

Follow Me
Ephesians 1:3-14
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Grace, mercy, and peace are yours from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

The text for today's sermon follows Paul's letter to the Christians of Ephesus, specifically focusing on verses 7-14. It reads as this "In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and understanding, he made known to us the mystery of his will according to this good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment—to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ... And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession—to the praise of his glory." This is our text.

Happy New! I'd like to ask you a simple question now that we're in 2015: "Who are you?" It's a broad question I know, and it can be answered in many different ways. But let me ask it again. When this church service is over, and you leave through the doors of this church, who are you going to be? The text for today's sermon aims to answer this very question by going straight to the core of who you are now in Christ, and how that affects everything that you are and the very life

you have.

The apostle Paul was no stranger to the difficulties within the church. On New Year's Eve I preached off of Paul's letter to the Romans. The church in Ephesus was struggling over the very same issues of a cultural clash between the Jews and Gentiles. This says a lot about the church back then and it still says a lot about the church today. The early church had its roots in Jewish traditions, and the leaders in Jerusalem thought that Gentiles who became followers of Jesus—the Way, as they called it, would have to submit themselves to the ceremonial laws of Moses that included things such as following kosher food laws and circumcision. It was thought *because you follow a Jewish Messiah, this is who you are now and this is what you need to do in order to be a part of the Kingdom*. In other words, the Gentiles who came to Christ had to abandon who they were culturally in order to become faithful followers of Jesus. Can you imagine that? For many of us Americans today, that would be like giving up the core pieces of the traditional American breakfast: sausage and bacon. Yeah, pancakes are alright, eggs are good, but nothing says America like sausage and bacon. Aside from that joke, many people have been pressured to such rigidity all throughout time for the sake of unity. But the apostle Paul and Peter stood up for the Gentile believers insisting that there was no need for the Gentiles to abandon who they were and to become Jews. In fact, what brought Jews and Gentiles together was the seal that marked them as God's own—we know this as baptism. Bringing people together as one in order to recognize their need for a Savior was and continues to be God's doing. It is the work of God that brings unity

amongst believers. It is not by the efforts of man that people are brought together, as the leaders in Jerusalem thought.

Because God had brought people from all the ends of the earth together to be His own according to His will, many churches in the ancient world grew. And we Gentiles, from all over the world and different times, have been brought in to Christ through the saving power of God's Word. The mark that brings us Christians of the world together is our baptism in the name of the Triune God: the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Through the washing of our sins, we have been saved by faith in Jesus, and brought into community with one another in the Kingdom of God.

Now we probably don't think much of our own baptisms except when we see a child or an adult getting baptized. But what exactly is baptism, and why is it so important to the Christian faith? Some in the body of faith would argue that it is a public commitment to following Jesus. Others would say it's simply a church ritual for initiation into a community of faith. And there are even some who would say "you don't need it in order to be saved." But God's Word says baptism saves us by the resurrection of Jesus. Biblically, baptism is akin to the Old Testament covenant of circumcision. God claimed the circumcised Israelite men and their families as His own. Circumcision amongst the Israelites made them God's children and they received His many blessings and promises. In the washing waters of baptism, we have received the many blessings and promises of our God in Jesus, and have become His children. In other words, our baptism is integral to our identity because

we have been saved by God. It speaks volumes as to who we are in relationship with and what the relationship entails.

If you had to self-identity yourself right now, what would it be? And how does that one specific marker permeate through your other callings in life? We tend to think about our many different callings in life as if they're like hats, don't we? Maybe not all the time, but we do this consistently enough. The average person in the work force tends to perform his/her tasks during the week for about 40 hours give or take. Let me share with you a hat that I used to wear. I used to work at Sigma Aldrich off of Teutonia which was right across from the DMV in Milwaukee. I spent most of my days hammering away at one single task that they hired me to do. They had over 180,000 chemical compounds they wanted me to track down, inventory, and then trash. Now picture this school's gym. If you don't know what it looks like, picture any gym. There were two floors to this room. I had to track down compounds that ranged in size from as small as this capsule to as large as a 2 drawer filing-cabinet with my scanner gun and push cart in the midst of 2 million other compounds. Can you guess how many I could collect in 8 hours? If I was in the zone, just a little over a thousand. Those were long days for my feet. But that was one of the hats that I wore after I graduated from college. A means to an end in which I could provide for my own family. That hat of mine didn't really affect who I was at home. It was just a hat that I wore to work. So that makes me wonder, what kind of hat are you wearing right now in those pews. Is it the Sunday Christian hat or is it the raw you?

Sure, we're a part of some church. We've been baptized and confirmed but what's that all supposed to mean if we can't follow through with what Jesus has commanded us? It's simply become a hat that can be hung up on our front doors, and is needed only when the occasion calls for it. And the sad thing is that we are teaching our children this as well. Christianity in America has become a consumer product in which we can get our fill of Jesus in one hour and live out the rest of the week knowing that we are becoming better people. It has simply become a means to an end. We have reduced God to a hat that we wear on Sundays. There is no relationship with God if this is all there is to the Christian life. I thought up a couple of slogans that I think might capture some of our consumeristic nature regarding church: *Church: it's where we learn our morals*, *Church: it's a Sunday thing*, *Church: it's really for the kids*. None of this actually reflects the historical Church built on Jesus Christ. Sure, on Sundays we do gather at a building called church, but God has called His people, us, to be His church. He has not called us to become better people but to be faithful to Him as His people. And the many stories of the Bible are great for children to learn, but as adults, it is our daily bread that sustains and nourishes us, it is the reminder for us that God is faithful even when we are not.

Who we are here and now is not a hat that can be worn. No, you are first and foremost a baptized child of God. That means you have been redeemed. That means you are a new person. That means each and every day you reflect, and are to reflect, God's love to one another, to stranger, enemy, and friend. And for many of us, this is

scary. This is asking us to step outside of our comfortable walls we've created for ourselves and to be more than what is required of us. "I know what Jesus wants me to be, but I'm just a human." No one is more human than Jesus Christ himself. He embodies the human story. He willingly received a crown of thorns for our sake; he didn't get to choose it. Though this crown was used a tool of mockery, it bore all of humanity's pain, suffering, and sin. Yet out of his great love for us he embraced it. This one man received the weight of humanity's sin and placed it upon his own head. Blood was shed when the thorns pierced into his flesh and locked-in to his head. And when his tear-filled eyes rose to meet with those whom he loved, they turned away. We turned away at the sight of something so hideous. Who would worship a king whose crown was made of thorns drenched in blood, and not of gold or silver? That crown bore death itself. To the eyes of those who stood before him catching small glimpses of this hideous king, it had seemed like death had swallowed him whole but humanity's story doesn't end there. Our Lord rose from the dead conquering death for our sake. Our human story starts new in Jesus whom we have been baptized into. He shows us how to be truly human. The wonderful thing about this new you is that your personality remains intact, and God uses you just as you are to further His Kingdom. That means everything that you are, He uses, personality, imperfections and all. We are, after all, the redeemed children of God.

2015 is here. There's a lot anticipation and excitement to look forward to. But as you head out those church doors, remember who you are in Christ, and follow him out those doors. Let every decision you make this year, be a reflection of who

you are in Christ. Look around you. Some of these people you've known for a long while, others are recognizable faces, and it's certainly possible you have no clue who is surrounding you, but you've been brought here together by your baptism to which we all are clinging to the promises of Jesus Christ. We're all in this together as church, so let's move forward together as church in order to bring light into our homes, into the many hats God has called you to wear, and into the world which desperately needs a Savior.

May the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.