A PRAYER WE’D ALL LIKE ANSWERED
IDENTITY THEFT
Ephesians 1:15-23 // Scott Wenig
October 24, 2016

SCOTT WENIG (GUEST SPEAKER): Wow, isn’t that just fantastic? What a great ministry there and also a middle school Halloween party, reaching kids for Christ. That’s just awesome. My name is Scott Wenig and I have the privilege of sharing from the pulpit with you today. Pastor Craig is taking the weekend off for a little bit of refreshment and family time. And so he very graciously allowed me to come in his stead. We’re going to continue our series this morning on Identity Theft out of the book of Ephesians. What we’re gonna do this morning is look at Ephesians 1 verses 15 through 23. And I’m gonna get us started by reading the first two verses of this section which is a prayer that Paul prays for the Ephesians and for his readers which would include you and me. Let’s begin at Ephesians 1, look at verses 15 and 16. This is God’s word to you and to me.

Here’s what the apostle inspired by the Holy Spirit wrote. “For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the lord Jesus and your love for all God’s people, I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers.” And as I said, he’s gonna go on and pray a prayer and we’re gonna look at that in detail. Before we do, can I get you to join your hearts together with me as we look to our Father in heaven?

Father, thanks for this day that you have given us out of your compassion and your mercy and your grace that we could gather together in this great auditorium to worship you. Lord, you are a great and awesome God, and we just want to lift our hearts up and praise to you today. Lord, we’ve all come from busy weeks doing a lot of things with a lot of responsibilities, so I just pray that you would meet each of us here wherever we’re at today individually in a special way. And lord, now as we look into your word, I pray that you might challenge us a little bit, but that you would also comfort and encourage us and point us closer and closer to our identity in you. And we pray this in Jesus name, and we do so for our sake, amen.

Entrepreneur and business investor Amy Rees Anderson says that every day as she was growing up and left the house, her mother would tell her, “Amy, remember who you are, remember what you stand for.” Anderson goes on to write, “I guess that I heard that phrase literally thousands of times before I graduated from high school.” Now, Amy’s mom, and I suspect her dad as well, were trying to help her define herself. Because they knew if she didn’t define herself, someone else or something else would do that for her.

Remember who you are, remember what you stand for. Well, that’s powerful advice for a child, and I’d like to suggest that it’s powerful advice for all of us here. Because as God’s people, we wanna be incredibly intentional, incredibly diligent to define ourselves first and foremost as followers of the Lord Jesus Christ. And that’s really, really important because advertisers want to define us as consumers and shoppers. Sports franchises want to define us as their very loyal fans. Occupations want to define us by what we do every day Monday through Friday, or Monday through Saturday. Politicians want to define us either by our support or in some cases, by our opposition.

Now, while none of those are necessarily bad in and of themselves, we always want Christ to define who we are and what we stand for. And this isn’t just a contemporary challenge for those of us living in America or living in Littleton in 2016. There were incredibly powerful forces at work in the ancient Asian city of Ephesus that sought to define each and every one of those inhabitants as well.

You may have known this, but Ephesus was the second largest city in the Roman Empire. It had 250,000 inhabitants, a quarter of a million people, had a lot of prestige. The city was also known of really being into the arts, into drama. They had an amphitheater that seated over 10,000 people. It was a city that was also known for its educational prowess. They had this...
majestic library that was the envy of many, many other cities in the ancient world. It had an agora or what we might call a shopping mall. And that shopping mall was filled with products and people from all over the ancient Near East and all over the eastern part of the Mediterranean. The city was also incredibly religious. It was the home of the temple of the Goddess Artemis, and that temple was considered one of the seven wonders of the ancient world.

I had the privilege of visiting the city about 15 years ago, and it’s all in ruins now. And it’s still incredibly beautiful and impressive. And I remember walking down one of the streets thinking, “What must this have looked like, what must this have been like in the 1st century?” Well, right there in the middle of that huge cosmopolitan Asian city with all its opportunities and its challenges and its pressures were a group of people who were trying to faithfully live out their identity as the fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ. And so to encourage them and instruct them what that might look like through the rest of their lives, Paul writes them this letter that we’ve been looking at here the last few weeks.

And as Pastor Craig has pointed out the last couple of weeks if you’ve been here, the apostle wanted those Christians during Ephesus and all the readers of this letter including you and me to know that we have professed faith in Jesus as our lord and our savior, we’ve now been adopted into his family, and we’ve been given this wonderful, awesome, great new identity as his son, his daughter, his child. Well, Paul knows that, but what he wants to do is he wants to drive us deeper and deeper and deeper into our identity in Jesus lest that be stolen from us. And so what he does now in the text we’re gonna look at is he pay a praise that’s incredibly passionate, that’s incredibly heartfelt prayer so that you and I will know who we are in Jesus and exactly what we stand for.

To begin this prayer, he praised that our intimacy with the lord would grow deeper and deeper and deeper. Look at verse 17. Paul says, “I keep asking that the Spirit or the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the spirit of wisdom and revelation so that you may know him better.” Paul knows that a key element in strengthening our identity in Christ is to deepen our intimacy with him. And so he praised here that that will happen. He praised that we’ll come to know the Lord better and better and better. Now, what I find fascinating about this prayer is that it’s Trinitarian in its essence. Paul is asking the Father to give us more of his spirit, the spirit of revelation and wisdom so that we can know the son that is Jesus in a deeper and more intimate way.

Now, I didn’t grow up in church where all then years and years ago when I became a Christian, I first encountered the idea of God being triune in his nature. It was a little bit confusing to me and so I’d ask my teachers and mentors and other people if they could explain it to me. And generally what they do, and I’ve always appreciated this and I still do, they would give me those analogies of God’s nature being kind of like an egg with the shell and the white and the yolk, or God’s triune nature being like water which can exist as steam and liquid and ice. I think those analogies, well, you know, they might break down at a certain point. Those are very helpful for helping those of us understand the complex nature of the trinity.

But what the early church did was they took the Old Testament command. “Hear O Israel, the Lord your God is one,” and then they added the further revelation given by Jesus and the rest of the New Testament to describe God as one perfect being who eternally exists in three persons: the father, the son, and the Holy Spirit. And as we read the New Testament, it becomes really, really clear that at the heart of the blessed trinity is this perfect relationship of love and community and intimacy. And Paul wants you and me as well as these early readers of this letter, he wanted them and he wants us to experience that kind of intimacy. And so he praised that our identity would be strengthened so that we can remember exactly who we are and what we stand for.

Now, there are lots and lots of ways that we can increase our intimacy or deepen our intimacy with Jesus. But this morning, what I’d like to do is suggest two that are closely related. First of all, I’d like to suggest that we all, every day, whatever works for you, sit in the chair of time with the lord. You all know this, I know this. Any relationship whatsoever, if it’s gonna be a good relationship, you’ve gotta give it time. So can I suggest that you figure out a way in your life? And listen, I know you’re busy, I’m
busy, we have tasks and responsibilities and jobs, and relationships to maintain, but can I encourage you to figure out a time when you can just sit with the Lord.

And then related to that is what I like to call the chair of openness. Once again, you know this, you get this, you experience this. Any relationship, if it’s going to deepen, if it’s going to become more and more and more intimate, it requires openness. And so what that might look like for you and me on a regular basis is we take some time and then we are open with the Lord. We pour out what’s going on in our lives and our hearts to the Lord. We say, “Lord, I’m really struggling with this sin of jealousy.” Or, “Lord, I’m really struggling with this sin of lust.” Or, “Lord, I have a big, big decision coming up. Lord, will you give me some wisdom and grace to help me with that?” Or, “Lord, I’m feeling kind of tangled in this situation at work, or this situation at school, whatever it might be, Lord, will you give me some help in doing that?”

See, the Apostle Paul comes along and he writes to these Ephesian Christians, but he’s writing to you and me. He doesn’t want our identity to be stolen from us. He wants our identity to go deeper and deeper and deeper into Jesus so that we’ll remember who we are and what we stand for. And he tells us here that the first thing he’s praying, the first thing we can do so that that will move that direction is to deepen our intimacy with the Lord. But he doesn’t stop there. As it’s Paul’s normal habit, he usually goes on and gives us some more. And that’s what he does here in verse 18. Here he tells us that what we need to do is grasp our destiny with Jesus. Look at verse 18.

He says, “I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he’s called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people or in the saints.” Paul moves on here to pray that we would know the hope that he’s called us to. And he’s very specific here as to what that is. It’s the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints.

Now, if you’re here this morning, and at some point in the past, you have professed faith in Christ and Christ alone, you’ve asked him to forgive your sins and to receive you into his family, that means that you have a relationship with him. Now, your identity is configured in him right now. In other words, your present status is with him in Christ. But Paul assumes that in a sense and then he develops it out in this prayer by saying that it also defines our future as well because it includes the riches of our glorious inheritance.

Now, this inheritance that he’s referring here to is the exact same one that he was referring to back in verses 11 and 14. It’s the inheritance that we will all receive along with all of God’s people when Christ returns, when history reaches its fulfillment, when we get resurrected in glorified bodies, and we get to live forever and ever and ever with Him and with each other in a new Heaven and a new Earth.

Friends, this is really important. See, our hope in Christ means that regardless of what happens to us while we’re alive here on planet Earth, our hope in Christ means that our destiny is determined. And so Paul prays here fervently and passionately and pastorally that we will grasp that destiny. This is such a great reality that I do really think it should cost us to come out of our seats and praise, lifting our hands in worship and thanksgiving, and minimally making all of us at least mildly charismatic.

But, you know, if you’re like me, and I think some of you are, there’s a problem with this. And that is, the problem I have is, I have a tendency to get so caught up in the day to day responsibilities and activities of life that I forget to grab hold of my eternal destiny with Jesus. And even when I remember that, I struggle to understand exactly what it means for my life day by day. And I think Paul understood that. I think he understood people like me. And so he praised here that the eyes of our hearts would be enlightened. And the word that he uses here is the normal word that he used in the bible for heart. And that means not just our emotions, and not just our intellect, but the totality of who we are as human beings.

When Paul prays here that the eyes of our hearts would be enlightened, he’s asking God to help us see with every single part of who we are, every fiber of our being, the crucial importance of putting the eternal hope of our destiny with Jesus at the very center of our lives. Because friends, hope is the fuel that life runs on. We really, really need hope in Jesus at a personal level
when we get sick and we face death, or when someone we love gets sick and dies.

A few years ago, I ran into a guy over at Starbucks in Aspen Grove. He teaches in our Doctor Ministry Program at Denver Center. He comes to town periodically to help us out. And actually, years and years ago, he used to be a member of Mission Hills when he lived here in town. But when I saw him that day, I knew that the prior year and a half had been a really hard time for him. He had lost his beloved wife to cancer, and then his oldest son was killed tragically in a haunting accident. You know, he didn’t need any more money, he didn’t need to teach any more classes, he didn’t need to write any more books, he didn’t need any more notoriety or fame, what he needed was the hope in Jesus that he would, in time, eventually see his wife and his son in the eternal glorious life to come.

You know, if our marriages get tangled, or our relationships breakdown, we need hope, don’t we? We need the hope that the Lord in his mercy, in his kindness, can help those tangles get untangled, that our relationships will be healed and whole so that we can enjoy them as he originally intended. All of us in this auditorium this morning need hope culturally, we need hope politically. Yeah, we’re all really, really, really concerned about this election that’s coming up. And so what we need is the hope that in the middle of all of our political dysfunction here in the United States that Christ is at work redeeming people and building His church and advancing His kingdom. As the author of the Hebrews said to some other early Christians, “Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for He, that is Jesus, who promised is faithful.”

Friends, Jesus loves us deeply. And he’s called us to this glorious kingdom that’s far beyond this country, this world, and this life, so let’s grasp our destiny with Him and live every single day as the most hopeful people around.

Did you know that hope actually has healing power? Did you know this? Listen to this. This is fascinating. In one study, 122 men who had a heart attack and survived were surveyed on their degree of hopefulness versus pessimism. Of the 25 most pessimistic, 21 died within 8 years. Of the 25 most hopeful or optimistic, only 6 had died. Now, listen to this. This is fascinating. Loss of hope increased the odds of death by 300%. It predicted death more accurately than any medical factor including blood pressure, degree of heart damage, or cholesterol. You know what that means? You know what that means? It means that we should always eat doughnut and hope rather than broccoli and despair. So after church, go have a doughnut and hope.

Friends, if we’re going to remember who we are in Jesus and that we stand for the advancement of His ruling, His reign, His kingdom, first of all, we want to deepen our intimacy with him. And secondly, we wanna grab our destiny with him. But to do those things over the long hold, the day by day, week by week, month by month process of life requires more than human effort. It requires the power of Almighty God, and Paul knows that. And so he goes on here on verse 19, and he prays this third part of his prayer. He’s prayed that they would know God more intimately and that they would grab their destiny. And then he prays, “And I pray that you would know His incomparably great power for us who believe.”

Paul had lived in the city of Ephesus for a couple of years. And he had been in and out of that great cosmopolitan center. He knew the social and economic and religious pressure that those Christians faced every single day. And so he doesn’t just pray for them here that they would rely on God’s power. But he prays, and this is awesome, he prays that they would all know his incomparably great power. In the original text, the phrase is literally rendered the energy of the might of His strength. Paul is adding word after word after word here to describe this awesome, incredible power of God, the energy of God, which is one of the words he uses to show us that we have access to that.

Just like those first Christians in Ephesus, you and I face pressures and fears, doubts and temptations, stresses and demands every single day. And so if we’re going to remember that we’re the followers of Jesus and that we stand for His kingdom first and foremost, that means we need to deepen our intimacy with Him and we need to grab our destiny with Him, and then we need to leverage the energy or the power of God that He has made available to us. And just so we all know the incomparable power and what that looks like.
Paul goes on and gives an elaborate description of it in verses 20 through 23. Look what he says here. This is really amazing.

“That power is the same as the mighty strength He exerted when he raised Christ from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also the one to come. And God placed all things under His feet, that is Christ, and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.”

Now what Paul is saying here in this really dense section of this prayer is that it was God’s majestic energy that raised Jesus from a dead body to being alive. It was God’s mighty strength that ascended Him to heaven. It was God’s awesome power that placed Christ above everything in the universe both seen and unseen. It’s God’s breathtaking power that made Christ the head of the church and He fills it in every single way.

Oh, do you see what Paul is doing here? He’s painting this cosmic vision of the sheer utter supremacy of the resurrected, ascended, and glorified Christ who saw over not only over the present age but also over the age to come. He’s the God of incomparably great power. Some of you might be sitting here thinking, “Well, you know, Scott, that sounds really good and I see that’s what the text says, but if there is so much divine power around, if the energy of the Almighty triune God is available for the advance of Christ’s kingdom, how come we don’t see it more?”

Well, I want to suggest to us this morning that actually it’s very, very visible globally, locally, and personally. We’re never gonna ever see this on the evening news, we’re never gonna read about it in any of the major papers, we’re never gonna see this online. But we need to know that today, God’s kingdom is advancing at an unprecedented rate in Asia and Africa and South America. Literally, thousands of people are coming to know Jesus in a personal way every single day in the Eastern and Southern hemispheres. There’s approximately a billion people who live in China and we know for a fact that 100 million of them are Christians, but we think that maybe many, many, many more are in the churches spreading like crazy in China to the point where some people think that by the end of 21st century, China will literally be a Christian civilization.

Nobody in the local media is gonna tell us this. You’re never gonna see this on Channel 2, Channel 4, Channel 7, Channel 9, Channel 13 news. But all along the front range of Colorado, all the way from North to Fort Collins, South down to Pueblo, there are hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of churches that every single week are ministering to thousands and thousands and thousands of people, and they’re impacting their communities for the advance of the gospel in Jesus Christ.

I mean, I’ve lived in Denver most of my life, and I really believed that in the last 25 years, there’s been something of an under the radar revival that has gone on and I think Mission Hills Church has been part of that. You know, we now only see that globally and locally, I think sometimes we even see that personally.

Not too long ago, I was in an incredibly, intense, tough meeting. Discussion over a very controversial issue, emotions were running really high. The tensions in that meeting were so thick you could cut them with a knife. You could just feel the anger and the antagonism start to rise in the room as different people were kind of leveraging against each other. And then the two men running the meeting exercised and leveraged the power of God. They listened to everybody present, they took their time, they processed everything really, really well. We came away with a good result, no relational damage.

Friends, that exact, same power of Jesus Christ is available to every person in this room. We just need to leverage it. And I think to do that, what we need to do is what the apostle did, and that is pray and ask God for it. Some in this auditorium this morning are battling sins, you’re battling addictions, you’re battling brokenness. God’s power is available to you for help and healing so let me encourage you to ask Him for that. Some here this morning are desperately lonely. You’re really frustrated with family dysfunction. You’re trying to process your way through relational heartbreak. God’s power is available to help us in those situations, help heal our hearts so let’s ask Him for it.

Some here might be struggling with identity, purpose, wondering who you are, what’s life all about, what do you really stand for?
Friends, the incomparable might of Jesus can help us know exactly who we are in him. And that he has called us to this great purpose of kingdom advancement so let’s pray and ask Him for His power to help us grab that. See, in this text here in Ephesians 1, Paul is praying that our identity in Jesus will grow stronger and stronger and stronger that no one will ever take it from us, that it cannot be stolen from us. And in order to do that, he prays that our intimacy with Jesus would get deeper and deeper and that we would grasp the destiny of our hope of eternal life with Him and that we would then leverage His power every single day.

And that’s a prayer I think everybody in here would like to see answered, because it will help us to remember that we are Christ’s followers and that we stand for Him and His kingdom regardless of what happens, regardless of our gender, of our occupation, our socioeconomic status or our age. Let me show you what I mean.

Tony Campolo used to teach sociology at Eastern College in Pennsylvania. Tony is retired now. He’s in his late 7s, maybe he’s 80 now. But before he retired, he used to travel all around the country all the time because he’s a great conference speaker. So he would speak in churches and he would speak at parachurch groups and he would speak at camp groups, just a tremendous communicator.

One of the stories that he always liked to tell was about a time when he was in his late 20s and he was invited to be a counselor and a speaker at a junior high camp, a middle school camp. Tony said he always liked junior high kids, but on this occasion, the kids in this camp were just mean. And they focused all their negative attention on a little guy by the name of Billy. Well, Billy suffered from Cerebral Palsy, and so he walked with a limp, he had a hard time controlling his arms, and he always spoke with a pronounced stutter.

And the boys in this camp, they just seemed to love to mock Billy and insult him and call him spastic. Well, after a few days of this, Tony said that he was so mad, steam was coming out of his ears and he knew he was gonna do something to some of these kids that he would later regret. But then came the low point. The cabin where Billy was staying was assigned to do morning devotions, and all the boys in his cabin voted to make Billy give the devotional because they knew it would be one more opportunity to mock him as he tried to speak in front of all the other kids.

Well, when it came time for the devotional, Billy pulled himself out of his seat. He limped to the front. He got to the podium. And then he said, “Jesus knows me, and Jesus loves me, and I love Jesus.” Tony says there was absolute silence and then it was followed by 150 kids crying and sobbing and confessing their sins. And then they mobbed little Billy and then they grabbed him, they hugged him, and told him how sorry they were, and that they were totally wrong, and they asked him to forgive them for what they had done.

Tony said that revival broke out in that camp. A lot of those kids gave their lives to Jesus Christ. And they went on to serve him locally and globally for years and years and years to come. See, little Billy knew Jesus in a deeply personal way. And that meant he knew exactly who he was and exactly what he stood for even in the face of mockery and opposition and harassment. May that same thing be true of you, may that same thing be true of me. As day by day, week by week, month by month, we seek to deepen our identity in the savior who has known us and loves us and has called us to spend eternity with Him in paradise.

We’re going to now do something that we do at Mission Hills once a month or so, and that is we’re gonna take a watch care offering and I’m gonna invite the ushers to come forward here in just a second. This is an offering where all the proceeds from this go to meet physical needs of people here in the church, physical needs of people here in the community. If the Lord blessed (SP) on your heart to give, God bless you, that’s great. I’m gonna pray for this and then our team is gonna lead us in some more singing. Let’s bow together.

Father, thanks for this day. Thanks for every person here. Thank you for your love and your grace. Help us to find our identity in you and revel in your grace and your kindness. In Jesus name, amen.