

New Hope Sermon I Thes. 5:4-12 To Whom do You Belong?

Introduction:

This morning I had a dream that was an enticement to evil. Immediately I awoke and the Spirit brought a hymn to mind we used to sing at Young Life meetings years ago: *Now I belong to Jesus:*

Jesus my Lord will love me forever
From Him no power of evil can sever
He gave His life to ransom my soul
Now I belong to Him.

Chorus: Now I belong to Jesus,
Jesus belongs to me
Not for the years of time alone
But for eternity

Once I was lost in sin's degradation
Jesus came down to bring me salvation
Lifted me up from sorrow and shame
Now I belong to Him
(I love Him)

Chorus
Joy floods my soul for Jesus has saved me
Freed me from sin that long has enslaved me
His precious blood He gave to redeem
Now I belong to Him
(I love Him)

Chorus: Now I belong to Jesus,
Jesus belongs to me
Not for the years of time alone
But for eternity

I went over the words to that song and claimed them so that no evil could rule me; I was freed from any enslavement to sin. Then I went back to sleep free and did not go back into that bad dream. The effects of belonging to Jesus is our theme today. Let us pray.

Sermon:

Bruce and Becky made a major move and career shift a year ago. They both had been deeply involved for years in their jobs here in Wheaton—Bruce belonged to the College Church family as their Missions Pastor and Becky belonged to the undergrad admissions team at Wheaton College. Those bonds were strong and fulfilling for both of them. Yet, at age 50, they chose to leave those communities and us, and move to Florida, so Bruce could take a new position at ECHO as the Strategic Missions Director. He has spent the last year getting established with the ECHO team in Florida and then globally as he has traveled to consult with the national leaders who head the ECHO ministries in Panama, Thailand, Burkina Faso, Zimbabwe, and Taiwan. Over time, God has helped him find his place and feel that he now belongs to this new global family. Belonging has given Bruce & Becky a sense of peace and purpose in their move.

Paul tells us in our passage for today that we are children of the light. We do not belong any longer to the darkness. We belong to the Lord. I was struck by this word “belonging” because it is used twice in this short passage.

Who do you belong to?

“A woman was at home with her children when the telephone rang. In going to answer it, she tripped on a rug, grabbed for something to hold on to and seized the telephone table. It fell over with a crash, jarring the receiver off the hook. As it fell, it hit the family dog, who leaped up, howling and barking. The woman's three-year-old son, startled by this noise, broke into loud screams. The woman mumbled some colorful words. She finally managed to pick up the receiver and lift it to her ear, just in time to hear her husband's voice on the other end say, "Nobody's said hello yet, but I'm positive I have the right number." *GCFN 7/18/17* All families do not have equal dynamics of peace. But when there's love and acceptance, we are grateful we belong.

Paul talks about belonging to the people of darkness or belonging to God.

In **Maslow's hierarchy of needs**, belonging is a basic building block to a healthy self-image. First, is one's need for survival and meeting one's basic physiological needs—food, water, clothing, shelter. Next, is safety. This is an extraordinarily pertinent issue amidst the terrorism and violence in the major cities of the world today. Safety is protection and security—a sense of being in an orderly world where we have some control. The angst that is felt globally is because the world seems to be out of control. There seems to be no safe places away from unrelenting violence and evil. But Christians can trust our safety to God because God is sovereign. God is in control.

Then, beyond that need for safety, in the middle of Maslow's triangle, is our heart-felt need for love and belonging. This is a social, relational need that's foundational to our identity as humans. It's why children cling to abusive parents, why people in poor areas join gangs. People need to belong.

Yet, what we need to understand at the onset is that **all humans naturally belong to the darkness**, to Satan and his realm. Jesus states that outright to the Pharisees: John 8: 42-47

42 Jesus said to them, "If God were your Father, you would love me, for I have come here from God. I have not come on my own; God sent me. 43 Why is my language not clear to you? Because you are unable to hear what I say. 44 You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies. 45 Yet because I tell the truth, you do not believe me! 46 Can any of you prove me guilty of sin? If I am telling the truth, why don't you believe me? 47 Whoever belongs to God hears what God says. The reason you do not hear is that you do not belong to God" (John 8:42-47).

Salvation in Christ switches our belonging. Then we are “*delivered from darkness into light, from the power of Satan to God; we receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in Jesus*” (Acts 24:18). Christ is the one who delivers us into God's family. There we are beloved; we are accepted. The Apostle Peter emphasizes this in his letter to the Jewish Christians in dispersion, “*You are...a people belonging to God that you may declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness and into His wonderful light*” (1 Peter 2:9). A Christian is one who is “*called to belong to Jesus Christ*” (Rom 1:6). This is a wonderful truth, beloved.

Think about this. It has so many layers of application. Let me start with a true story from Haiti:

“Fred and Cheryl went to Haiti 25 years ago to pick up a child they had adopted. Addie was five-years-old. Her parents had been killed in a traffic accident that left her without a family. As she walked across the tarmac to board the plane [with Fred and Cheryl], the tiny orphan reached up and slipped her hands into the hands of her new parents whom she had just met...

That evening, back home in Arizona, the parents sat down to their first supper together with their new daughter and their two teenage sons. There was a platter of pork chops and a bowl of mashed potatoes on the table. After the first serving, the two teenage boys kept refilling their

plates. Soon the pork chops had disappeared and the potatoes were gone. Addie eyes were big as she watched her new brothers, Thatcher and Graham, satisfy their ravenous teenage appetites. [But she became very quiet.] Fred and Cheryl noticed...and realized that something was wrong—agitation ... bewilderment ... insecurity? Cheryl guessed that it was the disappearing food. She suspected that because Addie had grown up hungry, when food was gone from the table she might be thinking that it would be a day or more before there was more to eat. Cheryl had guessed right. She took Addie's hand and led her to the bread drawer and pulled it out, showing her a back-up of three loaves. She took her to the refrigerator, opened the door, and showed her the bottles of milk and orange juice, the fresh vegetables, jars of jelly and jam and peanut butter, a carton of eggs, and a package of bacon. She took her to the pantry with its bins of potatoes, onions, and squash, and the shelves of canned goods—tomatoes and peaches and pickles. She opened the freezer and showed Addie three or four chickens, a few packages of fish, and two cartons of ice cream. All the time she was reassuring Addie that there was lots of food in the house, that no matter how much Thatcher and Graham ate and how fast they ate it, there was a lot more where that came from. She would never go hungry again.

Cheryl didn't just tell her that she would never go hungry again. She showed her what was in those drawers and behind those doors, named the meats and vegetables, placed them in her hands. It was enough. Food was there, whether she could see it or not. Her brothers were no longer rivals at the table. She was home. She would never go hungry again” (Eugene Peterson, *Practice Resurrection*, Eerdmans, 2010, pp. 159-160).

She belonged to this family. They accepted her; they would care for her—just as God has adopted us into his family. We belong to Him and all the resources of His amazing grace are ours as we ask and receive and walk in faith.

When I first became a Christian, there were two hymns that I learned at the very beginning of my Christian life. One is *Loved with Everlasting Love* and the other is *Jesus I am Resting, Resting*. Both of them talk about the blessing of a life kept by God because we belong in God's family. We sang them today to anchor our understanding of belonging:

“Loved with everlasting love, led by grace that love to know...to know what?...that I am His and He is mine” (v. 1). There is grace, there is peace, there are the experiences of God's unceasing love when we belong to God. That belonging also changes our entire mental outlook as the hymn says. There is a new celebration of the beauties in creation (v. 2). There's freedom from what used to cause “wild alarms” because of the security of being in God's care, and there's the assurance that this relationship with God is forever. *“His forever, only His, who the Lord and me shall part...While God and I shall be, I am His and He is mine”* (v. 4). A belonging to the Lord that settles our heart, gives us new eyes to see the world around us, deals with the causes of our fears and anxieties, and rests us in His care.

And that's the theme of the second hymn. *“Jesus I am resting, resting in the joy of what Thou art, I am finding out the greatness of Thy loving heart”* (v. 1). *“Oh how great Thy loving kindness, vaster, broader than the sea. Oh, how marvelous Thy goodness lavished all on me. Yes, I rest in Thee, beloved, know what wealth of grace is Thine, know Thy certainty of promise, and have made it mine”* (v. 2). These hymns assured me as a new believer that I was in the family of God as I was experiencing the truths in both of these hymns. I belonged to God and felt the privilege, the welcome, the sense of being accepted and loved.

But belonging to a family also comes with a sense of responsibility. We carry the family name. It helps me understand this better when I think about the Asian values of family. I appreciate the honor and respect Asian children, even throughout adulthood, show to their parents. They don't want to bring them shame. They want to show them honor by how they live.

And that's exactly how Paul transitions this thought of belonging to the admonitions he gives the Thessalonians in verses 6-11. Belonging to God affects how we act:

- First, **be alert and self-controlled** (v. 6, 8). The opposite of being alert is to sleep. "To be morally and spiritually insensitive" (Ronald Ward, Commentary on First and Second Thessalonians, p. 111). Instead, the Christian is to watch for the Lord's return, to be watchful of their own behavior, to be careful to have on the armor of faith, love, and hope.
- So the second admonition is that they are to **put on faith and love as a breastplate and the hope of salvation as a helmet**. "Note that these pieces of armor are protecting the heart and the head—the most important areas to defend and protect" (Liam Morris, Commentary on First Thessalonians, p. 159). Think about this for a minute. The breastplate covers the heart, the seat of our emotions. Faith is the protective cover over our heart, so our emotions and feelings don't rule our lives. Often what we do or don't feel is not an accurate indication of what is true or real from God's point of view. For example, we may feel hopeless as we look at repeated circumstances or strained relationships. But **when we are protected by God's love over our heart, we don't allow those toxic feelings to overwhelm us**. We claim, in faith, God's goodness and purposes.

Similarly, we are to put on the helmet of hope—the hope of our salvation. The helmet protects the mind from, in this example, thoughts of hopelessness that can run through our minds. With the helmet on, those thoughts can't penetrate our thinking and subsequent feeling and action. **These three defensive armors can keep us from behaving as those in darkness behave who belong to Satan.**

Belonging to God gives believers a sense of worth and positive purpose in life. It is literally the difference between life and death.

Let me give you an example from the book I just reviewed, *Do All Lives Matter?* Wayne Gordon is a pastor and leader of Lawndale Community Church Center. Lawndale is one of the most violent areas in Chicago. The murder rate coupled with the grinding property and rule of the gangs is astonishing. Gordon explains that the reasons so many black youth kill others, seemingly at random or in gang retaliation, is that they feel hopeless. They don't think their lives matter, so they don't think other lives matter either. It's easier to kill someone who doesn't matter." Gordon co-authored this book with John Perkins, one of the foremost black pastors in the United States. Now at age 86, Perkins has stood for reconciliation and peaceful demonstrations against abuse for blacks over the last 50 years. Perkins, himself, shares this story of a young gang banger who was carrying a gun:

"He was despondent. He had a gun and was acting like a loose cannon running down the street. I grabbed him and began to talk to him...He told me that he had already given up on life and did not care what happened to himself or anyone else for that matter. He had been told in numerous ways by society that his life did not matter. He was primed to kill someone and ready to turn the gun on himself. I told him that his life did matter. I told him of God's love for him. Somehow we have to find ways to reach out to these young boys who are shooting to let them know that their lives do matter" (Wayne Gordon & John Perkins, *Do All Lives Matter?: The Issues We Can No Longer Ignore and the Solutions We All Long For*, Baker Books, 2017, p. 32).

Perkins talked to this youth—black man to black man—about how much God loved him and how his life could have purpose and direction and hope if he submitted to Jesus Christ and claimed his salvation. Perkins was trying to give the young teen the hope of belonging that would satisfy his . He wanted to help that boy switch allegiance from belonging to Satan and the gang to belonging to Jesus Christ. Then he could become a son of the light and of the day. He could belong to the God of love. He would have a place of value in God's family. His life would matter.

- Helping people make that switch of allegiance is very encouraging to the church body. So as we share stories about how God is working; we encourage and build each other up. That is Paul's third admonition to the Thessalonians—that they bring honor to God as they encourage and build one another up.

The focus of that encouragement is the hope of Jesus Christ's return. Paul wants the Thessalonians to be ready to celebrate Christ's return because they belong to Him.

So the questions: What family do you belong to—physically and spiritually? How do you try to bring honor to that family name? And how does putting on faith and love as a breastplate protect your heart from the pressures and enticements of the kingdom of the world, from those who belong to Satan? Then there's the helmet of hope of salvation—are you wearing it? Does Jesus' return motivate you to live a life that will please Him when He returns?

We are called to belong to Jesus Christ. To be with Him where He is, to bring Him joy, to fulfilling His the calling He has for each of us in God's redemptive purpose. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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