

**Pastor Kyle Mercer**  
We Are in Christ

April 16, 2023  
Series: The Church and the Home  
Ephesians 1:1-2

**BIG IDEA – YOUR IDENTITY IS TO BE RECEIVED, NOT ACHIEVED**

You were made on purpose for a purpose. You're not an accident. You're not a mistake. You're not the product of time and chance. Your parents may have been surprised by you, but God was not surprised by you. We are entering a new series and season in the book of Ephesians, and that's exactly what it's about. It's about you realizing you're made on purpose for a purpose and finding that purpose among God's people.

So, you can type or turn to Ephesians. As you do, let me take one moment. I want to celebrate last week, Easter, our largest attendance ever. We had over 3,200 people with us. Isn't that incredible? Very, very exciting. That's a tipping point for us. Just think about this for a minute. That means over 1 percent of the population of Winston-Salem came to one of our services. Just incredible.

So, here's what I wanted to say: Thank you for investing. It rained. The parking crew and everybody... Yes. Thank you for investing. Thank you for inviting. It was an incredible week. If you came back... You were here last week, and you've been coming around for maybe just last week or maybe for the last month or so.

Let me tell you about our Weekender really quickly, April 21 and 22. This is how you move from the crowd to the connected and the committed, from "I'm interested in this church" to "I want to be invested in this church," from talking about our church like it's *that* church to talking about the church like it's *my* church."

Let me invite you... Some of you go, "I don't want to be the first to sign up." You're not. There are already over 50 people coming. It's going to be a great time. Also, let me encourage you, if you've been through the Weekender, to get in a group. If you are

not in a Community Group in our church (let me say this in the most loving way possible), you're not going to get everything you could out of this series.

If your only experience of Two Cities Church is on the weekend... We love the weekends, we believe in the weekends, but that's about half the experience of our church. The main place and point of connection and care is in Community Groups. That's where we work it all out. So, let me take a moment. I just want to thank God for all that happened at Easter and pray for us as we start this new series. Let's do that.

Lord, we thank you so much for Easter, for baptisms, for lives changed. I thank you for the people who invited and invested, who served in Kids and brought friends, and people who parked in the rain. Lord, now we just pray for fruit. The Christian ministry is the planting of seeds and the praying for fruit.

We ask that you would continue to water and cultivate the seeds we've planted in people who are far from God and close to us and that we would celebrate many more baptisms in the future, stories that came out of this past Easter weekend. We pray this in Jesus' name, amen.

You can type to or turn to Ephesians. If you have one of those real Bibles, you can find it. Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, or as I was taught as a brand-new believer, "God Eats Potato Chips." There you go. Or "General Electric Power Company." However you get there, find your way to Ephesians. We're just going to be in two verses, guys.

We went from talking about an entire chapter in Joshua every week to talking *this* week just about two verses. Let me introduce the whole concept really quickly to you, because maybe it's not immediately obvious why we do series. I don't think in terms of sermons, though I love them, and I don't think in terms of Sundays, though I love them. We think in terms of series.

Here's my question for you: *How could your life be different at the end of this series?* We're going to spend 16 weeks in what is two pages in your Bible. At least in *my* Bible, it's two pages front and back. It's only 155 verses, but pound for pound and page for page, most people say this is the most theologically rich and dense book in your Bible. Yes, Romans has more theology, but Romans is 16 long chapters. This is 6 very short chapters.

So, here's my question for you. And I know you don't know all that the book is about yet. You'll discover that. Here's my question for you: *How will your life be different at the end of this series?* Here's what it means to be a part of a church: connect your life and your family's life and say, "We're going to go through Ephesians together, and

we're going to work on this. This series is called *The Church and the Home*, and we're going to better understand the church and better understand the home."

How could your life be different at the end of July when this series is over? How is your marriage deeper? How is your family stronger? How is your identity in Christ more secure? How is your walk with Christ more intimate? How is your life more missional? How is our church more united? Isn't it exciting?

So, here's what we're doing, guys. We're just going to walk through verse by verse. Maybe you take it for granted. Why do we walk through books of the Bible verse by verse, line by line? It's so that we root the authority of this church not in a person or a pastor but in the text itself and to make sure we deal with all of the heart issues. We're going to deal with some really interesting things over the next 16 weeks and over these 6 chapters.

We're going to be tracing many themes, many topics. Two of the ones we're going to really focus on... There are a lot of topics. There's prayer, and there's spiritual warfare and today's identity. We're going to double-click on the home and the church, because those are the first two institutions God creates, and they are under attack today.

Did you see the new *Wall Street Journal* study that just came out two weeks ago? Basically, on the other side of COVID, community involvement is down, having kids is down, getting married is down, and religious faith is down. The only two things that are up are work and money. Those seem to be the only two things Americans really care about on the other side of COVID.

We're going to be spending these 16 weeks looking at many themes, but especially the church and the home. Why? Because the church is God's plan A (it's not an afterthought; it's how God accomplishes his purposes in the world) and the family is the place of human flourishing. So, let's go to verses 1 and 2. We're going to spend all our time in these two verses, so I will read them in their entirety. Here we go.

**"Paul..."** We'll talk about him for a while. **"...an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God..."** We'll talk about what God's will is. That's an important concept. **"...to the saints who are in Ephesus, and are faithful in Christ Jesus..."** That's verse 1. Then verse 2: **"Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."**

The big idea for this sermon is *your identity is to be received, not achieved*. Your whole life, everywhere you've ever gone, every job you've taken, every class you went to, every school you attended, they always told you, "You need to achieve your identity. You need to do a bunch of things, and then you'll become a certain person." That's the

exact opposite of what the Bible teaches about our identity in Christ. We don't work *for* an identity; we work *from* an identity.

This is such a big idea to understand the book of Ephesians. If you take Ephesians, the book we're in, it's six chapters. Here's what's really interesting. And this is how Paul always does this. Paul always tells us *who* before *do*. He always tells us our identity before any of our activities. This is so key. Look. I'm not making this up.

We won't be there for a couple of months, but in Ephesians, chapter 4, is the first command we get in Ephesians. Think about that. Chapter 1, chapter 2, chapter 3...no commands. When you go to the book of Romans, Paul doesn't give the first command until chapter 6...five chapters of telling us *who* before *do*. Here's what theologians call this: *indicatives before imperatives*.

God tells you who you are before he tells you what to do. It's like my friend growing up in high school. He had this great Christian family, and he tells the story that he was in high school. He was getting older, and he was struggling with all of the things high schoolers struggle with. He was going out to parties and different things. His parents gave him a long rope, but they always said...

He said, "My dad said the same thing to me every time I left the house. He said, 'Son, you're a Smith. Act like one.'" That's the book of Ephesians. To the Christian, "You're a Christian; act like one." The New Testament ethic is simply this: Become who God already says you are. Become practically and progressively what you are positionally.

So, we have to talk about identity, because we work *from* an identity, not *for* an identity. Now, we know identity is a big idea in our culture today. Whether you know it or not, you're reminded every day about identity theft. This is why you have to either use your face or type in a password.

Have you ever had this two-step verification process, where you log in, and then it says, "We're going to send you a text"? Then you have to click that button, "I'm not a robot." Then they bring up those little window squares, and you're like, "Is that a sidewalk or not?" Yeah, we've all been there.

Here's what I want you to know: your identity is being stolen today, but not the way we think it is where somebody else has your passcodes. Our identity is stolen today through lies. We are being lied to about who we are. The main problem in your life and in your kids' lives is you don't know who you are. Not knowing who you are and having anxiety are the exact same things.

We tell people today, "You can be anything." Guess what? That's too many things to be. We're constantly looking to everyone else for identity. With our time left, Paul is

going to tell us who *he* is, so we'll understand *his* identity and how that can be a part of *our* identity; he's going to tell us who *we* are; therefore, out of that, he's going to tell us what our lives should be about, namely, grace and peace.

So, let's go back to verse 1. I want to take us through all of this together. Let's look at the apostle Paul in verse 1. "***Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God...***" That's all he says about himself. So, we have to talk about Paul. Paul is so important. It's hard for me not to preach an entire sermon just on who Paul is. I love the apostle Paul.

Part of what happens time and time again... If you read your New Testament, you realize he wrote 13 letters. They're super personal. So, you take the book of Acts, and you take Paul's letters, and we can get a great picture of Paul's life. Let me just tell you about him because...you know this...it's super important to know the author. It validates and authenticates the rest of the message.

What's interesting is, nowadays, when we write an email... None of us really write letters anymore. If you get a letter, you're like, "Who was kidnapped?" That's how we feel if somebody writes us a letter. "Huh?" But we write emails. What's interesting about how we write emails is we put the person's name we're sending it to at the top, and finally, at the very end, we put *our* name. Back then, they put *their* name at the top, which seems to make more sense to me.

So, he says, "Paul..." Now who's Paul? Well, Paul was a very Jewish man, but he was a Roman citizen. Very interesting. He grew up wealthy. He was from the tribe of Benjamin. That's a very wealthy tribe. What's interesting is his name wasn't always *Paul*. Maybe you know this, maybe you don't. His name used to be *Saul*.

Now, why would someone be named Saul? Most people think his name was Saul because he was of the tribe of Benjamin. Guess who else was of the tribe of Benjamin: King Saul, the first king of Israel. He had good Jewish parents. They named him after the first king of Israel. So, Paul grows up as a very Jewish man. That's going to be very important in understanding his story.

Now, you may have heard *this* before. Paul is on the road to Damascus, and when Paul is converted, Jesus changes his life. This is all true, and this happens in Acts, chapter 9. I was always told (and I think I've said this, so, sorry I was wrong)... I have always said, "Oh, yeah. God changed his name from Saul to Paul." That's actually not true. If you go and read it, there's no name change.

In fact, he's called Saul a little bit more in chapters 10, 11, and 12. The first time Saul changes his name to Paul is when he's sent out in Acts 13 from that great mission-sending church, the first mission-sending church in the Bible, the church at Antioch.

Paul changes his own name from Saul to Paul. Why? Because there's not a much more Jewish name than Saul. Right? He changes his name to Paul so that his name won't be a barrier in reaching the Greeks and the Gentiles.

The first thing I want you to know about Paul is he was a Jewish Roman citizen. He ends up using his Roman citizenship to get him places the rest of his ministry and mission. The second thing I want you to know about Paul is he was a Pharisee. Now, Pharisees get a bad rap, and rightly so, because we're reading it through the lens and light of the Gospels.

We're like, "Oh, the Pharisees. They're just as bad as the Sadducees. They're Jesus' enemy, and they're super religious." Here's what I want you to think. What is a Pharisee? Let's teleport, if we could, back to the first century. Here's the best way to think about a Pharisee. A Pharisee was a lawyer, in today's terms. Now, lawyers today... It's like, okay, you do constitutional law or you do... They did Torah law.

So, here's what you need to know about Paul. Paul was wealthy. Pharisees were well paid. Paul was respected in culture. This was back when the idea of being a religious leader was respected. Paul learned under Gamaliel (he tells us that) who we know was the best teacher of the day, which means Paul was super smart, because a lot of Jewish boys wanted to grow up and be Pharisees, but they couldn't because they weren't smart enough.

You had to be the best and brightest, and another Pharisee had to take you and decide to invest in you. You had to memorize the first five books of the Bible. Some of you (it's okay) have never read the first five books of the Bible. Paul memorized them. The way they would test you is they would give you a verse, and you had to say the verse before it and the verse after it.

Here's what I'm trying to tell you: you've never met someone as religious as the apostle Paul. We never will. I don't even know that it's possible in our society today to meet a person as devoted as Paul. Paul was so devoted he goes from (if you know the story of Acts, you know this, and he tells us about this as well)... He's ashamed of this.

Paul goes from being a Pharisee to being a persecutor of the church. The first time we meet Saul, before he even becomes Paul, he's at the stoning of Stephen, approving of it. Paul ends up chasing down Christians, imprisoning them, and killing them, and then his whole life changes when he meets Jesus. Do you remember what Jesus says to him? "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?"

He says, "Who are you, Lord?" and he's blind for three days. Then scales fall off his eyes, and people are amazed, because the same Jesus he was persecuting people

about he begins to proclaim, which is why now he calls himself an *apostle*. An *apostle* is somebody who has a derivative authority. Paul didn't have any authority in himself, but in verse 1 he says, "I'm an apostle of Christ Jesus."

In other words, he had a unique authority to write scripture and doctrine, along with the other apostles, and their writings became the foundation of the church. Do you see the middle of verse 1? He says that he understands his life... This is a huge part of identity. I want us to get this. He sees his entire life according to God's will.

I think I said this at least in some of the services at Easter. The number-one question people ask after "Why is there suffering?" is "What is God's will?" That's it. We know that. That's a common question. Many of you have asked that question. But here's the problem with all of us. When we ask the question of "What is God's will?" we're normally thinking small and self-focused.

What are you thinking? You're thinking, "Should I take this job or not?" Fair enough. I'm not saying God doesn't care about these things. You're like, "Should I get married or not? Should I date him or her or not? Should we have kids or not? Should I buy the house or not? Should we move or not?" Fair enough.

In general, when the Bible talks about God's will, that's not what it's talking about. It's not talking about your individual, personal will for your life. The will of God is so much bigger than any one of us. It's interesting. In other places of the Bible it's called *God's plan*. In other places of the Bible it's called *God's purpose*. A little bit later in Ephesians it's called (I love this) *God's good pleasure*.

Let me explain how the will of God works. God has two wills. (I know this will hurt your head just a little bit, but it's worth it.) God is not like us. He's above us. He's different than us. God has what's called a *will of desire*. A *will of desire* is his revealed will that you can read in the Bible. Some people call it the *will of command*.

I had a friend, and he was deciding between two jobs. They were both high-level, great jobs. He said, "Kyle, the way I made the decision is I was reading my Bible, and I came to the end of 1 Thessalonians. At the very end of 1 Thessalonians it says, 'Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing. Give thanks in all circumstances.' I prayed about it. I realized in job A I could do that better." Wow. "I could better obey God's will in job A, so I chose it over job B."

Will of desire is very helpful. Most of God's will is found in God's Word. But I told you God has a second will. You read the Bible, and you're like, "Wait a second. This doesn't all seem to be happening the way I thought it was going to happen." That's why you have the Psalms. The Psalms are, basically, people crying out, going, "God,

I'm confused about your will," which is why theologians have understood (this is what Paul is talking about) God has a *will of decree*.

It's his secret, sovereign will in which he does not play checkers, but he plays chess. We never fully know how it's all going to work together. We get the end picture in the book of Revelation. If you ever ask the question... And people ask this question. "What is God doing?" At one level we can say, "I'm not exactly sure." At another level we can say, "He's accomplishing his will of decree."

Here's what happens. This is so helpful. Here's how we live *our* lives, and this is how Paul lived *his* life. You obey the will of desire, you trust the will of decree, and in the midst of it, you discover your personal will of direction. So, here's how the will of God works. This is so helpful to know. I hope this will be helpful for you. You don't understand God's will looking through the windshield of your life. Sometimes you do. Sometimes you can see far enough.

But what does the Bible say? His Word is a lamp to our feet. We see a few steps. What happens is when you look back on your life in the rearview mirror, you understand God's will. So, when Paul is looking back, he says, "I am an apostle according to the will of God." Here's what Paul is saying: "This is why I knew so much Torah. This is why I was a Pharisee: so I could understand the Bible so well I could explain Jesus from it."

He's going to say, "Oh, this is why I persecuted the church: because I'm going to be persecuted the rest of my life, and it's going to give me a compassion for those who persecute me and a strategy to run away from them, because I know what they're thinking." He's going to say, "This is why you gave me such an intellectual ability: because I'm going to write inspired Scripture for the church."

Can you look back over your life and go, "This is why this happened to me, as painful as it was"? We tell people here all the time (and I think it's worth saying one more time), "Your greatest ministry will flow out of the greatest sin you've struggled with, the greatest struggle you've gone through, or the greatest suffering you've endured." There's a reason for that. People who struggle want to be ministered to by people who have struggled or suffered in the same way.

So, what we have here is this whole understanding of Paul. He says, "Here's who I am. I'm an apostle according to the will of God." He spends a lot of time on himself, but he spends even more time on *us*. Let's continue on. Look with me at what he says about us. ***"Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, to the saints who are in Ephesus, and are faithful in Christ Jesus..."***



Before I transition and tell you a little bit about who the Ephesians were and what they did, let me tell you a little bit about Paul's time in Ephesus. What's interesting, by the way, is when he writes, "According to the will of God..." Do you know where he's writing Ephesians from? Prison. Paul did prison ministry from the inside.

The apostle Paul spent, we estimate... We try to put Acts together with his other letters, and we try to put it all together. We estimate, best guess, Paul spent six to seven years in prison. In fact, the old joke about the apostle Paul was whenever he'd go to a new city, he'd ask where the prison was because he wanted to know where he'd be spending the night.

What's amazing about Paul... When he's in Philippi, he's in prison with Silas. They sing songs, and they end up leading the jailor to Christ. By the way, this is a helpful thing to know about God's will: just because something is hard or your life isn't going exactly how you want it to doesn't mean you're not in God's will. Paul is in prison, and he understands himself in the will of God.

Now, he loved the Ephesians. He had been to Ephesus twice that we know of. He said, "I was there for a really short journey." We don't know how long that was. He spent more time in Ephesus than in any other city on any other missionary journey. His second time in Ephesus, he spent three years there. In fact, if you read Acts 19, we get a detailed account, and in Acts 20, he speaks to the elders. It's really interesting.

Here's what Paul did in every city. This is good to know. Christians have modeled their ministry after Paul for a long time. The first thing Paul did when he went to a city, after he checked out the prison... Every time, he did the exact same thing. He went first to the synagogues. He went to the synagogues because he believed the gospel was to the Jews first and then to the Gentiles.

So, he'd go to the synagogue, and he'd preach Jesus, and sometimes he'd get stoned, sometimes he'd get beaten, sometimes he'd get laughed at, and sometimes a few people would believe, and he'd say, "Okay, come with me." Then he would go over to the marketplace. Think, like, he'd go down to the Innovation Quarter.

He'd go to where people were gathering, and he'd preach about Jesus there. That's where all of the Greeks and Gentiles would be. A few people would believe, but sometimes they wouldn't. Then he would gather those people. So, the first thing he did was he would evangelize them. He'd share Christ with them. A few people would believe, and then he would begin to disciple them. This is what he did every place he ever went. He would disciple them for several months.

There are four things he did. First, he led them to Christ. Second, he disciplined them. The third is very interesting. We get this detailed account in Acts 14. It says after Paul

discipled people, he would tell them, "It is through many trials and much tribulation that you will enter the kingdom of God." Paul had a whole theology and philosophy of suffering that he would teach people.

The fourth thing he would do is he would appoint elders. He would appoint local leaders for the local churches, and then Paul would leave. Every time, that's what he did. Sometimes he was able to come back and visit. Other times he was able to write letters.

By the way, notice that Paul used the technology and the communication available to him at the time to get the gospel out. This is why we use YouTube. This is why we have a website. This is why we use social media. This is why we send you emails. We have tried to redeem every type of technology we can...except TikTok. It cannot be redeemed. No, I'm just kidding.

By the way, this is also worth noting. (I'm just kind of introducing us to all of these themes you're going to see later in this book.) Paul also targeted cities. Ephesus would have been the third largest city in the Roman Empire at the time Paul was writing. Paul only and exclusively went to cities.

The early Christian mission and ministry to cities was so successful... Do you know the word *pagan*, which we think as a nonbeliever...? Do you know the first people who were called *pagans*? Rural people. The root word for *pagan* means "I don't live in the city." What has happened today is the exact opposite. Christians have lived only in rural areas and in suburbs, and they've left the cities.

Jesus cares about every person in every place, but I want you to know, as we're building this building downtown, one of the reasons we did it was we said, "We want to go to the heart of the city." This is what Paul always did because he knew influence flows down from the city. This is why Paul, later in Acts... He could have gone home free, and he said, "I appeal to Caesar." Why, Paul? "Because I need to get to the very heart and center of culture."

So, that's Paul. Now Paul tells us who *we* are. Let's look at what he says about us. He says, "***Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God...***" Here's what he says about us: "***...to the saints who are in Ephesus, and are faithful in Christ Jesus...***" So, he tells us who we are. Do you see three things he's going to tell us? He says we're *saints* (I'll talk about that), we're *in Ephesus* (I'll talk about that), and we're *in Christ*. All three of those are super important.

Before I talk about that, I have to talk a little bit about identity. It's such a huge topic. When I preach through books of the Bible, I'm always surprised how much I end up

talking about circumcision, and I'm always surprised how much I talk about suffering. I'm also surprised how much I end up talking about personal identity.

This is so important. Stick with me for a few minutes here, because I'm going to tell you a little bit about the water we are currently swimming in that we don't even know and how we understand identity today. Today, you'll hear something like *this*. You may not even know what it means, because we don't usually talk like this, but people will say things like this. You've probably heard this. "Identity is a social construct." That's a very common saying.

Here's what people mean when they say that. I didn't know what they meant. I had to read about this and think about this and pray about this and all that. Here's what people mean: identity is not fixed, it's flexible (this is what people believe today); and identity has nothing to do with theology (who God says we are) or biology (what our body reveals us to be). Instead...

If you're interested in reading a book on this... It's a thick book, but it's called *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self* by Carl Trueman. It's like the smartest person you've ever talked to yelling at you for 400 pages. He explains how, over the last 150 years, we got to a place where identity has become two things. This is so important. This is why your kids are dealing with what they're dealing with. This is why our culture is confused.

Two things have happened to identity. It has become *psychologized* and *sexualized*. There has been an overemphasis on feelings and looking inward. In the book I just told you about... He starts the book and says, "The reason I wrote this book is because I wanted to figure out how we could live in a world where somebody would say, 'I am a woman trapped in a man's body' or 'I am a man trapped in a woman's body.'" Do you hear the feeling language there?

It's like, "What do you mean by that?" What does a woman feel like? What does that mean? So, what's inside of you is stronger and more powerful and more potent than the biology all around you. Very interesting. Here's why this has happened. We have so much freedom we think we have so much flexibility with our identity.

Teleport back with me for a moment. Imagine it's the thirteenth century. You go and talk to some 10-year-old or 12-year-old boy in the thirteenth century. I want you to understand that his identity would have been fixed with no potential for it being flexible. I'll give you an example.

You talk to the 13-year-old boy, and you ask, "What are you going to do when you get older?" That's an identity issue. Right? What's his answer? "I don't even have to think

about it...what my dad does." How much of our identity crisis is in "What school am I going to go to? What am I going to do?"

So, first question: "What are you going to do?" "What my dad did." Second question: "Where will you live?" "I don't even understand that question. There's nowhere else to live. There's nowhere else to go. This is where my family has always lived. What do you mean?"

"Okay. Who will you marry?" That's another huge identity crisis for people. "I already met her. We met when we were 10. There are only 100 people in this town. My parents will help me with it."

"What will you believe?" "I don't understand that question. That's my church right there. I was born there. I was baptized there. I'll be buried there."

You have to understand that that is much more the human experience for all of human history until very recently where our identity became flexible. "Where could I live? Who could I marry? What could I do?" We've gone and looked inside. This is why you're so obsessed with the Enneagram or the Myers-Briggs or the DiSC. We're not against those things, but a lot of that is we don't know who we are. "Maybe if I take this test, it will help me look inside of me and find out."

Remember last week I talked about if you went to your great-grandfather and asked, "Is your job fulfilling?" If you really could explain to your great-grandfather what you meant, here's what he would say, I think. He would say, "My job is very fulfilling. It allows me to provide shoes for my kids. It allows me to put food on my table. It allows me to pay all of our bills and for us to have a small house."

Do you understand? Think about this with me for a second. He's looking outside of himself. We've psychologized our jobs. So, if somebody asks, "What do you like about your job? Is your job fulfilling?" I immediately go inward. I'm like, "Oh yeah, I love it. I love when I'm unpacking some truth for the first time, and I'm watching other people get it." It's like, okay, we've psychologized and gone internal.

Here's the second thing. There are two places people wrongly find too much of their identity. The first is in their feelings, and the second is in their suffering. Let me give you another big word: *intersectionality*. If you've never heard of that word, you've experienced it. Here's what it is. We break up the world into race, class, sex, and disability.

This is how you know you're in an ideology. You're in an ideology if it's too simple. But this is what people do. They break it up. Then they think the more oppressed

identities they have, the better, and the louder their voice should be. Let me show you how this works.

"A man shouldn't be speaking here. I'm a woman. I'll speak." Then another woman goes, "You're a woman? I'm a Black woman. *I'll* speak. I have a unique..."

"Okay. You're a Black woman? I'm a Black gay woman."

"Oh, you're a Black gay woman. Hold on. I'm a Black gay woman with a disabled son."

"Oh, you're a Black gay woman with... Hold on. I'm a Black gay woman with a disabled son and an alcoholic father."

Don't make your issues your identity. Do not play the game "Who has suffered the most?" No one who's playing that game is happy. Have you ever met someone who's playing that game who's happy? Have you ever met a happy feminist? Exactly. Paul gives us something better. He tells us we're three things. Let's talk about them.

First, he says you're a *saint*. Now, I have to go back to my Catholic roots. I grew up Catholic. If you grew up Catholic, you think of saints as an elite spiritual class. I read what you have to do to be a saint.

First of all, you have to live an extraordinary life, so we're all out of it. The second thing you have to do is you have to do a miracle during your life. The third thing you have to do is die. The fourth thing you have to do is a group of people has to vote on if you were really a saint, and then you become canonized, and then they put you over a certain area, and then other Catholics can pray to you. That's the Catholic view of being a saint.

A Christian is a saint. It's actually Paul's favorite description for the Christian. He uses it nine times in Ephesians alone. A saint has two components. *Saint* means set apart and holy. *Set apart* means consecrated, dedicated, and devoted, but it also means to take on the character of God (this is what I said earlier), to become who God says you already are.

So, he tells them they're a saint, but then he tells them two other interesting things that are worth our attention and thought. He says, "You're in Ephesus, and you're in Christ." Do you see those two identities? It's a physical identity and a spiritual identity. It's an identity on earth and an identity in heaven. It's a temporary identity and a permanent identity.

*In Ephesus* are all of our secondary identities, and you have several of them. Your secondary identities are usually connected to people and places, and they change across time. The main thing is you don't look inside. The Bible teaches us we don't

look inside to find our identity; we look outside of us, and we look to relationships to find our identity.

This is why, for most people... Guys, you're going to have basically five identities in your life. You're going to be dad, husband, son, brother, and some type of employee. That's about it. You don't need more identities than that. For women, it's going to be basically the same thing on the other side. It's going to be wife, mother, sister, daughter, and employee. That's it. That's enough identities.

Here's how you know this is important. What's the hard thing about being an orphan? Think about an orphan for a moment. If you get into the foster care and adoption process (and some of you are, and thank God for that), you're going to see the heartbreak of a lot of it. What's hard about orphans is they have no identity because they have no consistent relationship.

Until you're, like, 10, your identity is "son" and "sibling," and that's enough when you're 10 years old. "I'm a son, and I'm a sibling" or "I'm a daughter, and I'm a sibling," and that's it. When you're an orphan, you don't have those identities, and people often spend the rest of their lives in brokenness, trying to figure that out.

Here's the thing about your secondary identities. You don't want to put too much weight on them because most of them don't last across time. The most unhappy person is the one who puts way too much identity in being a college student, and then they have to graduate. Like, the guy who's going back and still wearing his varsity jacket to the high school games though he's 25. Stay away from him.

We have to embrace the temporary nature of our identities. This is not a trick question, but I had this thought this week. I was like, "Okay. For most of us, our parents are going to die before us. If your parents die..." And this has happened to some of you. Both of your parents die. Are you still a son? It certainly changes the experience of it.

If your spouse dies, you're no longer a husband or a wife. You know, most of us are going to move something like six to eight times in our lives. We don't want to get too connected to any one identity. This is why the second identity of being *in Christ*... That's Paul's favorite phrase ever. This is why it's important. We're going to unpack it more in weeks to come.

There's no phrase more important to the apostle Paul than those two words. I know we pass them over, and they're everywhere, but listen. "In Christ" shows up 27 times just in Ephesians. It's the experience of the believer that what faith does... Faith, in a mysterious way, unites you to Jesus Christ. That's what all of the great Reformers talked about. They said faith is that which unites you to Christ.

The Bible actually says we're hidden with Christ in God and sealed by the Holy Spirit, which means if Satan wants to come after us, he has to go through all three members of the Trinity to get to us. You are very, very secure. Here's how your identity should work. You take your "in Christ" identity and put it as the first word before all of your secondary identities. This is so basic.

You are a *Christian* mom. That will help direct, influence, and inform what it means to be a mom. This may sound silly to some of you, but I have to remind myself I'm a *Christian* pastor. I'm a Christian even before I'm a pastor. I'm not just somebody who studies the Bible to teach other people what it says. I am, first and foremost, a Christian. You're a *Christian* brother. You're a *Christian* teacher.

When you become a Christian, being a Christian becomes the most important thing about you. That's how you know you've become a Christian. If being a Christian is a secondary identity in your life, then I don't know if you've really become a Christian. When you become a Christian, you're in Christ. Here's the theological term. It's called *union with Christ*.

Union with Christ is the precursor for communion with Christ. Paul is going to give us this in Ephesians 5, but the picture of this on earth is marriage. Two people become one. When someone gets married, they have a union, but then they have to decide across time to have communion. How many people have you met who have union but no communion?

This is also the temptation of Christians across time, which is why Paul ends... Look at verse 2. Paul ends telling us what our lives should be about. Here's what he says: **"Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."** Now, I told you earlier who Paul is. It's worth saying one more time.

Can you believe Paul, the persecutor, and Paul, the Pharisee, has now been transformed to Paul, the guy who talks about grace and peace? Paul's life was (and I think he knew this) the exact opposite of grace and peace before he met Jesus. His life was all about law. This is where some of you are.

Before you're a Christian, your life is all about your accomplishments or your religious activity. Before you come to Christ, that's where you find your identity. Paul found his identity in being a Pharisee of Pharisees. Read Philippians 3. He goes, "A Hebrew of Hebrews." He even boasted of things we would never boast about. He goes, "I was circumcised on the eighth day."

Paul boasted in his religious activity and in his accomplishments before he understood grace. Then what was Paul's whole life about right before he met Jesus?

Bringing terror, violence, and destruction to people, which is the exact opposite of what Paul is now about. Paul is about bringing peace.

It's hard to understand grace and peace. We say those words... If you ever wonder, "Why did Jesus teach in parables..." It's kind of interesting. Why did he tell so many stories? Because it's not easy to explain hope. It's not easy to give a definition for *love*. It's not easy to articulate a definition for *grace* and *peace*. So Jesus told us stories.

The best definition I *have* heard for grace is a one-way love. It's a love coming to you that has nothing to do with you. It's God loving the unlovable. I think, for me, recently, one of the most powerful stories that expresses the grace of God is *Les Misérables*. I don't know if any of you got to see it. It was at Tanger a couple of weeks ago, and I went with my wife and some friends. Just follow me. This is important to understand the grace of God.

Jean Valjean gets out of prison, and he's angry, bitter, resentful, and all of that. He can't find anywhere to live, because when you get out of prison... He was poor. So this priest invites him into the house. The priest sings him a song, which I will not sing you. He basically says, "We don't have much, but what we have is yours." He says, "Good night. We'll see you in the morning."

In the middle of the night, Jean Valjean gets up, and he steals from this priest. He steals the candles, and he steals anything of value. He heads out in the middle of the night. This is one of the first scenes in the whole story. The police grab him. You're watching, and you go, "This is the end. He's going to go back to another 20 years in prison."

The police bring him back to the priest's house, and they say, "This man stole your candles and your silver, and he said you gave it to him." In this powerful moment, the priest says, "I did." He says, "But you forgot more things." He goes back and gets more silver, and he gives the man who stole from him even more. You can see the effect it has on Jean Valjean.

He sings him another song, which I also won't sing. He says, "Use this to be a better man." The next scene is 15 years later, and his whole life has been transformed by an act of grace. We need stories of our own lives, and others, where we see the grace of God. Philip Yancey wrote a book called *What's So Amazing About Grace?* He gives no definition of grace in the whole book. It's a whole book of stories about the grace of God.

Secondly, we don't understand peace. We live in a society that wants peace but doesn't understand grace. The only way you get peace is by the grace of God. What is



peace? At the deepest level, here's the definition of *peace*: it's rest for your soul. The way you find rest for your soul is you realize, "Oh my goodness. Jesus Christ has dealt with my sin at the cross; therefore, I have peace, because I no longer have guilt." Secondly, you can have peace when you're no longer trying to achieve an identity, but you can receive an identity from Christ.

How much of our lives is some rat race and some "compare, compete, conquer" with other coworkers or classmates or family members? There is no peace because we're all striving for some identity. Where do peace and grace come from? Grace is given and peace is purchased by Christ. This is why he says there's grace and peace from our Lord Jesus Christ and God the Father.

As we start to embark on this four-month journey through Ephesians, I ask you... Let's close by dreaming together the dream of Ephesians. What would it look like for you to be so secure in your identity in Christ, where you say, "I'm a Christian brother" or "I'm a Christian sister" or "I'm a Christian mom" or "I'm a Christian dad" or "I'm a Christian teacher" or "I'm a Christian banker..."

You could be so secure in that identity you could actually be a peacemaker to other people. See, the reason we can't love people and serve people is, often, we need something from them. "I need you to see me as something. I need you to give me some identity. I need you to know who I am." Instead, we can say, "I actually know who I am, and I know whose I am."

How amazing would it be if our identity was fully in Christ, and secondly, how incredible would it be if our homes and this church and many other places were places of grace and peace? A place of grace and peace is a place where sin can be confessed. In fact, we're not shocked by sin. A place of grace and peace is where people get to start over, and they get second chances. It's a place where your life can fall apart and be put back together.

It's a place where we're not surprised when people sin. It's a place where we're quick to confess our own sins. What would it look like if we went out from here, today, and we were secure in who we were in Christ and committed to making every environment we head into a place of grace and peace? Because we've received grace and peace vertically, we can give it to others horizontally. Let's pray that together.

Lord, that is our prayer. Would you make us so secure in who we are? Paul, in his first opening sentence, can't but talk about how he belongs to the Lord Jesus. Paul understood his whole life and his whole ministry in terms of his relationship with you, Lord Jesus. Would you do that for us? Would you make us so secure, Lord? We pray for, particularly, our young teenagers, our middle schoolers, our high schoolers,

and our college students who are being bombarded daily, being told who they are, being lied to.

Would you give us a confidence, Lord? Would you let us live in both spheres, Lord? We live in an earthly sphere and a heavenly sphere at the same time. We have both an earthly address and a heavenly address. Would you help our heavenly identity of being in Christ to empower and influence our everyday, earthly identities? We pray this in Jesus' name, amen.