

Christian, Who are You?

I. In the World

II. In Christ

*17 So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. 18 They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. 19 Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, and they are full of greed.*

*20 That, however, is not the way of life you learned 21 when you heard about Christ and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus. 22 You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; 23 to be made new in the attitude of your minds; 24 and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.*

I've got a question for you. Would you say that when it comes to your core values, when it comes to how you live your life—would you say that you're pretty much like everyone else in our world? Or do you feel really different than everyone else? Do you feel like you pretty much blend in? Or do you feel like you're the odd man out? And now maybe the bigger question, which of these two should you be? What does God want you to be? Does God have anything to say about how you and I fit in our world today? What is to be our relationship to a society and culture that seems to be growing more and more ungodly?

2000 years ago, a Christian congregation much like ours found itself struggling with questions like these. And, by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the Apostle Paul provided them with some answers, answers that still have application for our hearts and lives today. Answers which are focused on what our identity as Christians is, and how it effects our lives. Today, the Apostle Paul invites each one of us to consider this simple question:

Christian, Who Are You?

I. Who are you in the world?

II. Who are you in Christ?

Our text for today is a portion of a letter that Paul wrote to the Christians living in Ephesus while Paul was in prison in Rome. In this letter, Paul begins by reviewing what God had done for them. He reminds them that even though they were once spiritually dead (as we all are by nature), still God made them alive in Christ. God saved them purely by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. And by breaking down the barrier of sin that once separated them from God, God also broke down the barrier that stood between them as Jew and Gentile. God made them all members of one family, united in Christ, functioning as members of one body, with Christ as the head. Or as Paul puts it in the verse immediately preceding our text, *From him (Christ) the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work. (Ephesians 4:6).*

You might say that in the first 3 1/2 chapters of this book, Saint Paul focuses on how God put the Jews and Gentiles into a right relationship with himself and each other. But that still leaves a question unanswered. And that is, what about the relationship between these believers and the world around them? How were these Ephesians supposed to interact with the society, the

culture in which they lived? Remember, these Christians were still Ephesians. Do you know what the city of Ephesus was known for? Ephesus was the home of the Temple of Artemis, the Greek goddess of fertility. Worship of Artemis basically consisted of having sex with temple prostitutes. Sexual immorality was rampant. People would come from miles around to engage in this behavior. It was a huge source of income for the local economy. That and the sale of little silver replicas of the temple that people could take home as souvenirs to set up their own little Artemis altars. The book of Acts records how the silver smiths were all up in arms when they thought they were going to lose this source of income.

Well, it was into this pagan, materialistic, sex-crazed culture that the Holy Spirit planted this little Christian congregation. The question is, how would they react? What would they do? Who would they be? Would they just kind of blend in with everyone else? Would they say, “Everyone else is doing it. Why can’t we? Why should we be different than everyone else we live and work with?”

These were some of the questions that may well have been going through the minds of those brand-new Ephesian Christians. So, how does St. Paul respond to the real life dilemma they were facing? Does he say, “Whatever. Do what makes you feel good. It doesn't matter how you live as long as you believe”? No, quite the opposite. Paul draws the line in no uncertain terms. He writes, here in our text, *I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking.*

Just so you understand, when Paul uses the term “Gentile” he is not referring strictly to those who are not Jews. Rather he’s using this term as a synonym for unbelievers. The fact is, Paul is writing to a congregation that had both Jews and Gentiles in it. His point is, “Don’t live like the pagans live!” From there, Paul goes on to describe the mindset of such unbelievers. He says, *They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts.* Just look at some of the words he uses. He says that their thinking is futile. Their understanding is darkened. They are ignorant because their hearts are hardened. Paul is telling us what the human heart and mind are like by nature. Elsewhere, the Scriptures tell us, *The sinful mind is hostile to God. (Romans 8:7).* And, *The heart is deceitful above all things. (Jeremiah 17:9).* Paul’s point is this: Unbelievers, by nature, are spiritually dead, blind to the truth, and hostile toward God. And that natural animosity toward God shows up in how they live their lives. Paul puts it this way: *Having lost all sensitivity, (in other words, their consciences have become so dulled, they have grown so callous to sin—kind of like when you keep burning your finger on a hot stove. Pretty soon, you have no feeling in that finger. You've lost all sensitivity. So also these unbelievers, having lost all sensitivity) have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more.*

Do you catch Paul's drift there? It's like when people do not fear God, when they do not respect his commands, there are no holds barred, no limits to the depths of their depravity. “If it feels good, do it.” Or, as Paul describes them in Romans chapter 1, *They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they have no understanding, no fidelity, no love, no mercy.*

With those words, Paul is describing the unbelieving world, the godless society, which he and the rest of the first century Christians were living in. If you think about it, things haven't changed much in 2000 years. When you consider the millions of people openly engaging in

sexual relations with people to whom they are not married, whether it be homosexual or heterosexual relations, when you consider the millions of children who were put to death before they were born, the millions more who were abused after they were born. When you consider that our nation spent 13 billion dollars on pornography last year, you realize that our society, our culture is just as ungodly, just as immoral as Paul's was, if not more so.

But here's the thing. It's not just the people "out there" who are guilty of such sins. Because we all have the same sinful nature that everyone else in the world has, because our sinful nature is thoroughly corrupt, and is more than happy to disobey God's commands, too often we end up looking and sounding and acting like every other unbeliever in the world. We fall victim to the sins of sexual immorality, impurity, lust and greed. We gossip and hold grudges and disobey our parents. We end up, as Paul puts it, "*living as the Gentiles do.*"

But that's exactly why these words that Paul wrote to the Ephesians still apply to us today. Paul speaks to you and me as Christians who sometimes fall back into the ways of the world and says, *That, however, is not the way of life you learned when you heard about Christ and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus.* In other words, going back to the ways of the world is not what Jesus taught us. Instead, Paul says, *You were taught in regard to your former way of life to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires.* Again, as an aside, notice that Paul uses the present tense there. Our sinful nature is being corrupted. It will remain corrupted. It is unreformable. But Paul says, *put off your old self and be made new in the attitude of your minds,* that is, let God change the way you think about yourself. And instead, *put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.*

Now at first glance, it may seem that when Paul says, "take off the old and put on the new", he's saying, "You need to stop doing bad things and start doing good things. You need to turn over a new leaf. Get a fresh start. Start being a better person. Be kinder, gentler. And, to a certain extent, those things are true. The Bible is filled with exhortations for us to live more holy lives. In fact, in the verses to follow, Paul writes, for example, *Each one of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbor.* (v. 25) *Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger.* (v. 31) *Be kind and compassionate to one another* (v. 32). In fact, Paul sums it all up with the words, simply, *Be imitators of God.* (Eph 5:1)

Those are all expressions of God's will for every human being in the world. It's what God wants us to do. But here's the thing. Just because God tells us that's what he wants us to do, doesn't give us the ability to do it. Or to put it another way, God's law, no matter how clearly it is stated, does not empower true obedience to it. Just saying, "You must do this, or even it would be good for you to do this," doesn't necessarily give a person the desire or the ability to carry out that command.

Let me give you an example of that. Imagine that I'm watching my three-month-old grandson. And I say, "Hudson, I've decided that the next time you fill your diaper, I want you to change it yourself. That's my command. Just take off the old one, clean yourself up and then put on a new one, that's my will for your life." Do you think that would work? Nope! Knowing Huddy, he'd probably just smile at me and ignore everything I said. No matter how badly I wanted him to do it, no matter what a great thing it would be if he would do it, the fact is, it ain't gonna happen. He is not going to be able to clean himself up. He's not going to be able to take off the old and put on the new.

You realize, the same thing is true for you and me. By nature, you and I do not have the ability to clean ourselves up. We don't have the ability to take off the old and put on the new. As

much as I would love to, as Paul puts it here in our text, “*put off the old self and put on the new*”, I can't. And neither can you. But what you and I can't do, God has already done for us. It happened the moment of our baptism. Through holy baptism, the Spirit connected you to Christ. That means that, in effect, whatever Jesus went through, you went through too. His life, death and resurrection get credited to your account. How does St Paul put it in Romans 6? *Don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. (Romans 6:3-4)* In other words, through your baptism, God buried your old man, and in its place, gave you a New Man, a spiritual self that Paul says here was “*created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.*” God, in effect, has dressed you up in Christ. That's why Paul writes to the Galatians, *For all of us who were baptized into Christ have been clothed with Christ. (Galatians 3 27).*

My friends, do you realize what that means? It means that in the washing of holy baptism, God has given you a new identity. He's made you the New You. As Paul wrote to the Corinthians, *If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has gone, the new has come! (2 Corinthians 5:17)* Now, does that mean that you no longer have an old nature? No, you still do. And it will continue to rear its ugly head. And when that happens, what do you do? You drown it. You push its head down under the waters of your baptism. Luther called that “drowning the old Adam by daily contrition and repentance.” That means saying, “God, I'm sorry that I sinned against you. But I believe that you have washed me in the blood of the Lamb. You dressed me in Jesus' righteousness. You've made me someone new. That's my true identity in Christ. And that new identity as a precious, redeemed, child of God is what empowers you and me to do what God commands us to do, namely to: *Put aside the deeds of darkness, and put on the armor of light (Romans 13:12)*, or *Put to death whatever belongs to the earthly nature (Col. 3:5)*. Or as Paul says here in Ephesians, *You must no longer live as the Gentiles do. (Ephesians 4:17)*

My friends, as you think about where you fit in our world, in our culture, in a society that has largely turned away from God, never forget who you are. You are a redeemed child of God. That means that your identity is not based on anything you've done, good or bad. Rather, it's based entirely on what God has done for you and in you through his Son Jesus Christ. God has made you new. He's recreated you in the image of his Son. God knows that. And now, so do you. Believe it. And live it. To his glory. Amen.