

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Under Construction

(studies in Paul's letter to the church at Ephesus)

Fighting [spiritual] Identity Theft

(Ephesians 4:17-24)

Study #6

Introduction: "This is the IRS..." (yikes!)

It's always a bit disconcerting to get mail from our friends at the Internal Revenue Service. Seeing the letter that came to our house a few years ago only briefly stopped my heart.

I recovered, though, and opened the envelope to discover a politely written letter. The IRS informed me that I hadn't done anything wrong, but that somebody else had.

Somebody had stolen my identity and had then filed my taxes in hopes of claiming my refund.¹

As you know, identity theft is a real problem these days.

Our digital fingerprints make us vulnerable to people who can rob us blind, without any physical contact. It's all done online.

If you've had your identity stolen in any of the ways that might happen, you know how disruptive it is. The whole thing leaves you feeling very violated and exposed.

¹ By the way, dealing with the IRS on this was wonderful. They were courteous, respectful and very helpful!

You worked hard to establish your identity. You have a good, clean record. You've established credibility online.

And then, someone you don't know messes it all up by forging your name on a document or they steal your Social Security number, trick you at the ATM, or take your identity along with that of millions of others who happened to shop at a store that got "hacked."

Our digital and financial identity is important to us and it's not right when someone steals it.

Even more precious to us is our personal identity. Our identity as a part of a family or in a circle of friends, as a citizen of a nation.

More important still is our spiritual identity. Fundamentally, who we are before God, who we are in Jesus, is the most crucial part of our identity.

This morning, the Apostle Paul helps us get a handle on our spiritual identity. It's an identity we are to understand, to embrace, and to never let anyone steal.

Review...

Last Sunday, we turned a corner in our time in Ephesians from the first section (chapters 1-3) that focused on what God has done for us in Jesus, to the second section (chapters 4-6) that focuses on our *response* to what God has done for us.

The first three chapters didn't include a single command, instruction, or exhortation related to how we are to live. But that is exactly what the last three chapters are all about.

Paul began Ephesians by laying a foundation of God's amazing grace.

We put our faith in Jesus and pass from death to life. We are blessed with every spiritual blessing imaginable in Christ. We become a part of the worldwide, ages-spanning CHURCH and are adopted into God's forever family.

It is only *after* having laid that foundation that Paul calls us to practical life change, as here.

“life” - Apart from Jesus (4:17-19)

An Inspired, Apostolic “Don’t!” (v. 17a)

[17a] So this I say therefore, and affirm together with the Lord, that you no longer walk just as the Gentiles also walk...

When Paul speaks “apostolically”

We know the Apostle Paul from his letters and from the stories we find in the book of Acts. The more I get to know Paul, the more I see Him as a fascinating, multi-faceted enigma of bold humility.

He was a humble servant of Jesus, and he knew when to remind his readers that he had apostolic authority from Jesus to lead.

Well, this is Paul, writing “apostolically.” He’s calling us to sit up and take notice. He’s writing, testifying to what is true ***“in the Lord.”***

Speaking with the Lord’s authority, he calls us to ***“no longer walk as the Gentiles also walk.***

A certain way to NOT walk...

The group of people to whom he was writing in the church at Ephesus represented a diverse mix of Jews and non-Jews. The bulk of the church, though, would have been non-Jewish.

Another term for a non-Jew is “Gentile.” Here, he tells Gentiles to no longer live the way a Gentile lives.

And if that sounds a little funny, the point is that while, on one level, these Gentile Ephesians to whom he’s writing were still Gentiles, that is no longer their defining identity.

He would say the same thing to the Jews in the church. Yes, they were Jews. But now their identity was not, primarily Jew-ish, but Jesus-ish.

He would say the same thing to us, today.

Sure, we’re Americans or maybe another nationality. We have political identities and ethnic identifiers. But, having believed in Jesus, our identity is now defined by our relationship with Jesus.

Fundamentally, when it’s all said and done, who are we? We are followers of Christ.

In what immediately follows, though, Paul opens a window into the soul of someone who hasn’t yet come to find their identity in Jesus. He begins by exploring the mind of this person.

The Old “Gentile-ish” Walk (vv. 17b-19)

Mentally (vv. 17-18a)

[17] So this I say therefore, and affirm together with the Lord, that you no longer walk just as the Gentiles also walk, in the futility² of their mind, [18] being darkened in their understanding...

Vanity of vanities!

Please understand that Paul isn’t saying anyone is lacking in intelligence or is intellectually dishonest. That is not the point. There is no need to ever attack outsiders, and that isn’t what Paul is doing here.

He’s pointing out something that is true about the thought processes of the person who doesn’t know God through faith in Jesus.

² Futility = vanity, purposelessness, absurdity, worthlessness. In Romans 8:20 Paul writes that the creation has been subjected to “futility” or “pointlessness.” It no longer produces fruit that sufficiently sustains life.

The light of the Gospel has not shined into his heart. So, the sole source of insight he has for understanding life and the world comes from within.³ That's not a very bright light.

People who haven't entered into a relationship with God through faith in Jesus end up thinking that this life is all there is.

They believe that *security* is to be found in the accumulation of things, that *significance* is measured in popularity, that *health* is all-important, that the pursuit of *pleasure* is the greatest good.

All of that is wrong-headed thinking. But those who live without God are left with the burden of trying to figure life out on their own. And that is a burden none of us were designed to carry.

Paul says that there is something "*futile*" about this kind of thinking.⁴ And that word - "*futile*" - brings to mind the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes.

Some have wondered if Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes on a bad day, but no. He simply wrote to show the futility of life absent God.

Ecclesiastes begins, "***Vanity of vanities, all is vanity,***" or, just as apt, "*Futility of futilities.*"

Life presents us with a maze. To navigate that maze - to set proper priorities, embrace the right values, relate lovingly and wisely - without the aid of life's Architect - is a tough assignment.

Paul helps us to see the magnitude of the problem by asking us to imagine living in physical darkness.

³ Mind = perceiving, understanding, thinking ability. May also involve moral attitude or even psychological disposition. Opinion, resolve, purpose, plan.

⁴ God's plan in giving people mental faculties (more advanced than the animals) was that we might comprehend God and His revelation. Due to sin we are unable to accomplish this goal without God's nudges to us, directing us to Him, which He does through the ministries of the Spirit, Son, and Father.

Blind, with no guide

When a man loses his eyesight, he knows his loss. He is painfully aware that he needs guidance, a seeing eye dog, an arm to lean on.

When I was younger, I enjoyed running long distances. I once ran the Dallas Marathon on a cold winter day. The temperature at the start of the race was 18 degrees.

We runners had to be careful at the water stops that day because the water turned to ice on the road as soon as it hit the pavement, making for treacherous conditions.

During that race, as was always the case, I was passed by lots of people. I was passed by one runner who was blind. He was led by a guide, of course. A blind person would not enter a race without a guide.

But the same is not true for those without spiritual sight. Spiritually blind people don't know they need help, so they try to navigate life's maze without a guide.

Spiritual blindness explains why we see people running full speed ahead to amass wealth or trophies or conquests. The hope is that these achievements will bring significance and fulfillment.⁵

That is why we see people giving themselves to sexual expression outside of marriage and to the lure of drugs and alcohol. The belief is that these things are the path to meaning and joy.

If they could only see, they would see the pointlessness of those things, but they can't see. Worse, they don't see that they can't see.

And there's more. If the *thinking* of the person who doesn't know Jesus is "off", their *standing before God* is a disaster.

What Paul says next comes with the force of a sledgehammer.

⁵ The Bible often speaks of cosmic / astronomical darkness (Mark 13:24; Revelation 8:12), but sometimes of spiritual darkness (Matthew 24:29), as here.

Spiritually (v. 18b)

Excluded from the life of God...

[18b]...excluded from the life of God...

Most of us have experienced alienation in some relationship. You don't have to live very long to know rejection, loss of intimacy, the cold shoulder.

People who have yet to trust Jesus for their eternal salvation, though, face a Grand Canyon-sized chasm between themselves and God. That's the ultimate in alienation.⁶

And, that's the plight of all who have not received forgiveness for their sins by placing their trust in Christ. Paul says that this alienation is caused by willful, chosen ignorance of God and by a heart hardened against God.

...due to chosen ignorance and hardness of heart

[18b]...because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardness of their heart

Now, of course, there is *ignorance* and there is **IGNORANCE**.

We can think of a child doing something wrong that he or she didn't know was wrong. The child was ignorant and simply didn't know any better.

God understands this. In the Old Testament sacrificial system, He made allowance for a special offering for someone to make who sinned without understanding that what they did was sinful.

In a message Paul gave from Mars Hill in Athens, he referred to "**ignorant**" worship. (See Acts 17)⁷

⁶ See Ephesians 2:12 and a more thorough description of spiritual alienation.

⁷ The Apostle Peter said that the Jews acted in ignorance when they crucified Jesus (Acts 3:17)

The ignorance Paul writes about here in Ephesians, though, is a willful, chosen ignorance. (See Romans 1:18-23) It is living without a conscious awareness and dependence on God, on purpose.

Anyone who is guilty of this willful ignorance is culpable, and such ignorance is so widespread because of the pre-existing condition of a hardened heart.

We are each responsible for the hardness or softness of our own heart. We are all responsible to watch over our hearts, for **[Proverbs 4:23] from it flow the springs of life**. It isn't surprising or remarkable to find people with hearts hard toward God.

Paul's providing us with a laundry list of challenges the people he's writing about (the Gentiles) are facing. And there is cause/effect all over this list.

Working backwards (but logically) - Hardness of heart toward God causes a willful ignorance. Ignorance about God (ignoring God) causes alienation from God. Alienation causes darkened minds, and darkened minds cause a walk into futility.

And all that leads to a life given to the things that don't last.

Morally (v. 19)

[19] and they, having become callous,⁸ have given themselves over to sensuality,⁹ for the practice of every kind of impurity with greediness.¹⁰

⁸ Hardness - the word was used by ancient physicians to describe the calcification that formed around broken bones, becoming harder than the bone itself; it carries the idea of paralysis as well.

⁹ Sensuality (Greek, *ασεληγεια*) - the performance of acts with no consideration of personal standards or social sanctions. Doing something indecent with no shame. Usually has reference to sexual lust or drunkenness.

¹⁰ Greediness - "I want more." No matter what it is, it is the hunger for more. Related to idolatry in that the desire for something becomes the center of our lives, i.e. - god/God. Extreme selfishness, the absence of moderation.

Calluses provide wonderful protection for hands that work hard or for feet that run hard. But the essence of a callus is that it makes the hand or the foot insensitive and unfeeling.

The callus Paul is picturing here has formed over the heart.

It's an unfeeling heart. It has no moral boundaries and feels no shame. It's moral apathy, and that rises because of a loss of hope that what someone so desperately long for - meaning, purpose, joy - will ever be found.

We see this process of hardening occurring in people we know and love - and it breaks our hearts. We see people who have never met Jesus leading lives of quiet desperation and we desperately want them to come to our Jesus.

Gospel...

Is it you who have not yet come to know Jesus?

The presence of God isn't present, and that sense of purpose and meaning you've been aching for isn't present, either. The problem is that's God designed you to find fulfillment in Him.

The first step on the path to finding that purpose and forgiven sin starts with a trusting look to Jesus. He died on the cross to take the penalty for all the bad things you've ever done, for all your sins.

He rose from the dead to prove that He had conquered death and He now stands with outstretched arms to welcome you into God's forever family.

There is no good work you could ever do to earn your way into God's family. You can, though, become a son or a daughter of God by simply putting your trust in Jesus, the One who gave Himself for you.

If today you place your trust in Christ, you will be saved. I know that because the Bible says, **[John 3:16] For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life.**

Now, having shown us the "life" that is available to those apart from Jesus, Paul orients us to what is true about L-I-F-E in Jesus.

L-I-F-E! - in Jesus (vv. 20-24)

Truth You Know in Jesus (4:20-21)

Paul knew his Ephesian audience well. It has been about five years since he had been with them. But he had spent as long as three years with them, sharing the Gospel, helping them grow in faith, and teaching them about Jesus.

So, he can confidently say, **[20] But you did not learn Christ in this way, [21] if indeed you have heard Him and have been taught in Him, just as truth is in Jesus¹¹**

The Ephesians "*learned Christ*" - not like learning calculus, but like learning a friend, relationally - while Paul was with them. They didn't get to literally "*hear Christ*", of course, but they "*learned Christ*" as Paul and his team modeled a holy, loving life.

They clearly had heard about Jesus, no "*ifs*" about it,¹² and were taught about Him through sermons and conversations and life.

They came to Christ through faith and moved out of alienation into relationship, out of condemnation into acceptance, out of darkness into light.

Same for us. Just like the Ephesians, we have learned Christ. We have heard about Him. We have been taught about Him.

And what have we been taught?

What would the Ephesians have understood Paul to be saying, reminding them of, when he wrote, "**...you have been taught in Him**"?

¹¹ "**Truth**" here is to be understood as reality in contrast to that which is false or deceptive. Jesus is the embodiment of truth.

¹² The Greek sentence structure argues for a translation more like "*inasmuch as...*" or "*since*" rather than the tentative "*if indeed*".

The way I see it, a big part of what they had been taught is captured in what Paul says in the remainder of our passage for today.

Up to this point, Paul has been focused on the negative, describing what life is like apart from Jesus. (vv. 17-19)

In what comes next, we learn what it is that we have learned about who we are in Jesus. So, before we get to what comes next, a word about what comes next.

Coming up next...

Lots of things happen to Christians - at the moment of conversion - without our knowledge or participation or permission.

For instance, we are baptized by the Spirit, made a part of the Body of Christ, adopted into God's family, regenerated by the Spirit, and much, much more the instant we believe in Jesus - without asking for any of it.

You didn't choose to become a part of the family of God. It was a part of the deal when you asked for and received eternal life. You learned about it some time after you became a Christian.

Nor were you aware that you were "**sealed**" by the Holy Spirit. (Ephesians 1:13) But, He sealed you when you believed as part of the born-again package.

I believe that what Paul describes in the next three critical statements of our passage commence immediately upon belief.¹³

¹³ Your Bible will likely translate "**put off**" and "**renew**" and "**put on**" with an imperatival sense, as in giving you something to do. But the commentaries come down on the side of Paul describing something that God has done and that now forms our identity in Christ. (Hoehner, who lists seven reasons to buttress this understanding; Abbott in the ICC series, Hendricksen). Plus, the grammatical construction Paul used (with the infinitive) is almost never used to give an exhortation.

We're going to hear Paul speak of "*laying aside the old self*" (v. 22) and of "*being renewed in the spirit of your mind*" (v. 23) and of "*putting on the new self*" (v. 24).

These all sound like great things to do, things that we should do. But I believe that Paul is not here urging us to do something.

I believe that He is reminding the Ephesians about what they have been taught¹⁴ and he's telling them and us who we are in Jesus.

In other words, what Paul is about to say clarifies our identity in Jesus.¹⁵

This is True About YOU, in Jesus (4:22-24)

About laying aside "the old self" (v. 22)

[22] that, in reference to your former manner of life, you lay aside¹⁶ the old self,¹⁷ which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit

We listen as he describes our former, unsaved state as "**the old self**".

It was a "**self**" that was separated from God. This "**old self**" was corrupted by a life that didn't take God into account. The "**old self**" believes that L-I-F-E can be found outside of a relationship with God.

¹⁴ All three infinitives (vv. 22, 23, 24) relate to "**have been taught**". (v. 21)

¹⁵ This explanation of what has happened, spiritually and internally, before urging to specific change in word, thought, and deed, is an especially Pauline way of writing, as he does it elsewhere, notably in the parallel passage in Colossians.

¹⁶ The word is variously used in the Greek version of the Old Testament of setting down stones (Joshua 4:8) and, more often, taking off garments (Leviticus 16:23). In the New Testament, it refers to putting someone in prison or getting rid of something.

¹⁷ My preference for a translation would be, "*You have been taught in Him that you have laid aside the old self*"

But he reminds the Ephesians that they had been taught - by Paul himself! - that this **“old self”** had been laid aside when they first believed in Jesus.

And, to my way of thinking (and that of many Bible scholars), the best way to read Paul’s words is to read, *“You have been taught in Him...that YOU HAVE LAID ASIDE the old self.”* He would tell us the same thing.¹⁸

When you believed in Jesus, one of the things that happened that you weren’t even aware of was that you laid aside **“the old self”**.

Paul pictures us doing the *“laying aside”*, and it is as much a part of the salvation package as being baptized by the Spirit.

He is saying the same thing here that he said in another place, that everyone who is **“in Christ...is a new creature; the old things have passed away; behold, new things have come.”** (2 Corinthians 5:17)

Picturing the **“old self”** as a garment, when you believed in Jesus, you slipped it off. The **“old self”** is gone. That **“old self”** is no longer who you are.

Second, Paul reminds them and us of what we have been taught about personal renewal.

About being renewed by the “spirit” in your mind (v. 23)

[23] and that you be renewed¹⁹ in the spirit²⁰ of your mind²¹

¹⁸ The tense of the infinitive is the Greek aorist, which points to a specific time in the past.

¹⁹ The form of the infinitive is what is called “middle/passive”. Hoehner (and others) takes it as a passive, where someone else is doing the renewing (God), and we are receiving, passively, the benefit of that renewing.

²⁰ Paul’s reference to “spirit” here is to the human spirit.

²¹ My preference for translation here would be, *“but you have been taught in Him that you are being renewed...”*

Unlike the first statement, which pictures an action we take (in Greek, the middle voice), this imagines us receiving the action of someone else, namely, God (passive voice).

His first statement was negative, having to do with laying aside something - **“the old self.”** This is positive.

And, his first statement was of a one-time *“laying aside”* that took place the instant we were saved. The words here speak of an on-going process. This **“renewing”** began when we were saved, but it continues throughout our lives.²²

Only the Spirit of God can change us, and He changes us by renewing our minds.²³

Paul envisions our inner life as consisting of mind plus spirit. The Holy Spirit is constantly taking God’s truth, applying it to our inner spirit and using it to renew our thinking.

Over time (years, decades!), our thinking and reasoning begins to reflect God’s wisdom, God’s perspective, more and more and more.

When Paul was with the Ephesians, he taught them about this. He’s teaching you and me, now. We are the people whose minds are being renewed by God’s Spirit. That is our identity.

Paul concludes, now, calling us back to the theme of laying aside by speaking of *“putting on.”*

About having put on “the new self” (v. 24)

[24] and put on²⁴ the new self,²⁵ which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth.

²² The present tense in Greek carries the thought of repeated, or continual, action.

²³ Remember what Paul has just said about our thought processes before we knew Jesus. See vv. 17-19.

²⁴ Same tense (aorist) as in verse 22, requiring a point-in-time (at conversion) when the action occurred.

²⁵ My preference for translation here would be, *“but you have been taught that you have put on the new self...”*

When Paul was in Ephesus, teaching these young Christians about life in Jesus, he told them that when they believed, they not only laid aside the garment of *“the old self”* (v. 22), they also *“put on the new self.”* The same is true for us.

This *“new self”* garment has been tailored for us by God. It “fits” the character of God. It is a garment of holiness.

So, after we have laid aside *“the old self”* - which is now permanently gone!²⁶ - we don’t remain unclothed. We instantly put on the *“new self”* and become someone who is justified before God, a child of God, heaven-bound, all things new in Christ.

Conclusion:

Next Sunday, you’ll have the delight of listening as Jeff leads you through the next passage in Ephesians, where Paul gets explicit and down to the nitty-gritty of actual life change.

But we needed today before we hear what follows. We have needed to know our new identity in Jesus.

- We are no longer the people we used to be - lost, alone, alienated from God, unforgiven.
- We are now the people who are constantly receiving truth from the Holy Spirit to renew our minds.
- We are the people who are new in Jesus, slate wiped clean, clothed in a garment of righteousness.

Now that we know our identity in Jesus, we are ready to lead lives that honor God.

²⁶ One author remarked, “We can’t be a Christian and a non-Christian at the same time.”