

What It Really Means To Be A Christian

Ephesians 1:1-2

Hello! Welcome back to Ephesians, “The Grand Canyon of Scripture”! Last week we stood only on the rim of the Canyon, and as we looked across its vastness, we were awed with its magnificence and beauty. The wonders we beheld last week are the fact that we are “in Christ,” that a Mystery has been revealed to us, and that it has been revealed to us because of God’s grace. Then we also learned that receiving that grace means that we are to live differently.

One of the early church fathers in the 4th century was a man by the name of Augustine. He was preparing a sermon on the doctrine of the Holy Trinity—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—and he was struggling with how he might explain this mystery so that people might understand it. He went for a walk on the beach, praying that God would give him insight.

As he walked along he noticed a young boy playing with a little bucket. The boy would run out into the ocean a few steps, fill his bucket, then run back onto the beach where he would pour the sea water into a large hole. So Augustine asked him what he was doing.

The little boy replied, “I’m moving the ocean.” Augustine realized he was trying to do the same thing in attempting to comprehend the mystery of God.

Trying to explore all the depths of Ephesians is like trying to move the ocean! We certainly could never exhaust all the riches and beauty which are there, but we are going to uncover a few very exciting wonders as we move through. We will see things that we cannot understand, but oh! the things we *will* understand will move us deeply.

Today as we begin our fascinating tour of the Canyon, we only take two steps before we stumble across something that could really transform the way we live for Christ. In chapter one, verses one and two, *we discover what it really means to be a Christian.*

So, if you’re ready to begin, follow me as we begin our splendid adventure!

Paul began his letter to the Ephesians first by identifying himself. He said that he was “*an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God.*” And what he meant was that God had called him to be an apostle, that he himself had nothing to do with it. You

may remember that Paul had been engaged in opposing the work of God, even dragging Christians off to prison and possible execution because he resisted the whole idea that Jesus could be the Messiah. He was on the way to Damascus to do even more harm to the believers there when God got his attention in a dramatic fashion. Saul, as he was known then, was certainly not looking to become an apostle of Jesus at the time! This happened to him by the sovereign will of God. He didn't seek it nor did he earn it.

In his experience, we see something that applies to each of us who know Christ. This is not something we sought after—God Himself came after us and in His great love pursued us. It may have taken years, and a whole series of circumstances before we finally surrendered our hearts and lives to Him. It happened by the sovereign will of God in our hearts, just as it did in Paul's. And when we are drawn to Christ, it happens because the Holy Spirit is working in us to bring us to Christ.

Then, Paul identified the people who were receiving his letter, and this is where we come in: *“To the saints in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus.”* It will help us to break that sentence into two parts, like this:

*To the saints **in** Ephesus
The faithful **in** Christ Jesus.*

Let's stop here on our tour and look a little deeper at these words Paul uses to describe those who call themselves “Christians.” What does it really mean to be a Christian?

1 Being a Christian means that we are saints

Have you ever considered that the person you look at in the mirror in the morning is a saint? You may say, “Not me!” as if that false humility somehow makes you a better person. But let's don't get confused by that word. In our day, we tend to use the word “saint” to describe someone who is a super-Christian, someone whose faith and works are extraordinary. None of us would claim that we are super-Christians, and we even have a phrase we use to deflect any thoughts along that line. We say, “I'm no saint.”

Our thoughts about what constitutes a saint have been influenced more by the use of that word in the Roman Catholic Church, than by what the Bible says. The process of declaring someone a saint in the Catholic Church is a lengthy and complicated one, and can take up to several decades. The Roman Catholic Church has more than 10,000 saints, people who have already died but who were believed

to have lived exceptional lives for Christ. They are believed to have worked miracles. There is even a “Saint of the Day,” for every day of the year. An example of that is that February 14 is the day for Saint Valentine. And it is certainly true that these men and women lived exemplary lives for Christ, and made a remarkable difference in their time. We take nothing away from them and their faithful service to Christ.

But when we look at the Scriptures, we learn that that is not the proper use of the word. The word “saint” did not apply to people who were already dead, or else Paul and others would not have written letters to them. And it certainly didn’t apply to people who were better than everyone else, or Paul would not have written later in this letter, *“Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor...do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths...get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice”* (4:25, 29, 31). Those words would have been unnecessary if these people were so good they were untouched by sin.

And if you are a believer in Christ, and you’ve ever said, “Well, I’m certainly no saint,” then I’m afraid you’ve been listening too much to the lies of Satan, who is trying to rob you of your inheritance. You need to go back and read what the Bible says about it.

The word that Paul used here and elsewhere doesn’t mean someone who is better than everyone else. This word means “set apart ones,” “the ones separated out.” So in that sense of the word, all Christians are saints, separate from the world. We have all been designated as set apart for the work of our Heavenly Father. Peter wrote in his first letter, *“But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God....”* (2:9). Notice that he said that this is what we **are**, not what we should be.

What does it really mean to be a Christian? This may be the biggest question of our day. In every community there are those who seem to have grossly misunderstood what it means to follow Christ. These people seem to believe that being a Christian means trying to live a good life, doing the best we can, being a good person, and occasionally showing up at church when there’s nothing better to do.

You see, the human side of being a saint is that this is something we have accomplished because we’re really good people. But when we fully understand what Paul was saying here as he began his letter to the Ephesians, we come up with

a totally different understanding. The Biblical meaning of the word is that this is something God does to us!

We can go all the way back to the Old Testament, to the book of Deuteronomy, to discover this truth. Listen to this verse: *“For you are a people holy to the Lord your God. The Lord your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession”* (Deuteronomy 7:6).

So the emphasis is not on our behavior, but on the goodness and grace of God who loves us and has redeemed us! Being a Christian means that we are saints! We are saints, not because we are better than anyone else, and certainly not because we’ve figured out a fool-proof way to live a sinless life. We are saints because of the saving work of Christ in our lives. This is something He has done, not something we have achieved because we’re such good people. We are saints because of what Jesus has done for us in cleansing us of our sin. Even the filthiest, thieving, lying sinner is declared to be a saint by the blood of Christ, the instant that person comes under His saving grace and protection.

2 Being a Christian means that we are faithful

After Paul identified his readers as being saints, then he said that they were *“the faithful in Christ Jesus.”* Now the word “faithful” has a couple of facets to it that are equally important. First, whenever we hear that someone is “faithful” we think that they are dependable, reliable, that we can count on them. We might say of someone that she is “faithful” to her church, and by that we mean that she attends on a regular basis, and even volunteers in the service of the church. We could even say that a man is “faithful” to mow his lawn every Saturday, and we mean that we can count on it that unless it is raining, he’s going to mow his lawn.

So when Paul says that the Christians, the saints, in Ephesus are faithful, he means something very similar to that. Here’s an example: *“Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful”* (2 Corinthians 4:2). When it comes to serving Christ and His Church, we are to be faithful, steadfast, dependable—not faithful for a few weeks at a time, unless we have something else to do, faithful day in and day out for our entire lives. We are to be people who don’t have to think about it and ponder whether or not we’re going to be faithful; we just do it as a matter of course. We are faithful to **do** because we are faithful to **be**.

This is what it boils down to: we *are* saints, but being faithful means that we *act* like saints. It means that we live up to who we really are—followers of the Lord Jesus Christ who have had our sins forgiven and eternal life given to us as a gift.

But let's move deeper. Gather around and let's look at that word "faithful" a little more closely. The word Paul used here means "to believe," so when we say "faithful" we mean that they are "full of faith." So it refers to those who believe certain truths about Jesus Christ. You see, no one is saved unless they personally believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. No one inherits salvation from their parents or grandparents. No one receives it as a right of American citizenship, or just because you've been a member of a particular church for a long time.

So what does it mean to "believe" in Jesus? It has to be more than mere mental assent that He lived, or even that He is the Son of God. James said, "*You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder*" (James 2:19). So mere belief is not enough.

What does it really mean to be a Christian? It means that we are saints, and it means that we are believers in Jesus and follow Him in our daily lives. But let's put those two things together to notice one more very important point.

3 Being a Christian means that we are Christians wherever we are

Don't miss what Paul said: "*To the saints in Ephesus....*" Yes, that is where they lived, but there is more to it than that. Ephesus was filled with great wealth, but also great superstition, black magic and idol worship. It was one of the largest cities in Asia Minor. The great temple to the goddess Diana, or Artemis, was there, and was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. She was the goddess of fertility, among other things.

We'll cover much more about Ephesus a little later, but here's what we need to know for now: Ephesus had had a reputation for centuries as being a place of sexual immorality and impurity. These people who had become believers in the Lord Jesus Christ were called to be saints in the midst of that kind of atmosphere. God didn't wait until they were living somewhere else, somewhere much more accepting of Christians. They were "*saints in Ephesus.*"

The same thing is true of us. Being a Christian doesn't mean that we follow Christ only when it is convenient, or only when it won't cost us anything, or only when

we are surrounded by other Christians. It means following Him even in the middle of very difficult surroundings. It means following Him even when others don't. It means following Him and being faithful to Him even when it makes us appear odd to the rest of the world.

We have our own "Ephesus" in our day. Right where we are, as we move through our responsibilities, we have an Ephesus. It's that place where it is a challenge to follow Christ with faithfulness. It's that place where it is a challenge to follow Christ with faithfulness. It's that moment when your friends scoff at you and mock you because you believe the claims of the Scriptures. It's that time when you realize that we are living in a society that is saturated with opposition and even antagonism toward God, yet we follow Him anyway.

When you put all this together, we come away with this: Being saints, being holy, means that we are set apart, separate from the world. It means that we are different, and that we behave differently, and that will put us at odds with our culture. These Ephesian Christians were certainly at odds with the world they lived in, had been born into, had grown up in. Yet Christ came in, and He made the difference. Now they were set apart for God. Now they were rescued from that darkness which permeated the entire culture of their city. Paul told them in 5:8, *"For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light."*

Paul wrote in 5:3 that we are "God's holy people," and he used the same word translated "saints" here at the beginning of his letter. We have been set apart for God's use. We've been born into this kind of atmosphere with all kinds of rampant immorality, impurity and greed, but now we've been "born again," and the new life doesn't include things from the old life. You are a saint of God.

So as we conclude this portion of the tour, we admit that we haven't covered a lot of ground. But we have covered some very fundamental things about what it really means to be a Christian. It doesn't mean you will never make a mistake, never commit a sin. It doesn't mean that one day there will be a statue raised in your honor.

It means that we are saints, set apart and separated from the world for Him. We are faithful to Him, and we believe what the Bible says about Jesus without trying to explain it away or modify it. And we are set apart for Him and faithful to Him regardless of our circumstances.

Is that where you are?