

Nurture vs. Nature
[Who Am I... In Christ – Part 2]

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Ypsilanti Free Methodist Church

There is a book that came out a while back called “If...Questions for the Game of Life.” That is all it is – a book of questions. The questions can be used as a game or as group ice-breakers or to just read and ponder. There are questions like “If you could physically transport yourself to anyplace in the world at this moment, where would you go?” They vary from the sublime to the ridiculous, but they *do* get you thinking.

Last week, we began a sermon series that I hope will get *you* thinking. We are considering the question *Who Am I...In Christ*. We are looking at Paul’s letter to the Ephesians and seeing how he helps his readers answer that vital question. Last week, we looked at how, when we are committed to Christ, we are blessed, chosen to live lives that reflect Christ-like characteristics, adopted into God’s family and set free to begin brand new lives in Christ. Today, we pause with Paul to consider who we were (or perhaps are) without Christ and who we *can* be in Christ. Before going on, though, let’s pause and ask for the Lord to open our hearts to what He has prepared for us.

Who we were without Christ (by nature)

Everyone has some pet peeves. You know, the things that other people do that simply drive you crazy – like leaving the shopping carts out in the middle of the parking lot when there is a cart corral within a dozen steps from where they parked! What kinds of things annoy you? Something – or should I say *someone* – that annoys me is a self-righteous Christian. I am talking about the type of person who has evidently forgotten that they haven’t always been a “saint.” Instead of trying to reach out to others who may not have heard the Good News about Christ or at least have not heard (or seen) an accurate depiction of what it means to be a Christian, this self-righteous saint is quick to point out the horrible way others are living and to condemn their behavior. I find it interesting that the only people that Jesus seems to have made a point of pointing out the “bad behavior” were the “religious” people – the Pharisees and the Sadducees!

Pride is a dangerous thing. Sometimes it can keep people from coming to God in the first place and other times it can keep those who at one point may have come to God from following God’s footsteps. Either way, it can be a barrier – a barrier between people and God as well as a barrier between one another!

Now, humility can often be a remedy to pride – when it is real, true humility, that is. Once, when Winston Churchill was asked about his long-time political rival Clement Atlee, Churchill said, “Clement Atlee is a very humble man.” After a short pause, he continued, “Of course, he has a lot to be humble about!”

The truth of the matter is that we *all* have a lot to be humble about. It is not hard to be humble when we fully realize who we were before Christ saved us as well as whom we would be without Him in our lives! In the second chapter of Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, he turns his readers’ attention to these very humbling facts.

¹As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, ²in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. ³All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath.

Now, before you begin thinking how thankful you are that you are not like Paul’s original audience, stop and take a humble pill! While it may be true that you didn’t commit certain obvious “sins” that others did (or do), I can guarantee that each of us has been in the same boat that Paul is describing here due to the fact that we *all* have sinned and, at some point, were lost without Christ in our lives – even those who were raised in a Christian home and now find it difficult to pinpoint when exactly you accepted Jesus as your Lord.

Without trying to classify sins as “big” or “little” (since all sin carries a death sentence), let’s consider the general effect that Paul is getting at in this passage. He mentions in the second verse that we all “followed the ways of this world.” That, in and of itself, is true of everyone to varying degrees. Because we are human, we all have certain tendencies.

One of these tendencies is to conform. We conform in order to “fit in” with our social group whether that be our church family or our co-workers or some group with which we just like to hang out. We tend to conform to our community’s “standards” and norms. We are even influenced by advertising and television to conform to what appears to be “normal.” Listen, even if you would classify yourself as a “non-conformist,” if you really examine your life you’ll discover that you are conforming to someone or something in your very “non-conformity”!

Now, this tendency to conform is not, in and of itself, a sin. It becomes a sin when we allow ourselves to conform to attitudes and actions that are in conflict with God’s Word. That is why Paul told the church in Romans 12:2, “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this

world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test, and approve what God's will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will.”

When we “follow the ways of this world,” as Paul describes it in Ephesians 2:2, and conform to the pattern of this world as, as we read in Romans 12:2, then we become disobedient to God and are subject to the “ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient,” as we read in Ephesians 2:2. In other words, sin is operating in our lives. It's described well in I John 2:16 – “For everything in the world – the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does – comes not from the Father but from the world.”

You see, Paul – in the first three verses of Ephesians 2 – is calling for us to remember who each of us were without Christ. That is who we were by nature. His words are meant both as a comparison to the good news he then gives us in verses 4-10 and as a warning to not become prideful or judgmental toward those who are still lost in the world. His words help us realize that the identity we had before Christ is not one to be proud of nor is it one to which we want to return. Rather, we want to remember our past as an incentive to pursue our new life in Christ. Remembering who we were, we can better understand and pursue who we *can* be in Christ.

Who we *can* be in Christ (by nurture)

Gene Getz tells the story about the time that he received an unexpected “gift” from a police officer. It seems that he was driving his car and noticed that there was a police car behind him. Well, he did what we all do in that instance – he checked his speedometer and was glad to see that he was under the speed limit. At the next stop sign, Gene turned the corner and so did the police. It happened to be on a 4-lane road and the police car pulled up alongside Gene. I guess they drove side-by-side for some time and, as they drove, Gene found that he and the officer kept exchanging looks. This continued until they came up to an expressway on-ramp.

As they approached the ramp, the police officer pulled on the expressway while Gene chose to turn onto the service drive, parallel with the expressway. After passing some bushes and trees separating the expressway and service drive, Gene discovered that, once again, he and the police officer were driving side by side, traveling at the same rate of speed and exchanging glances.

At the next exit for the expressway, Gene noticed the police car pulling off. Then, as Gene pulled in front of the merging squad car, the lights on the police car went on. Well, having

developed this “odd” relationship, Gene immediately pulled to the side of the road and waited for the officer. When the officer asked him for his license and registration, Gene asked him what was wrong.

“Well, sir,” the officer began, “When I was first driving behind you, you failed to come to a complete stop at the stop sign. That was your first violation.” Gene gulped, waiting for the “rest of the story.”

“Then,” the officer continued, “When you were driving on the service drive, you were exceeding the speed limit by 10 miles per hour. That was your second violation. As you approached the merger from the expressway to the service drive, you failed to observe the yield sign. That was the third violation. And, now, I see that your inspection sticker on your windshield has expired.”

At this point Gene was ready to crawl under his seat. Here, he thought was abiding by all the laws of the road, and this officer was telling him he was guilty of four traffic violations. But then, the situation took a curious turn.

“Sir,” the officer said, “I have a prisoner in my car that I must get to the police station right away. Because of time, I am only going to give you a verbal warning. Please be more careful.”

Needless to say, Gene was floored *and* thankful. Found guilty, he was nonetheless being forgiven. This officer could have thrown the book at him, but instead chose to let Gene go. *That* is grace – undeserved forgiveness, unmerited favor!

That is what God offers each and every one of us! Listen to what Romans 3:21-24 states:

²¹But now a righteousness from God, apart from the Law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. ²²This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, ²³for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.

There, again, is the reminder of where we *all* come from: “for *all* have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (v. 23). Not a single one of us *deserves* to be forgiven. Instead, we deserve to remain spiritually dead and face eternal punishment for our sins. But that is not how God has chosen to treat us. Why?

Paul tells us why in Ephesians 2:4-10.

⁴But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, ⁵made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions – it is by grace you have been saved. ⁶And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with

him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, ⁷in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. ⁸For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – ⁹not by works, so that no one can boast. ¹⁰For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

There are at least three reasons for God’s grace given here. First, there is God’s love. Verse 4 tells us that, because of His great love for us, God graciously made us alive with Christ! Remember, that is the starting point for our new identity in Christ. It all starts with the realization that God loves us unconditionally! He doesn’t love us *because* we are good people or do good things. Neither does He stop loving us when we are “bad” nor when we do bad things. We know that would be a scary scale to be on, wouldn’t it? God is able to separate His love for us from His disgust with the sin in our lives and He is able to act and be motivated by His great love while still maintaining the justice we would expect from a Holy, perfect God!

From the unfathomable resources of God’s love flow His mercy and kindness. The three are intertwined and operate in sync with one another. God’s love is seen in His mercy when we consider how, in spite of our previous attitudes and actions, God chooses to save us – to make us “alive with Christ” and “raise us up with Christ.” Paul wrote to Titus about this in Titus 3:3-5.

³At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another. ⁴But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, ⁵he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.

Mercy is the compassionate arm of God’s love. I like how R.C. Trench points this distinction out when he writes, “Grace is concerned for man, as guilty; mercy, as he is miserable” (*Synonyms of the New Testament*, pp. 166ff).

Back in 1992, Diane and I were preparing to celebrate our 10th Wedding Anniversary when I came down with what we thought was the flu or a bad cold. My fever spiked and I was unable to get it to come down. When I went to the doctor, he immediately had me admitted to the hospital where they diagnosed that I had pneumonia and began the regular treatment for it. I was really miserable as my fever continued to rise and the congestion in my chest made it feel like a ten ton elephant was sitting on me. Over the period of three days in the hospital and my condition worsened. My level of misery had grown proportionately.

Finally, after three days, the hospital ran some blood tests and discovered that I did not have pneumonia. I had Legionnaires' disease. With a change of treatment, I was soon on the road to recovery and, little by little, my misery subsided. What was needed was the proper cure.

God, in His mercy, addresses the miserable state that people are in. I'm not speaking of physical misery like I had endured with Legionnaires, but of the spiritual misery that builds up in the unrepentant heart. Because He knows that sin will eat away at us and the misery we endure when we try to deal with it ourselves or when we simply "medicate" the symptoms, God provides His grace so that we can be forgiven and find the heart-healing for which our souls cry out. In His mercy, God offers us the proper cure.

In tandem with His mercy, God's kindness flows out from His abundant love. Paul says about God raising us up in Christ in Ephesians 2:7, "in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus." After the forgiveness comes the restoration. After the restoration comes the life!

God's grace opens the door for us to be made alive when we accept Jesus' gift of salvation and commit our lives to Him. Then, having been made alive in Christ, we can begin enjoying our new life in and through Him! Listen to how Paul expressed this in Titus 2:11-14.

¹¹For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. ¹²It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, ¹³while we wait for the blessed hope – the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, ¹⁴who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.

God doesn't lead us to the point of repentance – of recognizing our need to change – only to leave us to fend for ourselves! In His kindness, He teaches us how we can change and to live differently. He envisions who we can become and works with us to help us get there! This is how He nurtures us.

A good teacher or coach can see the potential in their students or athletes. They can envision what these students or athletes can become. But, it is not enough to just see the potential. A good teacher or coach will work with those they have been given charge of and help them grow and develop their skills, attitudes, abilities.

Likewise, our Lord sees the potential in you and me. He recognizes that we may have come a long way, but there is still a lot of room for improvement! That is why He continues to walk with us when we commit our lives to Him. He will guide us and teach us and help us to

develop our ability to live in a way that reflects who we are and who we are becoming in Christ. This is what Paul is referring to in Ephesians 2:10 when he writes, “For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” The U.S. Army invites people to “Be all that you can be in the Army.” Jesus invites to us become all that we can become *in Him!*”

Choosing the “influences” in our lives

So, now what? We remember where we were without Christ and we see who we *can* be in Christ - now what? What can we do to develop this identity in Christ?

Choose the “influences” in your life wisely. Remember the children’s song “Be Careful Little Eyes What You See”? The words to that song are very appropriate for all ages. What are you putting into yourself? What do you watch and read? To whom and what do you listen? What goes into your body, mind and soul?

Choose godly influences for your life. Being aware of the world we live in so you are able to relate to others is one thing, but consider what the dominant influences are in your life. Who do you spend the most free time with and what do you spend most of your free time doing? These are key questions to think about.

One way to be sure that you are on the right path is to take advantage that God has provided. Read and study your Bible every day. Let me say that again. Read and study your Bible *every day*. Spend time talking with and listening to God *every day*. Talk with other believers who are committed to growing in Christ *every day*. What you do daily develop into habits, so develop good habits by using the resources God has given you.

Remember, the choice is yours. Who you were is in the past. Who you are is a reality. But, who you can become is a decision that you need to make. Jesus invites you to follow Him. What will you decide to do?