

## Ephesians: Becoming Who You Are

- Many years ago I got to go to Mexico as an adult mentor for high school students on a mission to Tijuana, Mexico, to build homes for unsheltered families there. There were loads of us from Seattle's University Presbyterian Church. And I was glad to have a number of students there that I had been investing in – gathering for Bible study in Joseph Li's basement each week, going to their sports events and extracurriculars, serving in mission. We went to the same orphanage in Mexico that Eric Jacobsen, my pastor's son-in-law, would later take students from this FPC Missoula. During the day we'd build houses. In the evening we'd all pile into the dining area of the orphanage where we were staying to worship. Which meant guitar. Singing. Prayer. A talk.

One night while our youth pastor was up front giving a talk, I noticed how interested a group of my boys was in a water bottle that a kid named Kelsey kept sipping from (sipping from, that is, then looking left and right like he'd just stolen a diamond necklace). As they say, subtle as a freight train. In any case, I took a whiff. And sure enough, Kelsey had somehow managed to get his hands on a bottle of something somewhat stronger than water down the block.

I was frustrated. This boy needed to be here. Kelsey needed this week to hear the gospel and live it out more than anyone living in Mexico needed him to be the one to do it. I directed him to the courtyard. And here's what I found myself saying to him:

This is not who you are, Kelsey. You're better than this.

He argued with me. He said this is exactly who he was. That I myself had invited him to be Real. To show his true colors. To trust that this was a place he could be himself. He was right. I had.

So how could I say, 'This isn't who you are'?

I had no doubt: God loved and embraced this sophomore boy just as he was: sophomore. But this was not the person of faith and character God *created* Kelsey to be. This was not the person set free from selfish fears Christ *redeemed* Kelsey to be. This was not his trusting, free, whole, loving, *true* self. Pouring liquor into his water bottle to swig during worship was an act of his *false* self trying to drown insecurity in rebellious 'cool.' Kelsey was better than this. To say 'this is not who you are' was to say 'who you are' is a treasure both already given by God, and still unlocked.

Think of Princess Elizabeth. Royal at birth. At age nine her father Albert, Duke of York would become King George VI. And Elizabeth would be destined to become Queen of England. 'Who she was' was given to her from the beginning, but she would have to grow up, she would have learn the ways of royalty, she would have to mature to become the self she was called to be from the beginning.

From the beginning, we also are royal, heirs of the King, meant for our Christ-made selves. We're meant to mature into the persons God's royal love frees us to be. Which makes all of our lives about growing up, about maturing, about Becoming Who We Are.

-This fall as we walk through the pandemic and a polarizing election I thought it would be important for us to be grounded in our true identity. And so we will be reading Paul's letter to the Ephesians through November. It's a letter about who God is and who we are becoming. It's about growing up in Christ. Maturing. And so the series is called 'Becoming Who We Are.'

Which has to do with both belief and behavior.

[Let's pray]

In Ephesians chapter 4, Paul will say that Christian ministry – and so what we are doing right now - is about building up the body of Christ until all come to the 'unity of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.' What we're about is growing in faith and Christ-like maturity. Belief and behavior.

Eugene Peterson writes this in his introduction to Ephesians (*The Message*):

What we know about God and what we do for God have a way of getting broken apart in our lives. The moment the ...unity of *belief and behavior* is damaged in any way, we are incapable of living out the full humanity for which we were created. Paul's letter to the Ephesians joins together what has been broken apart in our sin-wrecked world.

He begins with an exuberant exploration of what Christians believe about God, and then, like a surgeon skillfully setting a compound fracture, 'sets' this belief into our behavior before God so that the bones – belief and behavior -knit together and heal.' [emphasis mine]

-Do you like that image? Of the bones of belief and behavior being set together so that the many places where they are fractured in our lives might heal?

Belief matters. Ephesians will reveal, Petersons says, 'that the energy of reconciliation is the dynamo at the heart of the universe' (*Practice Resurrection*, 31). That what our God is about is bringing together what has been broken apart - our relationship with God, our relationship with our neighbors, our integrity as persons, our stewardship of creation. That at the heart of *everything* is God's good, wise, quiet, humble, powerful, non-violent, gracious and loving plan to draw together everything and everyone in Jesus, the true King.

Otherwise we might assume our feelings are all there is. That our adolescent wants, wills, wishes and desires are all we are. But we're better than that. That's not who we are. Who we believe God to be, What we believe God has created and saved us to be matters.

It also turns out, however, that our behavior is not principally guided by right belief. Psychology and theology agree. We humans cannot trust that right belief leads to right behavior. Though what we believe matters, we're not simply controlled by what we believe, if that means in our heads. It turns out that humans are mostly controlled by our gut. By our affections. Which have been endlessly disciplined by a godless world to seek self-protection. And so what we *believe* has to disciple our *gut*. Our head

knowledge has to become heart leaning. And that requires practice – that is self-sacrificial and gritty and beautiful as carrying a cross.

-As Peterson puts it, birth is relatively easy. A short-lived pain followed by euphoria of the joy and wonder of welcoming an infant. (He apologizes to mothers everywhere in saying birth is easy.) But at least relatively speaking, birth is easy.

Growth he says ‘is marked by fatigue, anxiety, panicked late-night calls to the doctor, confused decisions regarding discipline, worried conferences with teachers, puzzling over adolescent behavior and misbehavior. Birth is quick and easy....growth is endless and complex.’ (*Practice Resurrection, 3*)

-And so Paul writes this letter about both Who God is and Who we’re born to be, and about growing up toward maturity in Christ. About *becoming who we are*.

Here are the first few verses of Ephesians, Chapter 1:

1 Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God,  
To the saints who are in Ephesus and are faithful<sup>[a]</sup> in Christ Jesus:  
2 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.  
3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realm,

Paul describes himself as a person *sent* by Jesus, the *King*. The letter is to the *saints*. And ‘saints’ are those made holy not by what they have done but by what Jesus has done for them.

*Ephesus* is an ancient city located on the western coast of present-day Turkey. If you watched the sun going down over the Aegean Sea from Ephesus, the sun would drop right over Athens, Greece. The church in Ephesus was established by a charismatic Jewish preacher Apollos. Paul stopped in there to visit the Christian community on his second missionary journey. There were twelve souls. The letter is written around the year 52AD. Ephesus was the epicenter of worship for most Greek and Roman gods. Its Temple to Artemis was one of the Seven Wonders of the ancient world, with a colonnade twice the size of the Parthenon. We can read in Acts 18-19 about how the new life in Christ of this fledgling church began to disrupt the way things were and cause a stir – especially in matters of money. What was intended to be a 3-month stay for Paul turned into three years.

There are fifteen named churches in New Testament. All but two had letters addressed to them. The letter to the Ephesians is unique in that it’s the only letter written that was not addressing some *problem* of behavior or belief. In fact, I remember being in my New Testament class in seminary when they put up on the overhead one of the three best and earliest manuscripts we now have of the letter. The words ‘in Ephesus’ were missing; someone had written ‘in Ephesus’ as a work of editing. This means the letter is probably best thought of as a circular letter – one Paul wrote (as he did others) not *only* to Ephesus but also to churches in the Ephesus area.

Peterson says that this lack of a problem to solve makes Ephesians an ideal letter to explore the Reality of God's glory that gives the church its true identity and to expand our imagination for living in and for that glorious reality. Again, belief and behavior.

The United States is fighting a culture war right now over what's Real. The letter to the Ephesians gives us confidence that God-Reality is far more true, far more expansive, far more beautiful, and far more urgent.

NT Wright likens the Ephesian Letter to the breathtaking view from the top of the London Eye Ferris wheel on the Thames River in downtown London. He says it gives us a bird's eye view of the way God, the world, Jesus, the church, the means of salvation, Christian behavior, marriage, family and the Holy Spirit relate. The view from up high brings together the geography of God's kingdom and our place in God's larger plan.

-I want to invite you to read Paul's Letter to the Ephesians multiple times over the next many weeks. It's just six chapters. And if you can, read it in multiple versions. If you don't have a copy of the *Message* (Eugene Peterson's translation), this is the time. I'd buy a copy of *The Message Study Bible* that includes Peterson's priceless pastoral notes. Paul's prayer is that in reading we become more rooted and grounded in the love of Christ. And I'm confident that Ephesians will well-complement the deepening in belief and behavior that are part of our Roots study.

The invitation is to allow Paul to teach us the essentials of our faith and to set the bones of belief and behavior for the fullness of lives lived to what he calls 'the praise of God's glory.'

-I want to leave you with two things that have struck me as I've begun preparing for this series as a whole:

-To get Paul's letter to the Ephesians, to get the Christian faith, Peterson says we need to start from the center. The first three chapters are about belief. The last three chapters are on behavior. Three chapters on the gospel story. Three chapters on the human story.

Right at the start of chapter four is a Greek word that not only ties them together but centers the Christian life. That word is *axios*.

Chapter four begins with this verse: 'I therefore, a prisoner in the Lord (in Rome), beg you to lead a life *worthy* of the calling to which you have been called.' Worthy. That's the word translated from *axios*. It's the word on which the whole letter pivots. Peterson tells us that *axios* is a word with a picture in it, with a metaphor that holds the whole letter together. So not only hear this, but see it.

An *axios* is a set of balancing scales, the kind with a cross beam balanced on a post, with pans suspended from each end of the beam.

Maybe you put a pound of lead in one pan and then you measure out flour in the other until the two pans balance and you have a pound of flour. The unknown weight of what's being measured becomes

equivalent to the known weight. The lead and the flour are *axios* – worthy. They have the same weight or value. They can be different, but they are a fit.

Now the items balanced in the scales of Ephesians are God’s calling and human living. ‘I beg you,’ writes Paul to followers of Christ not only in Ephesus, ‘to walk worthy of the calling to which you have been called.’ God calls. We walk. And when our walk of faith is congruent with God’s call, when it is in balance with who we were created and redeemed to be, when it is *axios*, *then* we are mature.

As Paul does, I want to hold up these scales as an image worthy of a season of careful contemplation. Are God’s calling and your walking in equilibrium?

-Which brings us back to the first few verses of Ephesians. Paul will begin this letter not, as usual, with thanksgiving for the believers in Ephesus, but with an extended and joyful doxology we will consider next week. Paul begins his letter with worship:

<sup>3</sup> Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly real...

Paul will go on to praise the God who made us, chooses us, graces us, redeems us, and reveals for us God’s purposes to reconcile all things. Paul begins his letter with *worthy* adoration of the One to Whom we are called to be *worthy*.

Who is this God? Why is he to be worshiped with lives in the balance? Paul’s answer, says Wright, is that

‘the true God, who deserves and should receive our glad worship, is the father of our Lord Jesus, the king, the Messiah...[God] isn’t just a divine force, a vague influence or energy loosely known as ‘the sacred.’ He is the God who made the world, and who has now made himself known in and through *Jesus*. [W]hat strikes us most about this astonishing bird’s-eye view of the whole divine plan of salvation is the way ... everything that the one God has done [God’ has done in and through Jesus the Messiah.

Which means growing up to human maturity, growing up to our full stature, will mean growing up in *Christ*. With both belief and behavior centered in Jesus. That is how the church will continue taking worthy steps on the walk of our calling ... to Become Who We Are.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.