

EPHESIANS

WHO I AM AND WHY IT MATTERS

For the first few weeks of the summer, we've been in a series that will carry us through this season. We're talking about who you are and why it matters throughout this study of this book of the Bible. In other words, we're spending a season of our time in the Word together, defining our identity as Christians. As we've said previously, the first three chapters are more of a theological message about who you are. In comparison, the last three chapters discuss the practical outplaying of that spiritual identity.

Scripture: Ephesians 3:1-13

Discussion Questions:

1. Looking back at your sermon notes, what encouraged or challenged you the most?
2. What does it mean when Paul refers to himself as a prisoner for Christ? What does this say about how Paul viewed his life circumstances?

Paul's calling was a calling to gospel ministry that, from the outset, would be accompanied by many sufferings (Acts 9:15-16). He wrote the books of Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon while in prison in Rome, where he was, at one point, living under house arrest for two years (Acts 28). Nevertheless, he willingly accepted all that came his way for the gospel's sake. He viewed his circumstances, as difficult and challenging as they were, as a part of what God was doing in him and through him. Paul viewed the events of his life through the lens of God's sovereign will at every turn.

3. What's the difference between your faith shaping the way you view your circumstances and your circumstances shaping the way you view your faith?

What does it mean for your faith to shape the way you see your circumstances? In short, it's to be able to look your circumstances in the eye and genuinely say with Paul, "For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain" (Philippians 1:21). For many of us, our faith is as strong as the certainty of our coming through the other side of our suffering. We're as confident as the odds are in our favor or if we can imagine how God might come through for us. The kind of faith the Lord wants to sow into our hearts is the kind that says, "No matter the outcome...I trust Christ...even if there's no rescue from suffering on this side of heaven." When we arrive at this level of faith and trust in the Lord we are never closer to the heart of Christ who himself said, "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will" (Matthew 26:39).

4. While you may not face imprisonment for your faith like the Apostle Paul, you can undoubtedly expect to be ostracized in one way or another. In what ways are we likely to pay the price for following Christ?
5. What is the "mystery" that Paul refers to throughout today's passage? What is the "manifold wisdom of God" that Paul mentions in verse 10? How are these two connected? Why should today's passage give us a higher view of the church?

The "mystery" that Paul references throughout this chapter is that, through the cross of Christ, God would engraft Gentiles into his family – the Kingdom was not exclusively for those who are Jews by birth. Jews and Gentiles alike can have direct access to God through the blood of Jesus Christ. The plan of God to send Christ to atone for the sins of the world was first revealed in Genesis 3 but made clearer throughout the Old Testament, but it was made even more clear in the New Testament through the life and teaching of Jesus Christ. In verse 10 Paul adds that the church itself is the stage upon which the manifold wisdom of God is displayed. It is within the church that we see the dividing walls of hostility come down and Jews and Gentiles alike link arms in unity to glory of God. Paul specifically says this wisdom on display within the church is seen by the "rulers and authorities in the heavenly places." God is displaying His wonder working power for all to see – this includes the demonic "rulers and authorities" that fall within the category of principalities of the air.

In the church, we see the power of the gospel at work to bring salvation to sinners and to unite a diverse group of people across the globe into a family through the blood of Jesus Christ. When we join for worship and engage in the life of our local church, we're glorifying God and giving testimony to the "rulers and authorities" in the heavenly places that He is excellent and worthy of praise.

6. What does Paul mean when he uses the word "stewardship" in verse 2? What else does Paul say about his stewardship in verse 8? How could you personalize the truths of these verses to your life?

When we see Paul use stewardship in today's passage, he uses it to refer to his responsibility to preach the gospel to the Gentiles (Acts 9:15, Romans 11:13, 15:16). This didn't mean that he didn't share the gospel with Jews along the way, just that his primary calling as an Apostle was to steward the message of God's grace with the Gentiles.

Like Paul, we're called to be stewards. This includes our time, talents, and financial resources, but it's also true of the gospel message itself. If you're a follower of Christ, you've experienced the grace of God (1 John 3:1), and you're called to steward that grace by sharing it with others (Matthew 28:19-20). The Great Commission is our call to be gospel fountains, not drains.

In addition to sharing the gospel, we can be good stewards of God's grace by being people of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, and self-control in our homes, neighborhoods, and workplaces. Still, our most important calling is to share the gospel with those far from God.

7. What does it mean that following the way of Jesus means looking at others through the lens of eternity? How does today's passage speak to this way of viewing others?

The mystery that Paul is speaking about in these verses is that through Christ, the Gentiles can belong to the family of God. What had long been considered exclusive to the Jews was now made available to Gentiles through the blood of Christ. The Gentiles had previously been regarded as separate from God, but now through Jesus, they (and most of us) are brought near God.

An example of this racial hatred between Jews and Gentiles is seen in John 4. If you remember the story, Jesus tells his disciples that they must go to Galilee, and to do so, they must first cut through Samaria. This shocked the disciples because, being the Jews that they were, they would have instinctively gone out of their way to avoid Samaria because of the racial hatred between the Jews and Samaritans.

Regarding our associations, we should think more like Jesus than this world with all its barriers and divisions. Following the way of Jesus means looking at others through the lens of love and counting it a privilege to tell others of the endless treasures available to them in Christ.

8. Read Philippians 3:17-21 and Hebrews 10:24-25. What do these verses say about not losing heart and remaining faithful to Christ in a culture moving away from all semblances of Christianity?

Philippians 3:17-21, "Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us. ¹⁸ For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. ¹⁹ Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things. ²⁰ But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, ²¹ who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.

Hebrews 10:24-25, "And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, ²⁵ not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near."

9. What's one personal takeaway from today's study you can focus on applying in your life this week?