, we’re going to think about this together the next two Sundays, and this calling to serve the Lord in mission right here will be a big focus of our congregational meetings the next two Sundays. But a few questions to think about as we close this morning.

If in Christ we are missionaries, then clearly our desire is to see more and more people come to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. We want to see lives changed. We want to see God receive the glory due his name.

How does that identity shape what we do when we gather Sunday morning? Are we willing to invite our friends and neighbors to come with us? And would they feel welcome here? Would we go out of our way to meet them, to help them find their way around? Would they see a love shared among us, that reflects the love and beauty of God? Would they be able to follow and understand what’s happening during this service, and begin to get a sense of what difference Jesus truly makes?

And if there are what I call “unnecessary roadblocks” here—things that get in the way that don’t have to be in the way, are we willing to remove them for the sake of the gospel? I’m not talking about necessary “roadblocks,” if you will—things like the exclusivity of Christ, the truthfulness of his Word, the real problem of judgment, the emphasis on God’s glory—things that newcomers might find offensive, but are essential to the Christian faith. I’m talking about *non-essentials*, whether it’s the programs we offer (or don’t offer), our music style, the flow of our service, the look and feel of our building, the time we meet, and so on. I’m not talking about despising our heritage; I’m talking about *finding our identity in our ultimate heritage*—the inheritance waiting for us in heaven, and taking as many people with us as possible. If we are serious about being true to our identity as missionaries, and not merely preserving “church” as a museum, but sharing life together as a vibrant movement for the gospel, we need to be willing to ask those kinds of questions.

And second, if in Christ we are a family of missionaries, *how does that identity shape what we do when we’re scattered throughout the week?* As we live out our vision—we need to ask God to open our eyes to opportunities to love and serve our neighbors. What ways might we as a congregation be a blessing to Weston? How might those of us who live in Wayland work together to serve our neighbors in Wayland? Or those in Framingham teaming together to live as a community on mission in Framingham? Or those in Natick, in Wellesley, Needham, Newton, Sherborn, Dover, Marlborough, Sudbury, Belmont, Arlington, Dedham, Berlin, Stoughton?

One of the unique challenges of Westgate—the fact that as a congregation we are quite spread out and come together from a number of surrounding towns—is also a unique opportunity: God

has placed us throughout the MetroWest in such a way that as a congregation we could have a potentially wide impact for Jesus. He's given us a variety of relationships in a variety of places throughout this region. What might we do to share life together as a family of missionary servants to make the most of our relationships in our particular areas for the sake of the gospel?

Who we are flows out of who Jesus is and what he's done for us—our identity comes from our union with Christ. And who we are shapes what we do—our activity is shaped by our identity. So as we move toward the vision God has given us—to be a gospel-centered community living each day on mission for Christ—may God strengthen us to do so as a family of worshippers, learners, servants, and missionaries in whom God dwells and through whom he displays his glory.