

“In Christ”: One Nature, Under God

Text: Ephesians 4:21-32 (James 4:1-6; Romans 5:12-21)

10.8.17



Reflection questions... [please consider the teaching notes, first, as a basis of your reflections]

“If I am new, then why do I still have all of these lingering desires that seem to suggest that I’m just the same old me, with a few new God-hobbies? Am I simply this confusing amalgamation of good and evil, yin and yang? Am I essentially a ‘sinner’, who occasionally musters up the energy for goodness or, am I essentially a ‘righteous person’, who occasionally forgets who they are, and sins?”

“Think about a time when your present system of belief was challenged, and proven to be defective. Why do you think that adopting a new set of beliefs is both unsettling and disturbing? Do you notice that it’s typically when those beliefs are challenged, that we realize how deeply rooted they are and how thoroughly entrenched we have become?”

“How would you respond to this statement: ‘Once you realize that you have been chosen, the pressure’s off and you can simply find joy in your present life— suffering, failure, betrayal, sickness, unemployment, et al., in anticipation of something better... the real thing.’?”

“How has the presence of loving-acceptance in your life allowed you risk change? How has the absence of loving-acceptance created places of fear and insecurity?”

“Where in your life is your willpower losing out to your desires, despite your good intentions? What might you need to ‘take off’ in order to live more authentically... in keeping with who you really are?”

“How would you characterize the difference between acceptance and indiscriminate approval? How can we, both, remain secure in our relationship with God (and others) and risk addressing areas of brokenness in our lives?”

“How is attempting to avoid/ignore our brokenness determinantal to authentic acceptance? How can attempting to highlight our goodness be equally deceptive?”

“How does your group practice loving-acceptance? How do you think our understanding of God forms and informs the ways that we are with one another?”

“John said that Jesus came and embodied both ‘grace’ and ‘truth’ (1:14). What is the importance of grace in our relationships (with God and others)? Why the need for truth? What happens when either is absent or ignored?”

Teaching Notes...

All of God’s good creation is formed out of the sound of his voice.

“And God said, ‘Let there be _____, and there was _____’ (Genesis’ pattern). “No other god but me...”, sets the tone for the relationship (Exodus 20).

We were created for a singular, authoritative voice which carried weight (glorious), could establish our value, and could be distinguished from the other competing voices. This One, Paul says, is *“predisposed to us”*, and his guilty pleasure is in loving us (Ephesians 1:4-5)

When you lose this identity as the beloved, you become susceptible to other labels, each meant to “de-value” you and “desensitize” you to love.

Your sense of worth and value will always be ‘up for grabs’. You will always be tempted to believe that something other than love--- someone other than God--- is central to who you are.

God is always loving us into a new way of living.

We can always only be accepted for who we are because none of us is currently who we are supposed to be. So, grace always ‘frontloads’ acceptance and goodness. Instead of insisting that we perform (to be noticed, to be validated), it begins by conferring value and worth upon us and then simply invites us to live as if it’s true (Ephesians 5:2).

To be named and valued, without condition, is to be “loved”, by God. To be loved and permitted to remain in your present condition, is tragic indifference.

Grace is not simply God’s co-dependent way of maintaining a relationship with you.

“Because I love you,”: it is his desire to love you into a new reality, which demands massive doses of grace and healthy expressions of truth.

No one attempts, nor experiences, the kind of repentance and deep-heart transformation that this Story portrays without a greater incentive than, “being good”... but, we would do it for love.

“... grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (John 1:14).

Truth without grace is debilitating and leads to despair. Grace without truth is simply a naïve endorsement of all that’s wrong with us.

If the gospel says that I am accepted, in an atmosphere of loving-accountability, it encourages and empowers me to pursue authentic transformation--- becoming who I was always meant to be.

God knew that the only way to restore and recover a disconnected humanity was to place within us a desire for him that was somehow stronger than our urges toward sin.

Remember, we were reminded last week that when we say that we are, “*in Christ*”, we are speaking of a way of identifying ourselves that possesses both an *objective* truth and an *experiential* truth.

In one sense, there’s something **definitive** and **decisive**. “*You were..., you are...*” [‘*dead/alive*’; *darkness/light*’; ‘*separated/ brought close*’. Paul is saying that this is a reality that is not immediately present to you, meaning, that it cannot be either validated or invalidated by what you feel or observe [e.g. marriage: covenant ceremony legally establishes a new relationship, but your experience of that reality will be realized as you personally interact with it (“... *growing in every way, more and more like Christ...*” Ephesians 4:15).

This, I would suggest, is the central question which will determine both your understanding of belovedness and the ease with which you function, in this world.

The story that currently orders your life derives its power from your willingness to believe it and your determination to pursue it as reality. It doesn’t need to be true, it just needs to be ‘believable’.

The “new life” (new creation) is never a matter of attempting to become something that you’re not, but learning to live in defiance of everything that would diminish who you really are, “in Christ”.

Paul uses terms like “old nature/new nature”, “former way of life/life in Christ”, “flesh/spirit”, to attempt to describe a work of God in us that not only creates a new relationship, but a new ethic.

We would have to say at least three things concerning Paul’s use of the terms “old person” and “new person” (Ephesians 4; Romans 6). **First**, the “old person (self; man)” is a metaphor describing our life before encountering Jesus, in which we were more conscious of sin and ourselves than God.

Second, the “old person” can’t be tamed or domesticated or re-invented, it must die. **Third**, to have the fullest experience of life, you’ll have to ‘do the math’! (“*count yourselves dead...*”, Romans 6:11)

Paul offers this revelation to us in the form of a “*mathematical story problem*” “**reckon**”: *calculate, take into account, weigh, to decide*. It was a banking term. When you calculate, you take all of the actual numbers and add them to form a sum which means a new result. None of that changes your current financial position, but it simply makes you aware, which allows you to re-align yourself with reality.

The ‘*old self*’, is a way of describing the you which you have been fashioning through your commitment to self-gratification and posturing and achievement and SAT scores and using your language to manipulate a favorable response from others. It is getting your identity, your validation, your motivation from anything other than your God-status. It also describes the propensity we have to revert back to old patterns of thought and behavior. It’s comfortable. It’s familiar.

When Paul contrasts ‘*flesh*’ and ‘*spirit*’ (Galatians 5:16-18), he is contrasting self-reliance and God-reliance; being self-explanatory and God-referenced. Paul says that we are involved in an internal struggle between the new, as of yet under-developed heart, and the default systems of the self-directed life. At every point in our lives, we are living into/nurturing/deferring to the one and dissatisfying/frustrating/dismissing the other.

“taking off” and “putting on” [Colossians 3:8-14]

Paul also uses this imagery to describe the actions of a candidate for baptism. They would take off their present clothing, be baptized naked, then, having come up out of the water, would be

given a new set of clothes (white) to symbolized the cleanness and newness of life (nothing staining, no sin-residue left). Now that you are, *"in Christ"*, those clothes don't look right on you; that way of life doesn't suit you.

Putting off and putting on is a matter of consciously and persistently deciding to do certain things in certain ways so that, gradually, such actions become more 'second-nature'.

The initial steps that we take require a courageous choice for goodness and a decided course of action that is counter-intuitive to all that we have learned about life independent of God.

Again, this is not an amateur attempt at boosting your self-esteem, but a concerted effort at establishing your identity, because you will never live beyond what you believe to be true of God... what you believe to be true of yourself.

We don't always conduct ourselves in ways that are consistent with our new heart. We don't always respond appropriately to the new impulses of our renewed heart.

None of us, ever, fully displays our righteous status.

When we do find ourselves living "hypocritically", we can trust that the Spirit of Jesus, within us--- animating and empowering us--- will both convince and convict us. *"That's not who you are, anymore!"* [Romans 8:15; Galatians 4:6; John 16]