

Becoming Who We Are – The Book of Ephesians

Grace to You Who Love Our Lord

Ephesians 6:16-24

Mark Vroegop

In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one; and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end, keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints, and also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak. So that you also may know how I am and what I am doing, Tychicus the beloved brother and faithful minister in the Lord will tell you everything. I have sent him to you for this very purpose, that you may know how we are, and that he may encourage your hearts. Peace be to the brothers, and love with faith, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace be with all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with love incorruptible (Eph. 6:16-24, ESV).

It's always a special moment when we wrap up an extended expository sermon series, and that is what we are doing today with the book of Ephesians. This is the 28th and final sermon on this glorious and helpful book.

You may remember that during January to March of this year, we were in Revelation 12-22, a series called *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*. Revelation was so helpful and engaging that I wondered if anything could follow it. But Ephesians—*Becoming Who We Are*—has been equally helpful and engaging. In some respects, Revelation helped us think about what's happening in the world, and Ephesians helped us think about what's happening deep inside of us—with our identity.

So, what's next?

After Advent, and beginning on January 21, we'll start a year-long journey through 1st and 2nd Samuel called *The Weight of the Crown*. We'll explore the period of Samuel, Saul, and David with a view toward seeing the connection between God's glory and human glory, between the pride of mankind and the power of God. We'll see this verse play out through both books: "The bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble bind on strength" (1 Sam. 2:4).

The letter to Ephesus was written around 60 A.D. Yet, it has incredible relevance for Christians to fully embrace their identity ("in Christ") so that we'll learn to live it out in practical ways. Hopefully you remember that chapters 1-3 are primarily doctrinal, while chapters 4-6 are applicational.

There's a pivot that takes place in Ephesians 4: "I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called..." (v. 1). But before that there is this beautiful expression of prayer from the Apostle Paul:

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen (Eph. 3:14–21, ESV).

Paul has a big vision for this church, and I trust that you have a big vision for what God can do through all of us as we get our spiritual identity right. Christian, you've got to know who you are in Christ, and then you've got to walk according to that calling—in your life, in relationships, and at work.

Last Sunday was uniquely used by the Lord in my life, and I've heard from a number of you that you felt the same. Do you remember the main word from last week? No, it wasn't tortoise, although I'll never think about the shield of faith the same again.

The word from last week was **vigilance**. Becoming who we are requires not only knowing about our identity but also reminding ourselves and each other about it. And last week I encouraged you to consider using the armor of God as a way to prayerfully rehearse your identity.

Our last verses in Ephesians are 6:16-24, and I'd like to connect these final verses with four final admonitions about spiritual vigilance.

1. Keep Alert

As Paul wraps up this powerful letter and as he concludes the section on the armor of God, he exhorts believers with the following words: "To that end, keep alert with all perseverance..." The key to understanding this text is not just having the information about each of the elements of the armor of God. The key is to be vigilant.

The phrase "keep alert" is in the present active tense. That shouldn't be surprising because to keep alert implies an ongoing activity. Present and active are implicit in what it means keep alert. It would be unhelpful for Paul to say, "Be sure that you've kept alert in the past." A soldier who doses off while on guard duty will not be treated lightly because he was alert yesterday or the day before. Being alert is something that must be done in the present or it's not being alert.

The word "alert" means to not be asleep (obviously) and to be aware and on guard for potential threats. It has the idea of being watchful, especially of things that are important. For example, the word is used to describe the kind of watchful care that pastors and elders are to provide over their church members

in Hebrews 13:17. Jesus exhorted his disciples to “be alert” as the end of the age approaches in Mark 13:33.

Additionally, Paul adds “with all perseverance.” In the ancient world, this word was used for being devoted to one’s profession. You could also think about it as the word “steadfastness.” Consistency and faithfulness are in view here. Or, as we saw last week, we’re called to vigilance.

Paul is calling Christians to realize the reality of the battle that they are engaged in. Alertness with perseverance can be compromised by:

- Ignorance – not realizing the reality of the situation
- Arrogance – overestimating your ability
- Complacency – getting too comfortable with the risks
- Distraction – allowing other things to diminish your capacity to be aware

I wonder if any of those apply to your spiritual life. Paul is calling Christians to become who we are, but to also pursue Christian identity with awareness and steadfastness. Keep alert with all perseverance.

One way we keep alert is by consistent prayer for one another.

2. Keep Praying

Prayer is all over the book of Ephesians. Do you know why? Because if you understand who you really are in Christ, you need to pray and you want to pray for others. Eugene Peterson, in his book *Practice Resurrection*, compares prayer to a spring of water in Ephesians:

The message opens with prayer that bursts off the page like an artisan spring (Eph. 1:1-23). Then the prayer goes underground, prayers like a subterranean river deep within the church keeping the aquifers filled. Midway, the waters come briefly to the surface (3:14-21). But all through the letter we are aware that all the nouns and verbs, all the syntax and all the parts of speech, have been watered by the artisan springs of prayer. This message that guides us in growing up in Christ in the company of church develops in a community of prayer.¹

But notice the kind of prayer that Paul has in mind here. In the first part of verse 18 he previously mentioned praying “in the Spirit.” But now, in the latter half of verse 18, it’s even more outward focused. We got a hint of this earlier when he said, “with all prayer and supplication,” a word that means requests for others.

But now Paul is specific:

¹ Eugene Peterson, *Practice Resurrection: A Conversation on Growing up in Christ*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 266.

...making supplication for all the saints, and also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak (Eph. 6:18-20).

He instructs the church to pray broadly and for boldness. They are to pray broadly for every saint. This is how the book began: “To the saints who are in Ephesus and are faithful in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 1:1). Surely he has in mind that they would be praying for one another. But he also means all the saints in every city. In Ephesians 2:19 he says that they are “fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God.” So, it seems that Paul intends to remind them about their spiritual focus that cannot be merely internal or concerned with only their own little church. They need a bigger vision.

I trust that you know that Christian identity transcends individual churches. In all our efforts to understand and embrace Christian identity individually and in our church, we cannot forget that we’re just a little group of people and that there are many, many gospel-preaching churches in our city, state, nation, and world for which we can give thanks and pray for them. News flash: We’re not the only ones trying to live out Christian identity!

But Paul also adds something instructive. He specifically prays for boldness, but he also mentions that he’s in chains. Some commentators believe that there’s an approaching hearing, and Paul is asking for boldness to not shirk from being clear about his faith in Jesus, the very thing that landed him in prison in the first place.

I realize that there’s probably no one in our church facing prison for their faith. But I do think it’s important for us to be praying for one another as we face situations where it’s hard to know what to say and when to say it when challenging situations arise related to the application of our Christian identity. Let’s be sure we are praying for each other.

One more thing before I leave these verses. It’s unrelated to prayer, but it’s really important. Notice that Paul calls himself “an ambassador in chains.” What a word picture! Ambassadors represent foreign governments, and they are usually esteemed and honored men and women. But the depth of Paul’s understanding of his identity causes him to see himself as an ambassador—yes, even with chains. Christian identity provides this kind of perspective and freedom.

You see, when Christian identity takes root in your life, it creates liberating perspective. It allows us to live on mission, to embrace boldness, and to engage in the plan of God—not only for us but for the whole world. So, let’s keep praying to that end.

Practically, that means to be sure that you are spending some time regularly praying for others. You might develop a better prayer list; be a regular participant in our monthly prayer meetings; join a Barnabas group; pray through our pastor, elder, and staff page on the website; or utilize the missionary prayer guide from REACH.

My point is simply that Christian identity and prayer go together.

3. Keep Connected

Christian identity is theological and philosophical. It requires living out what it means to be “in Christ.” It’s also practical as we’ve seen in chapters 4-6. But it’s also personal. There are real people and real lives on the line here. Christian identity is lived out in the context of relationships. “Becoming who we are.”

In the closing verses of Ephesians, Paul mentions a man named Tychicus who is probably the carrier of the letter and a personal envoy from Paul. He’s also cited in Colossians, 2 Timothy, and Titus. Tychicus is mentioned in Acts 20 as part of the team that traveled through Macedonia after a riot in Ephesus due to Paul’s preaching.

If you read other letters from Paul, you’ll find a lot of names—eighty of them in fact. It’s a good reminder that gospel ministry and Christian identity are personal. It requires staying connected. Notice what Paul says and how it points to this connection:

- “So that you also will know how I am and what I am doing.”
- “That you may know how we are, and that he {Tychicus} may encourage your hearts”

There’s a sense of love and concern here. Paul’s letter was written out of a deep affection for the people (saints) in Ephesus, and he sends Tychicus because he wants them to know how he’s doing. What a good reminder that Christian identity is lived out through people who are connected together.

One of our Core Values is Redemptive Community, which means that gospel relationships matter. It’s why we encourage you to linger after a service. It’s why we have pastors and elders available after each service. It’s why we divide our congregation into parishes. It’s why our pastors and elders pray for specific people. It’s why we pray specifically for people in our worship services. Christian identity requires connection.

We’ve never lived in a more connected and more isolating time. Technology is giving the impression that we’re connected, but that connection is increasingly less common. Some of you may need to apply this sermon series by deciding to take the next step in getting connected. Whether it’s becoming a member, joining a group or class, coming tonight, or joining a Bible study, Christian identity is lived out in community—with real people in relationship.

Eugene Peterson writes:

“There is more to the church than sermons and sacraments, theology and liturgy, Bible studies and prayer meetings, committee minutes and mission statements. There are names, meals, small talk, births, and deaths. There is us. Conversation is the form that language takes when the persons of the Trinity and the persons of the congregation are in the same room.”²

We become who we are by keeping connected.

4. Keep Trusting

² Eugene Peterson, *Practice Resurrection*, 271.

Last verses of Ephesians. And with these final statements, we hear the heart of the apostle Paul as he seems to encourage the church to keep trusting as they consider their future. These concluding words are heartfelt and hopeful.

There are mainly four things that Paul desires for the church: peace, love, faith, and grace. Peace has been a major theme throughout the book of Ephesians (2:14 – “for he himself is our peace,” meaning Jesus). He wants them to know and have the peace of Christ.

Love is found in verses 23 and 24. In verse 23, it’s a love that comes from the Father and the Son. What’s more, it’s a love with faith. He’s connecting what Christians believe and what they love. We’ll come back to love again in verse 24.

Grace is both unmerited favor and the ability to do what God commands. We receive grace and live on grace.

...and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them (Eph. 2:6-10).

Finally, the book concludes with a statement about a love that is incorruptible. In other words, embracing our identity is a long-term project. It’s a pursuit that requires effort on our part but only happens as we receive the grace, peace, and faith that we need. We must keep trusting.

As we sang last week:

*No power of hell, no scheme of man
Can ever pluck me from His hand
Till He returns or calls me home
Here in the power of Christ I'll stand*

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