

YOU ARE CHOSEN IN CHRIST**EPHESIANS 1:1-6**

Sometimes we need to be reminded that our lives are important and have value. Some years ago now, a man received a Ph.D. from Oxford University. The thesis for his degree was entitled, "The Influence of the Motion of Fish's Tails upon the Tides of the Ocean." He proved, to his satisfaction at least, that the great tides of the world are indeed influenced to some degree by the motion of all those billions of fish tails. We do seem to live in a universe where every movement has meaning and purpose. With that in mind, do you really think that God, who created it all, is going to overlook you – a person for whom His only Son died and in whose presence you are invited to live forever? If you're tempted to think that your life doesn't count for much, remember that every fish - and even its tail - has a divine purpose and place.

This morning I'm starting a new series of message on the New Testament book of Ephesians. The title of the series is "Child of the One True King: Discovering Who You Are In Christ." I've borrowed part of the title from a Christian contemporary song that became popular last year which reminds us that when you start to follow Jesus your identity goes through an amazing transformation. You're no longer who you used to be. You are a new creation in Christ. You are indeed a child of the King of the Universe. That fact changes everything.

Ephesians was written by Paul, the great apostle and leader, in the middle of the first century - some 20-30 years after Jesus died, rose again and ascended back to Heaven. Paul had lived and ministered for three years in Ephesus and converts had gone from that city and established churches in other nearby towns and cities. Paul's letter was probably intended not just for the Christians living in Ephesus - this city in Asia Minor - in the present day nation of Turkey, but also to all those other churches in the area. It was kind of a circular letter or an e-mail letter with a wider distribution list than just the church in Ephesus.

Now today I want us to drill down on the first six verses of the first chapter and particularly verses 3-6. You should know, however, that in the original Greek language, verse 3-14 is one long, complex sentence with all sorts of supporting clauses. In our English translations, it's been broken down into several sentences but not so in Greek. It's such a complex passage grammatically that one Greek scholar has said that v. 3-14 is "the most monstrous sentence conglomeration I have ever met in the Greek language." In fact, when Greek students start to get a bit cocky about their proficiency, sometimes their professors will ask them to outline or diagram v. 3-14. With that in mind, let's read the first six verses of Paul's letter to the Ephesians.

You might be tempted to see those words as very theological, very dry and with little value in helping you figure out how to live tomorrow. Now, it is true that Ephesians - and the passage we just read is a prime example - is packed with some powerful theology. But it's also immensely practical. It will make every

difference in the world to how you live your life every day if you will take the time to understand and reflect on the truths found here. Here are three very practical, foundational truths from these first six verses. The first one is this:

YOU HAVE GREAT VALUE.

Right there in v. 3 you're told that God has blessed you. What is a blessing, after all? We think of good health as a blessing. Or our family. Or our kids - at least, on most days! We usually think of a blessing as something we have been given that has value and worth. It's something good, beneficial and wholesome. Notice some important aspects of God's blessings here. The verb is actually in the past tense - God "has blessed" us. These blessings from God have already been given. Then, Paul says that these blessings are "spiritual" in nature. What does that mean? Paul wants us to think about God's spiritual rather than physical or material blessings. Back in Old Testament times, God's blessings were usually things like a long life, wealth, property - material, physical stuff. But now, God's blessings are primarily spiritual. Paul underlines that by the little phrase - "God... has blessed us in the heavenly realms." (Eph 1:3 NIV) These blessings have to do with a spiritual realm into which we have come or entered. It's that unseen world of spiritual reality in which Jesus is supreme and in which we live right now if you're truly a follower of Jesus.

It's also very important that all of these spiritual blessings come by, in, through and because of Jesus. Paul uses that little phrase "in Christ" no less than five times in these six verses. To emphasize this point even more, Paul refers to God here as "the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." Whatever it is that God has given you and me, we only ever get it when we are in Christ. People call God by all sorts of different names the world over. Many people - particularly in our country - don't think it matters what you call God. They believe Allah, Krishna, or Buddha all refer to the same Person. Wrong! If God is not the Father of Jesus of Nazareth who walked the earth some 2,000 years ago as the Incarnate Son of God, then He is not the God who has given you and me all of the blessings described here in v. 3-14. That's the only God Paul knows. You can't discuss the one, true God of the Universe without immediately bringing in Jesus Christ.

Now, in v. 3-14, Paul tells us that God has already given every follower of Jesus three blessings. We only have time to discuss the first one today. You'll have to come back next week to hear about the second and third blessings. What is the first blessing? It's right there in v. 4: "For He chose us in him before the creation of the world...." (Eph 1:4 NIV) God has chosen you. God has decided to do something in you and for you. Were you around before the world was created? Nope. Then it was God's initiative and God's decision to choose you before you even had the opportunity to choose Him. Jesus said the same thing on one occasion, "You didn't choose me. I chose you...." (John 15:16 NLT) What difference does that make? Much in every way! Since it was God who did the choosing, everything is certain. There's no possibility of failure or it not working

out. Since God chose you before you were even born, before you had even done anything good or bad, moral or immoral, then being chosen by God doesn't depend on either your consent or your behavior.

Try to get your brain wrapped around that awesome truth! Before God made this world, He knew all about you - your name, what you would do, how many years you would live. But God did something else. He chose you to belong to Him, to become one of His children, to make living in Heaven with Him for all eternity part of your destiny. Sometimes we think God only started thinking about human beings when He created Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden or when they committed the first sin ever. But here we learn: "For He chose us in him before the creation of the world...." (Eph 1:4 NIV) When a terrible storm occurs like the recent one in the Philippines, other nations respond with relief supplies. If a person starts to drown at the pool, his cries for help bring other people to the rescue. God didn't reach out to help or rescue you after you screwed up and cried out for help. Before anything even came into being, God had already decided to bless you by choosing you to belong to Him. "For He chose us in him before the creation of the world...."

Many of you know that I've just touched on a controversial subject: election, free will, predestination. There have been countless debates over hundreds of years on the subject of whether everyone who becomes a follower of Jesus is pre-selected by God to the extent that he or she really has no choice in the matter or whether a person can freely choose or reject a relationship with God. We aren't going to solve the tension between God's sovereignty and human free will this morning. I do appreciate the insight of the late Richard Halverson, a pastor and author, who said, "Nothing God has planned interferes with human freedom.... Nothing humans do frustrates God's sovereign plan." I don't know how God does both, but He does! Obviously, Paul believes and teaches here that God chooses people to belong to Him, but it's within the context of a Heavenly Father's great, inviting love. It's all about God's love. If you have an image of God saying, "You're in. You're out." - like some kind of Almighty Tyrant - you don't understand God. You should never speak about God choosing people to belong to Him without knowing that it's firmly rooted in and built upon the love of God.

You might have watched that great, old movie "The Sound of Music" again just this past Christmas season. Do you remember the scene where Maria and the captain are out in the garden gazebo and first admit that they love each other? Maria says it was when the captain first blew his ridiculous whistle to summon his children. The captain says it was when Maria sat on the pine cone one of the kids had put on her chair as a joke at dinner. Neither one of them seemed troubled in the least by the fact that in choosing to make the other one the object of their love, they - by necessity - chose not to love others. Neither one of them said, "Now wait a minute here. A lot of people are getting left out!" No, their election of one another was a source of deep joy. God says to you and me, "I started loving you before I made the world." How does that make you feel? It should

make you feel very special, valued, chosen and loved. It should fill you with an indescribable joy. Let God figure out who is going to Heaven and who is going to Hell. Isn't it enough to know, to relish, to rejoice in the wonderful fact that he has made you an object of His eternal love - and He did that before He made the world?

Can you perceive how this incredible truth - God has chosen you - meets a fundamental need in the heart of every human being? Do you have value? Are you worth anything? Every Christian should be able to shout, "Yes!" But just because you're a follower of Jesus doesn't mean you automatically say, "Yes!" We're deeply affected by our culture that sends us some pretty disturbing messages. Like what? If you make enough money, then you're valuable. If you look good physically, then you're loveable. If you're useful and make some kind of contribution to society, then you're worthwhile. But God says something very different and wonderful, "I have decided to love you. Before the world was ever created, I made you an object of my love. You have eternal worth, eternal value and you will be eternally loved because I have decided it. Nothing and no one will ever change that fact." When you get a hold of that truth, it has the power to transform your life. You are a special person because God says you are. You have value, worth and dignity because God says you do. You are loved regardless because God is the One who loves you. Now, this first great spiritual blessing that you have already received is the fact that God has chosen you. That means you have great value. Secondly, it means that...

YOU HAVE A GREAT PURPOSE.

"For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight...." (Eph 1:4 NIV) God wants you to become like His Son, Jesus. If you're a follower of Jesus, that's your great purpose, your great destiny. What does that mean? A lot of it is wrapped up in those words – "holy and blameless." These are indispensable biblical concepts we have to understand and own. There is a kind of holiness that only God can give you. The fancy word for it is imputed holiness or goodness. The Bible tells us that when you put your trust in Jesus for salvation, the perfect goodness and righteousness of Jesus is transferred to you. This kind of goodness was given to you at the moment you were born again by God's Spirit. It's a gift of God's grace so that you could begin to have a relationship with Him – this absolutely holy, perfectly good God. Here's a distinction worth remembering. God didn't choose you because you were already good. If you were chosen to be good – that's what v. 4 says - , you cannot have been chosen because you were already good. God didn't choose you or make you an object of His love because you were already such a neat, moral or good person. In fact, you were just the opposite.

But there is another kind of holiness that God gradually works into you over a lifetime. This has been called imparted holiness or goodness. Imparted goodness is a process and it takes your whole life. It involves both the Holy

Spirit working in you and you learning how to submit to His leadership in your life. As you grow in your love for Jesus, your desire to obey Him will grow, too. You will want to act like He acted and think like He thought. Your attitudes towards God, other people, and life itself start to resemble the attitudes of Jesus. This kind of holiness - imparted goodness – doesn't earn you being selected by God. Instead, it's the evidence that you have been chosen by Him. It's the proof you belong to God. You've heard the old saying, "The proof is in the pudding." People who can demonstrate spiritual progress (not perfection, but progress) in their attitudes towards God, in their lifestyle choices, in their words, in their relationships with others simply point to the fact that they belong to God. Frankly, if your life or mine looks pretty similar to when we first trusted Jesus as Savior, you might want to check out the authenticity of that decision!

That word "holiness" in the Bible also includes the sense of difference and separation. God did choose you to be different. In what ways? Things like lifestyle choices, what we value, what we live for, what we desire and how we treat others. Those differences don't take us out of the sinful world in which we live everyday, but it should definitely make us different in that world. It doesn't mean we're going to get a Heavenly exemption from things like temptation, heartaches, disappointments or problems either. It does mean our approach to and our outlook on those universal human experiences will be different than someone who is not a follower of Jesus. It should be relatively easy to identify a follower of Jesus in a school, an office place, a neighborhood, even in a family. It should be relatively easy to identify a follower of Jesus when tragedy strikes or when disappointment surfaces. His or her whole approach to life and living is different and distinct. If people who don't follow Jesus see no difference or distinction between ourselves and them, that's bad news.

Why are you here on this Earth taking up space today? Why are you alive? What is the purpose and meaning of your life? I love this quote from Russell Moore: "For too long, we've called unbelievers to 'invite Jesus into your life.' Jesus doesn't want to be in your life. Your life's a wreck. Jesus calls you into his life. And his life isn't boring or purposeless or static. It's wild and exhilarating and unpredictable." It's incredibly sad what people settle for when it comes to life's purpose instead of stepping up and into what God has intended. If we were honest today, some of our answers would sound like this: "My purpose in life is to be happy... successful... self-fulfilled... to make lots of money... to have a great career." Even answers like "My purpose in life is to help others or to make a difference" are way too inadequate. God has a purpose for you that is so incredible, so far-reaching, so big that it will blow your mind and thrill your soul all at the same time. We can get bored with life because we've adopted a purpose in life that's so woefully inadequate. God wants you to become like His Son, Jesus! If you're a follower of Jesus, that's your great purpose, your great destiny. What does that mean? It will take all of eternity to reveal what it means and to experience it fully. You have great value. You have a great purpose. Here's a final truth to reflect on quickly today:

YOU ARE GREATLY LOVED.

“He destined us in love to be his sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will.” (Eph 1:5 RSV) Before God made the world, He decided to make you part of His family and one of His children forever. He wanted you long before you could even exist to want Him back! Love was God’s primary motivation in choosing you to be His child. There’s nothing cold, harsh or tyrannical about God choosing you. This is what happens when a parent tells a child how much he or she was wanted, anticipated, looked for and longed for. Your kids love to hear how much you wanted them and how you anticipated their arrival before they were born. That’s what God is saying to us here.

Think with me for about God’s love as I close today. Because of Jesus, you the abandoned child became the adopted child. Because of Jesus, you the condemned criminal became the pardoned member of God’s family. Because of Jesus, you the enemy of God became the friend of God. You didn’t make yourself acceptable to God nor could you. God made you acceptable to Himself through His Son, Jesus. Because it is God who loves and accepts you, it is final, complete and forever. One day when you stand before God in Heaven lost in wonder, love and praise, you will not be any more loved and accepted than you are at this very moment – even with all the tears, the failures and the problems of this life. So, remember who loves you today! It is God! Has someone rejected you? Has someone turned his or her back on you? Has someone you love pushed you away? Of course, it hurts, but just remember the One who still loves you and will forever love you. “If God is for us, who can ever be against us? Since he did not spare even his own Son but gave him up for us all, won’t he also give us everything else?... I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God’s love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God’s love.... [N]othing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Rom 8:31-32, 38-39 NLT)

Entertainer Garrison Keillor recalls the childhood pain of being chosen last for the baseball team. “The captains are down to their last grudging choices: a slow kid for catcher, someone to stick out in right field where nobody hits it. They choose the last ones two at a time—‘you and you’—because it makes no difference. And the remaining kids—the scrubs, the excess—they deal for us as handicaps. ‘If I take him, then you gotta take him,’ they say. Sometimes I go as high as sixth, usually lower. But just once I’d like Darrel to pick me first and say, ‘Him! I want him! The skinny kid with the glasses and the black shoes. You, c’mon!’ ***But I’ve never been chosen with much enthusiasm.***” “For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight” (Ephesians 1:4). Did you ever think about the fact that you are so valuable to God he chose you very early—and with the utmost enthusiasm?!

You, my friend, are a child of the one true King. You need to learn and then always remember who you are in Christ. Because you are chosen in Christ, you have great value. Because you are chosen in Christ, you have a great purpose. Because you are chosen in Christ, you are greatly loved.