

OUT OF THE SLAVE MARKET

1st in a Series on Ephesians called, "Messages to the Misfits"

Passage: Ephesians 1:1-7

Kateri and Jay Schwandt of Michigan have 14 children! Their last child was a boy, born last year, whom they named Finley Sheboygan Schwandt. Jay tells an anecdote about that middle name. His father-in-law once told him a story about a Native American chief who had a large family of all boys. But when his wife was pregnant yet again, he was absolutely certain that this time they were going to have a girl. When that baby turned out to be a boy just like all the rest he said, "She's a boy again," which gave rise to his name, Sheboygan. We once knew a woman with whom Laurie had considerable contact over a number of years, but this woman called Laurie the wrong name. This astounded me because Laurie is very memorable. But it irked Laurie, because your name is part of your identity. Not knowing your name is like saying you are insignificant. If she thought Laurie mattered, she would have made the small effort of remembering her name. Today we are going to think a bit about identity.

Paul wrote this letter to the church at Ephesus around 60 or 61 AD. He was in prison in Rome. Paul had planted the church in Ephesus beginning around 52. He had stayed there more than two years, which tells us how vital he believed that ministry was. Typically, he stayed in one location for a few months, and at times only a few weeks.

Ephesus was in the Roman province of Asia, which is today Turkey. It was the major city of the province, a port city on the Aegean Sea. There are extensive ruins there today, and some in our church have visited the site. It is no longer a port as its harbor filled with silt over the centuries, so now it is actually several miles from the coast. In addition to being a busy port, Ephesus was also the western end of an important trade route from the east. It was the fourth largest city in the Roman Empire with a population estimated around 250,000. It was quite an impressive city. Because it was such an important trade hub, there was considerable wealth there. The temple of the supposed goddess Artemis was there. The locals took great pride in that temple. It was a huge building, at the time considered one of the seven wonders of the world. The second century writer Pausanius said its size "surpassed all buildings among men." It was the first temple of its size to be constructed from marble. It took 120 years to build it. Artemis was the most popular goddess in the pantheon of that day. She was considered the goddess of fertility and the guardian of wealth. Because of the wealth thing the temple became essentially a major bank that drew a lot of money into the city. But the fertility-cult part of it resulted in there being hundreds of temple prostitutes there. The supposed "worship" included visiting those prostitutes.

The city also had a large outdoor amphitheater. It had a seating capacity of 25,000, which meant it was close to the same as the Stub Hub Center in LA where a certain football team whose name I refuse to utter plays their games. Maybe the NFL would consider putting a team there. They could be the Ephesus Falcons. Oh, wait, there's already a Falcons. Okay, how about the Ephesus Eagles.

Rats, there's already an Eagles too. Maybe the Ephesus Eskimos? No, that doesn't work. All right, I'm going with Ephesus Enforcers.

Uh, maybe we're a bit off track. There was a huge slave market in Ephesus. According to Encyclopedia.Com, it was the world capital of the slave trade. Life was pretty cheap. Think about the environment of that city. It was a port city, a trade center, also the center of idol worship, a place where there was a lot of money, and the capital of human trafficking. The result of that was that the people who grew up there and were part of the culture had some very ungodly lifestyles. There was greed, rampant and flagrant sexuality (not as bad as Corinth, but beyond even our degraded culture), idolatry, and abuse of people in many forms. They had come out of those lifestyles when they put their faith in Christ, but long-time habits are hard to break, especially when they are continually reinforced by the surrounding culture. So the Christians were having a hard time living the kinds of lives God wanted. They were struggling with drifting back to old ways that were encouraged by their families, colleagues and culture. They were misfits. They knew they no longer fit with others in their culture. But what did that mean for them? Were they like their culture or were they something else? They were on the Island of Misfit Toys.

Paul wrote, at least in part, to instruct these believers in how they should live. But he understood that he needed to give them reasons to live in a new way with life choices radically different from both their previous habits and from those of their culture. They had to understand why and how they could live differently, and that was rooted in their understanding of their identity in Christ. They needed to know that they were new people with new hearts and thus a new way of living. They needed to know what they had been given in Christ and who they were, just like we do. Who we perceive ourselves to be and what we have as resources have a big influence on how we live. When I was in grad school for one year, I was a part time high school math teacher. That's how I was working my way through school. I taught Geometry and Algebra 2. There was a kid in the geometry class who had apparently passed Algebra mostly by the grace of the teacher. Right off the bat he struggled in the class. A few days in I talked with him and explained I wanted to help him. But he said to me, "I can't do math. I've never been able to do math. I'm just not a math person." He had to pass Geometry to graduate, so I needed to do everything I could to get him through the class. So I said, "Well, let's look at where you're having trouble and I will try to help you." So we started with a pretty basic principle and he said he didn't get it. I began patiently and slowly explaining it to him, but within seconds his eyes glazed over. It was obvious all he was hearing from me was that "waa waa waa" sound the kids on the Charlie Brown television show heard from all adults. When I stopped he said, "I don't understand it. See, I just can't do math." I quickly realized that his problem wasn't that he couldn't understand it. It was that he gave up and didn't try. In his mind he couldn't do math. That was part of his identity. So there was no use even trying. His identity was the biggest problem that he had.

Our sense of our identity has huge impact on how we live. That was also true of people back then. If they saw themselves mostly as people who were just like everyone else in their culture, they would never rise above it. If they saw themselves as something different, as people who had been given the possibility of living a completely different way and as people with a high calling that

demanded that different way of living, then they likely would have the desire, the motivation and the hope of living a new way. So the first half of this book focuses on their identity, on who they were as children of God.

WE HAVE BEEN PREDESTINED

In many of his letters Paul started with giving thanks for the people he wrote to, which was accepted form in that culture. In this letter he jumped right into giving thanks to God. He praised God because he “blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms.”

First pay attention to who the active person is in these verses. God has blessed us, he chose us, he predestined us, this is through his grace which “he has given us.” Paul began by praising God for what he has done, and the emphasis throughout this section is that God is the one acting. This is all about what *God* has done.

Let's think for a moment about the statement that God has given us every spiritual blessing. The Greek word translated blessing is *eulogia*. We get the term “eulogy” from it, which is a speech expressing nice things about someone at their funeral. Its root literally means “to say good.” So initially to bless someone meant to say something good to them or about them. But eventually the meaning expanded to refer to good things one might give to another. So in Christ, God has given people every good thing that exists in the spiritual realm.

The word “spiritual” is a crucial qualifier. The idea shows up in two ways in verse 3. The verse says the good things God has given are spiritual, then it says they are the good things in the “heavenly realms,” which is a way of referring to the spiritual world. This is crucial to take note of, because our natural human desire is for God to give us every *physical* good thing that is in the *earthly* realm rather than *spiritual* things in the *spiritual* realm. There are lots of ministries out there that promise that very thing. God wants you to succeed. God wants you to be healthy. God wants you to be rich. God wants you to have all the good things in this life. In fact, in some parts of the world the fastest growing ministries are those that preach exactly that message.

I get why people want that. Who doesn't want good things in this world? Nobody likes disappointment. No one wants to be sick. No one loves poverty and weakness and nobody likes failure. We do all we can to avoid those things. They aren't good things. We want the opposite of disappointment, sickness, poverty and failure. Doesn't it seem reasonable that if God loves us, he wants us to have good things, not bad things? So if he wants us to have good and he is powerful, surely he will give us every good thing in the earthly places, right?

That works for me. Unfortunately, there are two truths that we need to keep right in the front of our brains. We ought to wear glasses with these truths written on them so we view the world through the lens of these two truths. The first has to do with what Jesus said in Matthew 6:19-21. He taught that we should not store up treasure on earth, but we should store up treasure in heaven. In other words, we shouldn't focus our attention on the good things of earth, but the spiritual things, the good things in the heavenly realm. Then in verse 21 he said, “Where your treasure is,

there your heart will be also.” Your heart will always be in - even obsessed with - whatever is most valuable to you. That is just common sense.

When I was in high school, I was a good student. I did my homework and I tried to do well. But I admit that I saw the one hour or so of homework I'd have to do on a typical evening as an annoying chore. I didn't rush to get to it. I'd think about ways to avoid it, I'd put it off if I could, and I mostly would hurry through it, just do what was necessary to get it done. Meanwhile, I was also playing baseball. We had practice every day. Typically it would be a couple of hours, more time than homework usually required. But I went to practice and games with enthusiasm. I never begrudged it. I gave it my best effort. Late in my junior year I got my first start in a league game. I had mostly sat on the bench all year, a scrub second baseman who didn't have a prayer of getting in the game. But our starting second baseman got hurt during a game near the end of the season, and the coach's only option was me. I finished that game with no big mistakes and actually got a hit, much to my coach's surprise. A few days later came our next game, and by process of elimination I was now the starting second baseman. The day before that game, and all day the day of that game, I could think of little except playing in that game. I hoped I wouldn't embarrass myself. I envisioned what it would be like and pictured myself getting key hits in the game. I obsessed about that game. That's because I treasured baseball, not my school work. Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Let's suppose that we decide the good things of earth are what we really need and want. They are the things we treasure. Then where is our heart going to be? It will be in those things, right here on earth. Those will be the things that we will obsess about, that we will try to find our joy in. They will occupy our lives and our hearts. And what will we not be treasuring then? God and his kingdom. He becomes an afterthought, an add on that we might nod to, at best, after we have the things we really treasure. We'll be thankful to him only to the degree that he gives us the good things we really want, the things of this life.

If we treasure the good things of this earth, and that is our natural bent, our hearts will be in this world. We will not love God above all else, and we will not seek first his kingdom. Oh, yes, we might dutifully go through religious activity the way I dutifully did my homework, but just like my heart wasn't really in it, so our heart won't really be in loving and serving God.

There is a second truth that we need to keep before us always. The good things of this earth are certainly good. **But they cannot give us what we most need and want.** There is no possession, position or pleasure in this world that can give us the peace and fulfillment we long for. They certainly cannot give us eternal life. The things that create peace, joy and love in our hearts have to do with God and his kingdom. So as we treasure the good things of the world we are treasuring and pursuing an illusion that will never give us what we want most of all.

As I was working on this sermon it occurred to me that the illustration of my baseball playing days pretty well fits this matter of earthly good things versus spiritual good things. Yes, I treasured baseball, but what was best and most important for my life? What I needed was to learn

and do well in my schoolwork. Baseball was pretty much a rabbit trail that was over when I was 20 years old and hadn't really even launched into adult life. Baseball would have exactly zero effect on how successful and full my life would be. So it is with the good things of the earth. They seem fun and they attract our attention, but in the end they will have little to no effect on what really matters and how full our life is.

So here's a great truth. Contrary to what our society is totally committed to, the spiritual is the ultimate reality. Consider that God as spirit existed before the physical universe. The spiritual is the origin of the physical, which means the ultimate reality is spiritual. It is where life originates and where life finally is found. And God has given us every good thing that exists in the spiritual realm. What are those good things? They are true life, eternal life, divine acceptance and love, forgiveness of guilt, complete forgiveness, continual relationship with God, God loving us, God's Spirit giving us strength to do what he gives us to do, joy, peace and so much more. Paul is going to describe what some of these good things are in the following verses.

I was thinking about our car recently. The first car I ever had came with just the basics. It had an engine, wheels, transmission, steering wheel, seats, windows, a heater, a speedometer, and pretty much nothing else. The car we have now has Bluetooth communication so we can talk to people on the phone hands free, heated leather seats, a navigation system, stereo system, power windows, power tail gate, remote keyless entry, back up camera, and a bunch of other stuff. It's amazing. The car is smarter than I am. But the cool thing about that is that all that stuff came as a package. It was all included when we bought the car. It's nice that I didn't have to specify that I wanted an engine, brakes, power steering, glass in the windows, power windows, seats with leather and all the rest. It was a package deal. And that's what Paul says God has done for us. He has given us a package deal that includes every good thing in the spiritual realm.

This sounds wonderful, but how do I get in on this deal? This is where the most astounding news comes in. Remember what I said when I started? Who is doing the acting here? It is God. God blesses us with every spiritual good thing. Okay, but what's my part? What do I do to get this deal? Have you noticed that Paul doesn't say anything about that? Here's why. Your part is you receive it. God does all the work, you just get it when he gives it to you.

In fact, Paul says, God already worked this out before the world was created. Verse 4 says God, "chose us in him (Christ) before the creation of the world." The next verse says he predestined us. The word translated "predestined" meant to "mark out beforehand" or to "appoint before." Sometimes just the word "predestined" causes people to freak out. But it means that God appointed us before the world even started to receive the spiritual blessings Paul alluded to. It is saying much the same thing as he chose us before the creation of the world. It happened before the earth even existed. Do you get what this means? It means it had nothing to do with you deserving it because you didn't even exist at that point.

In his commentary on Ephesians Andrew Lincoln, professor at the University of Sheffield in England, wrote, "To say that election in Christ took place before the foundation of the world is to

underline that it was provoked not by historical contingency or human merit, but solely by God's sovereign grace."

Okay, now I have a couple of problems with that idea. First, it doesn't seem like God chose me. I remember when I made a definite choice to believe in Jesus. Second, this doesn't seem fair. How could God arbitrarily choose some without their involvement? Imagine that you had a class in school in which the teacher decided before the class ever began what grade you would get. No matter how hard you worked you got a D. And a person in the class who never studied, missed class, never did assignments got an A because the teacher decided it long before. Would that be fair?

You are probably asking, "Yeah, that bothers me. How do you explain that, Rick?" I'm really glad you asked that question. Here is my answer. I can't. I don't understand how this all works. People make attempts to try to make this more palatable, but they don't really work.

God has not asked us to understand. He doesn't explain himself to people. He just tells us how it is and calls us to trust him. I know that "because I said so" is a frustrating parental response for kids. And that's not far different from what God's response to us when we object, "I don't understand this, how can it be?" God exists and operates in ways that are beyond human understanding. He is God, after all. So we should expect him to be beyond our comprehension. If he were not, if finite humans could comprehend him, he would not be God. He would be finite, like us. He doesn't explain some things to us because there's no way to understand them unless you're infinite. We were helping take care of our granddaughters. At one point, Cara got her hands on a metal pan and started banging it against a wall. She was going to do damage to the wall so Laurie stopped her. She objected strenuously. She cannot understand why Nana would keep her from doing what she wanted to do. Laurie's reasons are beyond her ability to grasp at this point, so she had to live with "because I said so." So, though it is less than satisfying to our curiosity to say we cannot understand this truth but we must trust him, that is what God asks us to do.

Remember the story of Job. His whole life blew up. He suffered unimaginable grief and loss. He couldn't understand how God could allow such things in his life and he challenged God to explain how it was all fair. Do you remember what God said in response? It was essentially, "Who are you to question me? Are you God?" Job ended up saying, "You're right, Lord. I need to just shut up and trust." There are a number of points where we will need to do the same.

But here is the great news about that. The fact that God did the choosing and the work to give us every spiritual good thing when we did not earn it and certainly do not deserve it, means we can't mess it up. What if I'm not good enough? What if I mess up tomorrow? What if I just can't be as faithful as I ought to be? Well, none of that matters, because God decided this long ago. He chose you before this millennium began, before you were born, before World War II, before the Civil War, before America even existed, before Columbus sailed the ocean blue, before King Arthur existed, before Jesus Christ walked on the earth, before David ruled Israel, before Abraham,

before Noah, and before Adam and Eve screwed up the Garden of Eden. That issue was decided, signed, sealed and delivered before God ever said, "Let there be light," so you are not going to unravel it, no matter what you do. Do you begin to see what an incredible gift this is? Do you see how much peace it can bring to you?

As the sales guy says on infomercials, "but wait, there's more!"

WE HAVE BEEN ADOPTED

Paul says God predestined us for adoption to sonship. We are all familiar with adoption as a concept. But I think we often don't catch the full impact of the idea as it existed in Paul's day. There has been considerable controversy in our nation lately about the abortion issue. Well the Roman Empire was worse than our society when it came to innocent babies. It was acceptable and legal in that culture to actually kill babies after they had been born, not just before birth as it is in our society.

What usually happened was that after a baby was born it would be presented to the father and he had the right to decide whether he wanted it or not. If the baby was the wrong sex in his mind, or if it had any kind of defect, or if for any reason whatsoever he didn't want the child, then they would get rid of it. Usually the way that was handled was the child was just abandoned to the elements.

There was a large garbage dump outside Ephesus, and it was common for people to take unwanted babies and leave them there. What an image, to leave a child on a trash heap, thrown out like any unwanted household item. People would sometimes look for abandoned babies and take them in, but in many cases not for altruistic reasons. Because of the lucrative slave market in Ephesus, sometimes people would take unwanted children and raise them until they were old enough to be sold as slaves.

The term used here by Paul means, as the text reveals, to be truly adopted, to become a child, not an asset to be developed and sold, but to actually become a son or daughter. It is clear that God did not do this merely so he could use us in some way. Observe that the passage says, "**in love** he predestined us to adoption to sonship." God has chosen us to be his adopted children not because it would be advantageous to him, but purely out of love.

Pastor David Prince tells the story of some friends of his who adopted a young girl from an orphanage overseas. The conditions in this orphanage were horrific. When the couple adopted the girl, they continually assured her that they loved her and that she was now a part of their family. As a part of the family she had some chores to do, just like everyone else in the family. Her job, they told her, was to clean her room each day. This young girl knew nothing of unconditional love. She was terribly afraid of having to go back to the orphanage. She could see no reason why these people should love her. She fixated on the one thing that made sense to her, and that was that she was given a job to do. So each morning the parents would go into her room to find it immaculate. The little girl would be sitting on her bed and would say, "My room is clean. Can I

stay?” It broke their hearts. They had to continually work hard to help her understand she was now their child and that nothing would ever change that. Whether she performed or not, she was loved.

We might feel like we are that child that wasn't wanted, that was left on the trash heap. But this passage says God has adopted us to be his children. He did it in love. He didn't do it so that he could get something from us. He just loved us. And we need to grasp the same thing that little adopted girl needed to understand. God will give us some things to do, but no matter what happens, no matter what we do, we are his children, and nothing will ever change that. We keep trying to do what we think God requires of us and asking, “I did it, can I stay?” God wants us to grasp that we are his adopted children and nothing can ever take us away from him.

The world may not notice us. It may not think much of us. It might say we belong on the trash heap. But God has adopted us. He loves us, he delights in us, more than any human parent has ever loved a child. And nothing can ever get in the way of his love for us.

WE HAVE BEEN REDEEMED

Finally notice that Paul says in verse 7 that we have “redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins.” Unfortunately, redemption is a very religious sounding word that most people today don't understand and don't care about at all. The meaning of the word according to *The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, was “Setting free for a ransom.”

This was an image that certainly would communicate in Ephesus. It pictures someone doing the amazing thing of buying a slave in order to give that person freedom. By the time Paul wrote, the emphasis in the meaning of the word was less on the ransom part and much more on the setting free part. The late Ray Stedman said of redemption, “It has become ‘theologized,’ which is another word for partially decayed. It has lost its meaning. I'd like to use a modern equivalent: ‘we've been liberated.’ That's the idea. We've been liberated, set free.” In his commentary on Ephesians, theologian and professor Klyne Snodgrass said, “the apostle thought of salvation primarily in terms of release.”

What have we been freed from? We get a clue from the fact that Paul explained redemption as “the forgiveness of sins.” Think of the guilt of our sin, our failings, our wrongs, things we all know we have plenty of, as being like that. It's hanging over us. It's always there in the background, or sometimes staring us in the face. It is a threat to us. Have you ever had something hang over you, perhaps a task you have to do or some difficult thing you are going to have to endure? It's there in the background, always weighing on you. But then when it is finally done it is a huge relief. That's how being set free from our guilt should affect us.

God has paid our debt, paid the penalty of our sin. It is gone forever. We are free of it. Psalm 103:12 says, “As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from

us.” How far is the east from the west? That is an illustration, a way of saying, “infinity.” Wow, what a relief.

In his book, *Out of the Question, Into the Mystery*, Leonard Sweet wrote, “At the core of who we are as humans is an inner drive for relationship with God.” Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones said much the same in his book, *God's Ultimate Purpose*. “The fundamental need of man is his need of God. Everything that goes wrong in life in this world does so because we are not rightly related to God.”

Unfortunately, the natural state of all humans, without exception today, is to be disconnected from God. That is the effect of what is wrong with us and it is wrong with every single one of us. That means unless something changes, we are burdened with going through life knowing something is fundamentally wrong, feeling the lack of that most important thing in life, and being unable to do a single thing about it. But God has intervened and done for us what we could never do. In Christ, our sins are forgiven, meaning the thing that blocks us from being connected to God has been taken completely away. We can openly, freely, joyfully connect to God. We are free of that lack and the need to do something about it, as well as the hopelessness that comes from discovering we can't fix the problem. We are free from the need to earn something before God or prove something. We are free from the need to perform. We can just relax in our relationship with our Father. We are free from fear of what is going to happen to us. We are free to enjoy God, to live in his presence, to live with reckless abandon, loving other people for all we are worth.

IMPLICATIONS

God has given us every good thing there is in the spiritual realm. The spiritual good things are the things that make for real life, full life. God has done this for us before the foundation of the world. He has adopted us as his children and he has set us free. In light of this here's what we need to be aware of every day of our lives.

WE ARE GOD'S CHILDREN

This is the thing that is most fundamentally true of us. It is our core identity. The world may not notice us. It may even look down on us or reject us. But we are God's children, and just like my children will always be my children, so we will always be God's children. Nothing can change that.

When you take care of young children you watch a whole new panoply of shows. I'm thoroughly familiar now with Mickey's Roadster Racers, Mission Force One, Tangled, Frozen and others. One show we watched was the animated version of the Prince and the Pauper. In it, Mickey Mouse is the poorest of the poor, but he is an exact double for the Prince of the kingdom. At one point they trade places. The prince takes on the lowly state of Mickey, but he still behaves like a prince, because that's who he knows he is. In the end he confronts the evil captain of the guard, Pete. People ask, “Who do you think you are?” He knows he is the prince, and operates from that identity to stop Pete and his evil schemes.

We are children of the King of the universe. Others may not realize it. They may see us as paupers, beggars, as worthless. But we must never forget who we are. We are children of the king, adopted by him, chosen by him before humans even walked on this planet.

WE ARE FREE

We have been redeemed, set free. We are free from fear, free from being apart from God, free from the need to earn something or prove something, free to be in God's presence and enjoy him, free to live without restraint. We should enjoy our freedom every single day.

Back in June of 2017 the *New York Daily News* had a story about a man in Minnesota who was pulled over by a police officer because the man wasn't wearing a seatbelt while driving. But quickly the situation became more serious. First the officer learned that there was a warrant out for the owner of the car the man was driving. No problem, because the driver didn't own it. He had borrowed it from a friend. But when the officer did a routine check on the driver, he discovered there was a warrant for his arrest, too. As he was being searched, the man pulled out a Monopoly "Get out of jail free" card and handed it to the officer, thinking he would just let him go. He went to jail. The sheriff's department commented on the incident, "We appreciate the humor. A for effort."

The amazing thing is that we in effect have been given a get out of jail free card by God. That doesn't mean go live a life worthy of being put in jail just because you can. But it does mean we don't need to fear. We are free!

WE CAN NEVER LOSE

God is the one who has made all this happen. He did it of his own free will. It was decided before he put a single plant in the Garden of Eden. It didn't happen because we are better or more deserving than others. It didn't happen because we finally measured up. It happened because God chose it of his own free will and for no other reason...which means we will never lose our position as children of God. We will never lose our freedom. This is all God's doing, and nothing we do or anyone else does can undo it.

I want you to realize that being God's child, being redeemed, set free to live a remarkable life that does his will and brings him glory, is what you were destined for. You may think who your parents were, was a matter of random chance. You may think that the things that have happened in our life, the people you have encountered are just random. But it is not true. God decided long ago about these things, he made sure the circumstances of your life brought you to your destiny, to the point where you have become a child of God. God is doing this. It is a plan that has been in the works for thousands of years, and behind it is the greatest power in all that exists. So his plan for you never has been and never will be in doubt. So be at peace, live out your destiny without fear, for you are a prince or princess, a child of the King.