

Becoming Who We Are: An Unexpected Family

Ephesians 1:3-14

“*Becoming who we are*” – that’s what we will be considering together for the next 11 weeks here at LAC. With that phrase, we’re trying to capture something that is central to the New Testament’s teaching about us growing to become more like Jesus.

But, I wonder what most people think of when they hear a phrase like, “becoming who we are.” I imagine that many might think that it’s talking about something we often hear in some pop psychology in our day that says all of us should discover what our individual passions are, what our inclinations or deepest desires are – and then go after them with all our strength. “Don’t let anyone else tell you what to do or what’s right and wrong! You’ve got to go for it yourself!” This view of life challenges you to “self-actualize,” i.e., it tells you that you and you alone are responsible to fulfill your potential.

That’s not what we’ll be teaching this fall here at Lake. So, if that’s not what this series is about, what else might come to mind when hear, “becoming who we are”? Well, I’m quite sure some of you might think of the Disney animated movie, *The Lion King*. In it, the young heir to the throne of the king of the jungle named Simba had embraced a self-centered “hakuna matata” philosophy not unlike the self-centered view of life I just mentioned. Simba was wasting his life living for himself with no worries and no problems about the rest of the world. Then, as you may know, he receives a visit from the grave by his deceased father, Mufasa, in which the father tells his son, “Remember who you are!” Mufasa wanted his son to know that he was made for something much bigger than this self-centered living. (See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=661FpEeDb7g>)

What we will be talking about this fall will be a whole lot more like Mufasa’s words to young Simba than like the false promises of self-actualization. But, what the Bible teaches is not quite the same as Mufasa taught. What we be considering is the Bible’s call to us, **first, to see ourselves as God sees us** when Jesus is our savior, i.e., God sees us “in Christ.” God sees us not just as we might be living right now but as we will be when God has finished his work in us. Then, **second**, we’ll consider **how we will become what God says we will be** – when God has finished his work in us.

Know this today: God already sees you as he promises he will make you to be. The Bible says, God sees you “in Christ”. Not one of us has yet been made complete (Amen?) – but, the Book of Ephesians will teach us that we are all

becoming who we are in the eyes of God. In fact, God promises it – guarantees it (1:13-14).

So, **here is the question of the day: *Who are we in the eyes of God?*** When God sees us now as he promises we will be, what does he see? I want to ask this question both about us as a church and as individuals.

Who are we at Lake Avenue Church? *When God sees us, what does he see?*

God sees us as a gathering of his loved, blessed and unexpected family made up of people from every tribe, language and nation and located in this time and place to live together in such ways that we make God known to our world. Making known what God is like is what it means to glorify God. We are here in Pasadena, CA in the 21st C to glorify God. In other words, when the world sees us doing life together, they should see growing to become what our Triune God is like.

Are we perfectly like that now? No, we aren't! But, God promises us we will be. And, what we will hear from Scripture this entire fall is about the work of God that will lead to us as a church becoming who we are.

Who are you in the eyes of God? *When God sees you, what does he see?*

God sees you as a person he lavishly loves and blesses, and whose life he is remaking to be whole and complete like that of Jesus. In other words, when people see you, they will increasingly see something of Jesus. They will see a person, as Rom 8:29 says, is being “conformed to the image of Christ.”

Are you perfectly like that now? No! You are not – nor am I! But all of us who place our faith in Jesus are promised that through the work of God in our lives, we will be. And, at the heart of the Book of Ephesians is this matter of becoming: both becoming who we are as a church in the family of God and becoming who we are as individual members of the family of God.

I have been discovering more and more how genuine followers of Jesus often agonize over how far we are from what God promises he will make us to be. Over the past 20-25 years, I have had the incredible privilege of being with great men and women of God at the ends of their lives who have confessed to me that they consider themselves, even at the end of their lives, to be far short of what the Bible calls “*the glory of God*” (Rom 3:23). And, now after following Jesus myself for 60 years and being a pastor for most of them, I feel that way too. In fact, I imagine today that we can all relate to the Apostle Paul's words

in **Phil. 3:12-14** -- I am not saying “*that I have already obtained all this or have already arrived at the goal...*”. I am saying that “*I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me...*”.

That passage means so much to me. It’s my own testimony. In other words, I honestly confess I am not yet all that I will be, but I press on toward becoming who I am in Christ. I am filled with hope.

So, we will be seeing beautiful language about becoming who we are in Christ as we go through Ephesians:

- “God chose us in Christ to be holy and blameless before him (1:3).”
- “We are God’s masterpiece created in Christ Jesus for good works (2:10).”
- “We will be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God (3:19).”
- “We will we all reach unity in the faith... and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ (4:13).”
- “We will put on a new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness (4:24).”

All this is summed up succinctly in **Eph 5:8** – “*You were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. So, begin to live as children of light.*” In other words, “become who you are!”

Let’s begin today in the place the Apostle Paul began, i.e., with the reminder that all this can only happen through the work of God. Darkness cannot turn itself into light. In Ephesians 1:3-14, Paul begins his letter by telling us that **this beautiful promise of us becoming what we are meant to be is the work of the Triune God: Father (1:3-6), Son (1:7-12), and Holy Spirit (1:13-14).** Today, I’ll give you only a brief overview of God’s work in our lives. But, we’ll be going deeper into how God is at work in us throughout this series of messages.

In Eph 1:3-14, the Apostle Paul used family language to begin his letter to the church in the mega-city of Ephesus. This was a church that was struggling to be unified as a family because some of the members were Jews and others were Gentiles. In the world at that time, these two groups hated one another. They may have loved Jesus – but they didn’t love one another. So, one fundamental question that permeates this entire letter is: “Whose idea was it to have a family like this?”

#1: This unexpected family is God the Father's eternal plan to make his glory known. *The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ chose us in him before the creation of the world...* (1:3-6).

Our English versions have divided Eph 1:3-12 into a number of sentences – but, in the original letter, it was all one long sentence. The Apostle Paul was thrilled when he wrote it, so much so that he didn't even pause to take a breath. It's like he's shouting out, "Let me tell you something: Praise be to God the Father! He has blessed people like you and me with every spiritual blessing in Christ. And, believe it or not, we don't have to beg him for those blessings. We can't earn those blessings. No, he chose us before the creation of the world to be in his family and to lavish his blessings on us!!"

Most people in our American churches who read Eph 1:3-14 seem to focus only on the theological doctrines about salvation found in words like "chosen" and "predestined". Now, as I have spoken of often here at LAC, the Bible points out again and again that our salvation begins with God. He loved us before we ever loved him. At the same time, we do have a responsibility to respond in faith to God by receiving Jesus as savior and making a commitment to follow him in obedience. Both of these things are true.

But, in Eph 1, the Bible emphasizes the first part of that truth, i.e., that God is the one who wanted us in his family. This is the point that thrilled the Apostle Paul so profoundly. Do you remember that, even at the end of his life, Paul still felt that he was the worst of sinners (1 Tim 1:15) and that God loved him anyway? Paul knew there was no hope for him without God taking the initiative to break into his life. Salvation starts with God.

To understand these great verses, you need to realize that, in them, the Bible is taking about being adopted into a family. Notice that phrase in v. 4, "*adoption as sons*." This was a technical phrase in the 1st C legal world. There were several kinds of adoption but this phrase, "adoption as sons" referred to the kind of adoption in which *the adopted child was made a full member of the family including all inheritance rights*. Yes, this kind of adopted child was not a 2nd class family member. That's why Paul says that when God adopts us into his family, he gives us "*every spiritual blessing (1:3)*" that the Heavenly Father of this family can give. And, as I hope you know, our Father gives us everything that truly matters. He forgives sins, takes away shame and guilt, begins to heal our inner beings, to reconcile broken relationships... He can set you free from addictions and bondages. He gives you life to the full. He does all that and much, much more.

So, if you say, “If God knew some things about me, he wouldn’t want me in his family.” I’m telling you, “He already knows – he knows everything about you”. And, he loves you. Now, God loves you too much to leave you where you are, but he is ready and able to turn you around and remake your life.

And, what he says to us as individuals, he also says to us as a church family. The language in these verses is not singular but plural. These are words written to local church families like ours. What the Bible says is that God’s eternal plan is that he will bring together into one family people as divided as Jews and Gentiles were in the city of Ephesus. Did you notice vv. 9-10? They speak of God’s eternal purpose to make known his glory: “*God the Father purposed in Christ...to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.*” And, that work is to start in the local churches God places in communities.

So, God placed a church in Ephesus in the 1st C. He placed it into a society in which Jew and Gentile wanted nothing to do with one another and told them he would unite them and make them one in Christ. That’s who they were – one unexpected family now one in Christ. And, he has now placed us here in Pasadena, CA, one of the most diverse cities in our world and he adopts us into one family. He unites here us in Christ. As he adopts us into his family, he leaves the breadth of diversity: different ethnicities, different physical appearance, different gifts, different generations, etc. But, he plants us into this neighborhood and tells us to live, serve and worship in unity so that people might see that God is real and see what he is like. Just as God is one God always existing as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, so the church is one but made up of every kind of person God has created – all one in Christ. That’s who we are. Now, we must become who we are!

Sometimes it’s hard, isn’t it? But, this is God idea and God’s eternal plan. Who else would have thought of such a thing? You and I surely would have chosen different family members. That’s for sure. God chose the Pharisee Paul as well as a woman who had been trapped in prostitution in Luke 7 – both for one family. He chose a tax-collector Zacchaeus who was viewed as a traitor by his own people as well as a political zealot like Simon who thought that tax-collectors needed to be imprisoned – and put them into one family. Would you have done that? Of course not. But, God does. And, by doing so, he makes himself known to all the world. He thereby declares, that there is good news available for all people – for all people – through faith in Jesus. There is welcome through faith in Christ for all people in God’s unexpected family.

My time is almost gone today – and I’ve hardly begun. So, let me simply show you briefly how these verses speak not only of the work of God the Father but also of God the Son and God the Holy Spirit – and we will return to these things more fully throughout fall.

#2: The unexpected family is made possible through the person and work of God the Son, Jesus. *In Jesus, we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins...* (1:7-12).

Who are we? According to v. 4, we are people God sees as “holy and blameless.” That includes you and me! It begs a huge question, doesn’t it? How can a God who is truth truthfully declare that you and I are holy and blameless? How can unholy people be said to be holy? How can God see blame-filled/shame-filled people as blameless and freed from shame?

You know the answer, don’t you? God the Father sent his Son Jesus to rescue us. That’s how he does it. Jesus alone lived the holy and blameless life we should all be living – but none of us has lived a perfectly holy and blameless life. Then, this same sinless one was willing to die the death we all deserve for our sins and he did it knowingly and he did it in our place. He took the punishment we deserve and paid the price necessary for our forgiveness. In awe as one rescued by Jesus, Paul says in vv. 7-8, “*In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace that he lavishes on us...*”

Why would God do such a thing? The Bible only says, “*in love*” in v.4. So, God loves us! God loves you! That is true even when we are not yet fully holy and blameless. God sees us in Christ. He sees us as we will be when he is finished with us.

How do we receive that gift of forgiveness? V. 13 tells us: You are “*included in Christ when you hear the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation and you believe...*”. So, I ask you, “Do you believe?” Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved (Acts 16:31).

#3: The unexpected family is sealed together, and its future secured through the presence of God the Holy Spirit. *When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance*(1:13-14).

At this point, we need to face a difficult issue that churches throughout history have had to wrestle with, i.e., **God adopts people into his family that the rest of the family doesn’t really want in the family.** This was certainly true in

Ephesus in the 1stC. God was welcoming both Jews and Gentiles into his family through faith in Jesus. But they didn't want to be in the same family; at least, not in the same local church family.

In vv. 13-14, Paul makes the point that both Jew and Gentile have received the same Holy Spirit. I'm sure Paul is referring back to the time when, in Acts 10-15 when God's Spirit was poured out on Gentiles who came to faith in Jesus. This led to an enormous controversy in the previously all-Jewish church. But, the presence and work of God's Spirit among Gentiles was the way God forced them to see that, if God received all people into his family through faith in Jesus and even gave his Spirit to all who received Jesus, we should do so too.

I will say much more about this in coming weeks but, now, let me simply say that, **as we become what God says we are, we will need to learn to see one another as God sees us.** God sees us as those made in his image. He sees us all as those for whom Jesus died. He sees us all as those in whom his Spirit lives. He sees us as his family – his unexpected family, not unexpected to him for we are his eternal plan. But, a family like Lake Avenue Church is surely unexpected to a divided world. Now we are to become what we are.

All this sometimes seems so impossible, doesn't it? **How will people like us ever be blameless and holy in the sight of God? How will even one local church like ours be united in all things** (v.10).

So, in this first message, I tell you the same thing Paul told his church: **This is the work of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. What we cannot do, he can.** We are becoming what God says we are. God already sees it! And it will be.

Let me give you one practical thing to take home with you today. Pastor Jeff Mattesich brought me a copy of the morning prayer that Pastor John Stott prayed each day. John Stott became a good and personal friend in his latter years. Every year, he did chapels at the university I presided over. I know he would have told you that he still was far from being complete in Christ. But, those of us who knew him considered him to be a godly and authentic follower of Jesus. Knowing that the only thing that can change us from what we are to what God says we will be is the work of the Triune God, he prayed this prayer each day. I encourage you to do the same.

John Stott's Morning Prayer

Good morning, heavenly Father;

Good morning, Lord Jesus;

Good morning, Holy Spirit.

Heavenly Father, I worship you as the creator and sustainer of the universe.

Lord Jesus, I worship you, Savior and Lord of the world.

Holy Spirit, I worship you as sanctifier of the people of God.

Glory to the Father, and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit.

Heavenly Father, I pray that I may live this day in your presence and please you more and more.

Lord Jesus, I pray that this day I may take up my cross and follow you.

Holy Spirit, I pray that this day you will fill me with yourself and cause your fruit to ripen in my life:

Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

Holy, blessed, glorious Trinity, three persons in one God, have mercy upon me.

Amen