

Becoming Who We Are – The Book of Ephesians

This Is Who We Are

Ephesians 4:25-32

Mark Vroegop

“Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another. Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil. Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need. Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you” (Eph. 4:25-32).

There’s a question that I’m sometimes asked that’s a bit complicated to answer. Here it is: “Are you a golfer?” Now, you might think that’s an easy answer, but it kind of depends on a few things. What if I’m golfing with people who I don’t know, and they ask me this question as I’m walking up to the first tee box? Or what if I stop for a Diet Coke after a round of golf and someone sees that I’m wearing a golf shirt? Or what if I take my car in for repairs, and the service tech asks me the question because he sees clubs in the back of my car? Or what if a PGA pro attends our DISCOVER event, and as we get to know each other, he asks if I’m a golfer?

Do you see? It would be much easier to answer questions like: “Do you own clubs? Do you have golfing clothes? Do you like to golf?” That’s easy. But there’s something to the question “Are you a golfer?” that’s different.

But now imagine if instead of being asked the question, what happens when you offer the information without being asked? For example:

- “I’m a singer.”
- “I’m a runner.”
- “I’m an influencer.”
- “I’m a scholar.”

These questions and statements are loaded because they connect to the issue of identity. It’s one thing to ask “Do you like to play golf?” It’s another to ask, “Are you a golfer?” It’s one thing to introduce yourself by saying, “I like to golf.” It’s another thing to say, “I’m a golfer.” Do you see the issue?

Identity and actions are linked together. “I’m a golfer,” “I’m a scholar,” or “I’m a singer” implies that there are skills and competencies that fit with the identity. What would you think of an influencer with fifteen followers? Or a “singer” who can’t carry a tune? (Ever watched American Idol?)

Last week Jeff Ballard mentioned a teacher who told students they were scholars. Why did she do that? To encourage them to reach their full potential with getting good grades and graduating. **Identity can inspire action, but identity without action is an illusion.** There’s a connection between identity and actions.

Identity and actions are central to the book of Ephesians. You can hear it in our title for this series: **Becoming Who We Are.** Like most of the letters the apostle Paul wrote, he starts this letter with big, foundational doctrinal truths related to Christian identity. That’s the first three chapters. But there’s an important pivot in Ephesians 4:1, “I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called...”. The remaining chapters, 4-6, highlight the practical applications of that doctrine.

The text today highlights the actions that fit with our identity. This is who we are. In other words, it would not be good when people identify themselves as Christians and the people around them say, “Wait. What?”

Six Marks of Christian Identity

Paul provides six marks of what it means to embrace being a follower of Jesus. This is not an exhaustive list by any means. And it’s not a list that every Christian keeps perfectly. If you are a Christian, there will be some of these that will be convicting. There’s nothing new here. This is what we already know should be true.

And if you are not a Christian or trying to figure out what it means to be a Christian, this list will help you see that a personal relationship with Jesus really does work. These identifiers are impossible and unusual unless a person is deeply affected by the grace of God. Identity and actions are linked together.

1. Truthfulness

Let’s start with something pretty obvious: Christians shouldn’t be liars. I’m sure you know that the ninth commandment forbids bearing false witness. Lying and dishonesty are evil, and they are contrary to the heart of God. The Devil is the Father of Lies (John 8:44), while Jesus is described as “full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). For most of us, this isn’t new information.

But look at the unique perspective and emphasis that Paul brings. In verse 25 he says:

“Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another” (Eph. 4:25).

Notice that putting away falsehood is already a given. To be a Christian means that you’ve walked away from all the things that characterize the fallen world, including lies. And there’s a fundamental

commitment to speak the truth with one another. Don't miss the statement "for we are members of one another." Now, this doesn't mean that you say everything you think or express every feeling or thought that you have. There's a lot of damage done with "I'm just being honest." Let me also caution you about saying "I'm speaking my truth" as if your perception is inarguable.

Beyond the ninth command, Paul has in mind how the absence of truth really affects the fabric of relationships. Have you noticed the cultural erosion of trust in a post-truth society? It's hard to know what source and who is really telling you the truth, isn't it? Martin Lloyd-Jones said:

What makes fellowship possible is trust, mutual trust, mutual reliance, a feeling that you can trust one another, and therefore you can speak freely and openly, one to another. But the moment the element of lying comes in, fellowship is destroyed: you are no longer free; you do not know how much you can believe or what you can believe; you do not know how much you can trust the other person.¹

As the world continues to morally implode, it creates an opportunity for Christian communities to be marked by truthfulness.

2. Patience

The next identifier relates to anger. I've chosen to state it positively with the word "patience," and I'll explain why I think this is what Paul is driving at. Admittedly, he doesn't use the word here. Here's exactly what the verses say:

"Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil" (Eph. 4:26-27).

Notice that Paul doesn't say that all anger is sinful. Some anger is not only justifiable, but it's also necessary. John Stott says, "True peace is not identical with appeasement."² Some people are so conflict adverse that they're guilty of injustice or laziness. You can hide selfishness under the banner of "not getting angry."

Paul's instruction here is toward not allowing that anger to get out of control, linger, and open a door for other sin issues. The main point seems to be the phrase "Do not let the sun go down on your anger." That could mean reconcile with someone quickly, but I think it's simply meant to say that we should apply patience when we feel angry.

I think another word might help us: long-suffering. The idea is that our anger doesn't linger longer that it needs to. Deal with your frustrations quickly. Introduce your anger to patience. Be sure you balance out the urgency that comes with anger with the wisdom that comes with patience.

¹ Martin Lloyd-Jones. *Darkness and Light*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1982), 223.

² John R. W. Stott, *God's New Society: The Message of Ephesians*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 186.

Be careful here because that phrase “give an opportunity to the devil” is important. John Stott offers this wise caution: “{The Devil} loves to lurk around angry people, hoping to be able to exploit the situation to his own advantage by provoking them into hatred or violence or a breach of fellowship.”³

3. Generosity

The eighth commandment prohibits stealing. This might seem to be the simple meaning at first. Paul could have said, “Don’t steal from one another.” But he takes it a step further to highlight that generosity is actually the goal.

“Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need” (Eph. 4:28).

Notice that the goal is honest work that creates a resource to share with others. It is a hallmark of God’s grace that God’s people work hard and give generously. Christians give because everything they have is a gift from God. They’re generous because they look at everything in life through the lens of God’s graciousness with them. Christians see the world through a lens of what they believe about God, and it affects how they live:

“Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work” (2 Cor. 9:7-8).

Generosity is an identifying mark of a Christian.

4. Graciousness

Fair warning: the intensity picks up a bit in the second half of this list. Paul now turns to the kinds of words that Christians use. He makes one negative statement and four affirming statements about how we talk. In short, he’s appealing to Christians that they would use gracious words, the kind of words that advance God’s agenda.

Let’s look at the verses and then examine what the various phrases mean.

“Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption” (Eph. 4:29-30).

The negative statement is “no corrupting talk.” This means bad, worthless, rotten, useless, or harmful. Jesus used the word to describe a diseased tree that bears bad fruit. Apparently, Paul wanted to make his point even clearer because he adds some phrases to highlight the positive. What are good words like?

³ Ibid, 187.

- “good for building up” – These are edifying words that encourage people to do what’s right. These are words that motivate people toward righteousness.
- “fit the occasion” – Words that are selected wisely, based upon the unique circumstances and the particular needs of the people involved.
- “that it may give grace to those who hear” – We need to consider how our words become conduits for God’s empowerment. They’re life-giving words.

Do you feel the orientation of this list? We’re a long way from “I want to give them a piece of my mind” or “I’m just gonna tell it like it is.” Often that’s a verbal cover for a selfish, reactionary spirit looking for verbal revenge. Speaking in a way that fits with Ephesians 4 means that I’m not centering myself in every conversation. I think that’s why grieving the Holy Spirit is mentioned here. Human words can hinder the work of the Spirit in the lives of other people.

I’m not allowing how I feel or what I want to say to be the only factor in my verbal filter. It means that I don’t see my words through a defensive lens. My words are to be helpful. Gracious words serve as a conduit for the work of God.

5. Goodness

Verse 31 is a list of some really destructive responses. This is a list of the evil ways that human beings often respond. These issues are to “be put away.”

“Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice” (Eph. 4:31).

The last word, “malice,” informs the rest of the verse. It means evil, hateful, and bad. It’s the total opposite of goodness. It seems that it characterizes the entire list: evil expressed through bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and slander. None of these responses reflect goodness. They’re just a unique expression of how we embrace evil.

Let me unpack each of these:

- Bitterness – A sour spirit or disposition toward someone. You hear their name, and your internal reaction is “yuck.” Think of it like moldy milk. You’ve allowed things to fester, and now you’ve got a mess inside. That’s bitterness.
- Wrath – An explosive rage that is more external
- Anger – A determined hostility that is more internal
- Clamor – Verbal combat that involves quarreling, arguments, or raised voices
- Slander – Speaking evil about others for the purpose of destroying their reputation

What a depressing list! Aren’t you glad that our culture is seeing less and less of this? It’s just the opposite, isn’t it? We now live in a day with outrage and controversy entrepreneurs. You can build a platform, find new friends, or gather a following by playing into our most evil inclinations. It’s so much easier to be against people than it is to be for them. But that’s the contrast between evil and goodness.

6. Mercifulness

Thankfully, this text ends on a hopeful and instructive note. Paul provides some specific counsel, almost as if he anticipates, “Paul, what should we do!?” This would be a good verse to memorize because it addresses the action steps that we can take when malicious actions and attitudes take root.

“Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you”
(Eph. 4:32).

The first recommendation is to become kind. I’m choosing that word “become” intentionally because the sense of the word is connected to a change of your state of mind. It reflects the disposition of God toward us, extending mercy to us that we don’t deserve. Tenderhearted simply means compassionate and concerned for another’s welfare. Forgiving literally means “acting in grace” toward another person.⁴ It means that your heart is in the right place toward the other person.

In short, all of this (kindness, tenderheartedness, forgiveness) could be summarized by the word “mercy.” It’s a calling here to extend grace to others in the same manner in which grace has been extended to us.

Six marks of Christian identity: truthfulness, patience, generosity, graciousness, goodness, and mercifulness. They fit with what it means to be a follower of Jesus. They reflect our understanding of how the grace of God has been applied to your life.

So, let’s be sure that our actions fit with our identity. And hopefully, the question “Are you a Christian?” will have an easy and obvious answer.

Identity and actions are linked.

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⁴Ibid, 191.