

Well, again, good morning to you, my name is George Davis. Some of you are new to our church, whether you're joining in person or online, and so thank you for filling out that card. We really do wanna be a place where you can get connected. As you know for us, our heart beat is to be a place a community where people are living with Jesus, loving like Jesus, and leading others to do the same, so there are a variety of ways we wanna help you get connected in this journey of following Jesus.

Now, this morning, as I get started, I wanna ask you a question. The question is this, among the people who know you well, your friends, your family members, are you known for saying certain catch phrases, catch words, or you're known for always talking about certain themes or certain topics in other words, whenever people are around you, it feels like this thing always comes up, you always manage to work it into conversations, or there's some things that you always say. If you never thought about it, and maybe if you end up at lunch today with friends or family, just there's a conversation started for you. You may be surprised and it may turn out that you are known for saying certain things that you didn't even realize you're known for, or you're known for talking about certain things that you just never paid attention to how frequently you bring up this topic or you use that phrase or you bring things up. To show you what I mean. Let me just show you this. "Hey, Hershey Free Church it's the first day of a new month. Hey, Hershey Free, I hope you're having a great week. Hey, Hershey Free. Hey Hershey Free, I hope you've had a great Christmas season. Hey Hershey Free, Happy New Year. Hey, Hershey Free, I hope you've had a great summer. Hey Hershey Free, it was so great to see you over this last weekend. Hey, Hershey Free, I hope you're having a great week." That was brought to my attention a few years ago, and as it turns out, you may be known for saying certain things, or talking about certain things, you just don't realize it yet.

Now, why do I bring that up? Well, here's the reason I bring that up. Over these weeks leading up to Easter, we are going to be working our way through the letters of Paul. And as we do that, this morning, what I wanna do is really introduce you to Paul's letters. And I wanna introduce you to Paul's letters by introducing you to one of the phrases that Paul uses. I think it really is kind of a catch phrase for Paul, that was something that was so foundational to much of his life and ministry. And in bringing this up, I want to acknowledge, of course, that Paul writes, Paul writes different letters to different people, he writes to different congregations, and he covers a variety of topics. For instance, let me just remind you of a couple of places. He writes to, he writes to the church at Ephesus. This is a picture of ancient Ephesus. So he wrote to a small group of Christians that were in this community, he also wrote to a group of Christians in a much larger city of Rome, and so we have those letters.

So Paul writes, he writes to different people in different situations. And it's important to understand that his letters are what are sometimes referred to as occasional letters. And by that I mean this, his letters for the most part were written in response to certain things. They're written in response to questions, they're in response to conflict, they're written in response to certain things that are going on in these early churches, or with these early church leaders with whom he corresponds. And so in that, as we're gonna see during the course of the series, he does really cover a variety of topics and issues. So I wanna acknowledge the diversity of what

he's going to talk about upfront. Nonetheless, there really is one phrase that I think encapsulates what he's doing through these letters, right. Even as he addresses different situations, different topics, different people, I think there's one phrase that really gets at the heartbeat of what he's trying to do. One phrase that really gets to the heart beat of his encouragement of his counsel, of his direction. And likewise, this phrase, I think describes how these letters can encourage you and me today if we're willing to engage them as we're going to do over this series. So what is that phrase? Seven simple words, here it is: Live a life worthy of your calling. Live a life worthy of your calling.

One of the reasons I think this is a good summary of what Paul is seeking to do is he writes these letters is this, he uses this kind of language or similar language in four different books, writing to four different groups of people covering different topics, and yet in each of these letters, this kind of theme comes up. Let me just show you these. First of all, this is Ephesians Chapter 4, Verse 1, and right in the opening chapters of Ephesians, Paul talks about what does it mean to be a follower of Jesus? And he really focuses on the amazing work of what God is doing through Christ Jesus, and then you get to the second part of the book where he's kind of applying, Well, what does that look like? And here's how he begins that section, he says, Look, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Let's go to the Book of Philippians. In Chapter 1, and Paul acknowledge some of the challenges and the complexities, both of his life and then the lives of the people receiving this letter, and then he says this, but whatever happens, I can't control the circumstances in my life or your life. But whatever happens, he says, this, Conduct yourselves in a manner worthy, this time, it's of the gospel of Christ. What about Colossians? And the opening chapter of Colossians Paul is praying specifically for these people, and he concludes his prayer in this letter. And how does he pray? What is he praying for? Well look at this, he says, I'm praying so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord. Or, let's move to a different letter, Thessalonians, 1 Thessalonians. And in this letter, there's an autobiographical section where Paul talks about what he's been doing, he talks about his ministry, he talks about his relationship to this early group of Christ followers. And in that description, he says, I've been like a father to you, and he says, as a father, here's what I've been doing. Encouraging, comforting, and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory.

For different letters, four different groups of people, really four different sets of issues and concerns, but in each of them, he comes back to the same kind of thing. Look, I want you to, here's what I'm all about, here's why I'm writing you, here's what I wanna see in your life, I want you to live a life worthy of your calling, I want you to live a life worthy of the good news of Jesus Christ. And you know, I think in a similar sense somehow you and I could sit down with the Apostle Paul today, maybe you sit down, share a cup of coffee, at Starbucks or something like that, and maybe as we begin the year, you were to talk with him just about what's going on in your life, and even as we talked to last week, maybe you would kinda share with him with some of your responsibilities or maybe some opportunities in your life or maybe some of the challenges that are kinda keeping you up at night at times or sources of uncertainty, and maybe you would just have that conversation. And I really do believe at some point in that conversation as a mentor, as a coach, as someone who is for you, if you're a follower of Christ

Paul would come back to the same kind of thing. As you in her 2023, if you're wrestling with these responsibilities, opportunities, challenges, whatever that looks like. He would say, Okay, as you think about this, as you engage this, just keep this in mind: live a life worthy of your calling.

Now, maybe at this point, you say, Okay, George, I get it. This is a big thing, this is kind of a major theme in Paul's writings. It's one thing to understand that. It's another thing to actually understand what he's getting at. So what I wanna do is really kind of unpack this theme just with two questions. First of all, what does this mean? Live a life worthy of your calling. Now that can be confusing. Among other things, I think it's confusing because we use the term calling in different ways. For instance, maybe you've had this experience, maybe somebody you've known has used language like this, you find yourself in a job that really seems to be a good fit for you. Maybe you've had different jobs, and you find yourself in a job that now this really feels like my sweet spot, and at some point you might say this, or someone going through this might say, You know, I really feel like I've found my calling. Sometimes we use that language that way, but what does Paul mean when he says, live a life worthy of your calling?

Well, I think a helpful way to think about that is to go back to that last verse I showed you. So go back to that Thessalonians passage. And remember the last part of that passage, right? You to live a life worthy God – what? Who calls you into his kingdom and glory. When Paul was talking about calling in these passages, he's talking about the reality that if you are a follower of Jesus, you've been called into the kingdom of God. Here, I think Paul is obviously building on the teachings of Jesus, because the kingdom of God really was central to Jesus' ministry. Jesus says, Look, here's what I'm doing, I'm bringing about God's kingdom, and those who believe in me become participants, they become citizens, they become people who are part of this. And so Paul is building on that theme to say, Look, I want you to live in a manner that is consistent with the fact that you are now part of this bigger reality of what God is doing, this kingdom of God. Now, in saying that, I think there's a framework that you need to understand. And in some ways it's fairly simple, but this framework is so important in understanding Paul's letters, and it's really, I think absolutely foundational in understanding the New Testament as you read the New Testament. So let me show you this framework.

Now remember, Paul grew up in a Jewish context, and in a Jewish context in the first century, when you thought about God's kingdom, here's kind of the way you could talk about it. Here's the way you could think about it. First of all, when you talk about God's kingdom, you could really talk about this age. Right, and here's what I mean by that. There's this age in which we live. There's this age, this age of brokenness, of sin, this age where things aren't as they should be, and particularly in the first century, part of the way people understood this age was this was the age of foreign domination. This was the age in which Israel was under the thumb of Rome. But even in acknowledging that, there was also the expectation that, but one day God is going to do something different, and there's the age to come. And the age to come would be when God brings his messenger, his Messiah, who comes to establish his Kingdom, and who comes to rule into reign, and of course, in the first century, that also meant who comes to kick out the Romans. So this was kind of how in Paul's context, you thought about God's kingdom. But

here's what you need to understand, and this is really important. In that context, in Paul's background, you thought of these ages as back to back, right? Hang with me, this may feel a little technical, but I really think it's crucial. So you thought of, so we live in this broken world, but one day God's gonna do something and then everything, the Messiah is gonna come and everything's gonna change, and it'll be the end of this age, and we're in that final form of what God is doing in his plan of restoring his people. Paul grew up with this framework. Here's what radically changed in his thinking, among other things, when he became a follow of Christ, Paul came to understand these ages. They're not back-to-back. They actually overlap. You see, Paul came to understand that with the coming of Christ, with a cross work of Christ, this age to come has now invaded the present age of brokenness, and one day, this age to come will come in its final form when Christ returns. But in the meantime, Paul understands these ages actually overlap, and this framework is central to how he thinks about following Jesus. Paul understands, you know what? These ages overlap, we live in a world of brokenness and sin, and yet God's work has already invaded through the work of Jesus Christ. And the reality is this was true for the recipients of these early letters, and it's true for us today. We live in a moment, for both of these ages are at work.

Now, we could unpack that a lot more, and I would be glad to tell you this, but you need to understand this framework really shapes Paul's thinking, right. On the one hand, for instance, Paul can talk about the reality of this present evil age, and he doesn't deny that, he doesn't pretend we don't wrestle with sin or he doesn't in any way soft peddle the brokenness of the world in which we live. He understands this is a present age in so many ways, that's disappointing, evil, wickedness, darkness, brokenness, we see it in ourselves, we see in other people. But he also knows, but the new age has already invaded and we need to be attuned to that. For instance, think about what he says in 2 Corinthians 5, Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come, the old has gone, the new is here. You can really, I think, translate that this way, If anyone is in Christ, there's new creation. It's like Paul looks at you. And if you're a follower of Jesus, he says this, he says, Look, I know, I know. Look, I know your life is complicated, I know the world in which you live, I get that context, but as a follower of Christ right now, you embody one small piece of the age to come. Because this new age is already here and it's been made possible through the work of Jesus Christ.

Now you might say, Okay, George okay, I get it, but that was kind of technical. Why is that important? Well, here's one reason why I think it's important. I think it's important because if we don't get this right, if we don't get the overlap of the ages, I think some of us may be prone to really kind of see one without the other. For instance, I think sometimes follows of Christ just kinda get, they get comfortable with, Hey, I'm part of this age, I'm kind of comfortable doing life the way I do it. I mean, I go to church, I pray when things go wrong and I pray for God to do something, but other than that, I'm just kind of comfortable in this age. I wanna work hard and instill good values in my family, all that, that's laudable, but there's a real sense in which I'm just kind of comfortable in the way the world is, and I don't see any need for anything different.

Interestingly, I think, for instance, when you read Paul's letters, there are moments where he's challenging his readers, look, you've just gotten stuck in this age in the ways of thinking of this

age and the priorities and values of this age. I think particularly, this is true in Paul's interactions with a church at Corinth in so many ways, he's saying, Guys, you're just kind of gotten, this is where you're at and you've lost sight, that a new age and a new way of life has invaded this present age brought by the work of Jesus Christ. So if we're not careful, we can kinda just kinda get comfortable in this age. On the other hand, I think for some Christians, all we wanna think about is kind of the age to come, that God's work is already here, and therefore, if I'm a Christian, I'm part of this new age, this kingdom of God, however you wanna describe it. And because I'm part of what God is doing, you know what, my life should go according to plan, because God's already at work and I'm claiming the promises of God, I shouldn't experience difficulty or surprises or hardship, and sometimes if I lock into just seeing this, what happens is maybe there's some prizes, some curve balls that come my way and I just, I'm not, I don't deal with it well. Maybe I presume, well, I must have messed up. I did something wrong because my life has gotten complicated in difficult situations, this relationship isn't going the way I thought, and so we, some of us, we may even put blame on ourselves that because my life isn't going perfectly, and I'm part of this age to come, something has gone wrong with me. If that's where you're at think about the Apostle Paul once again. Think about his relationship to the Corinthian church, which is very complicated. And at one point in an autobiographical section of Second Corinthians, Paul in essence says, You know, he describes a really hard season, and the language he uses communicates this. This was really stressful.

In fact, I think it communicates a deep presence of anxiety and even depression. And maybe you would say, Oh my goodness, Christians aren't supposed to, you know, the age to come, God's already at work. We're not supposed to go through that, we're not supposed to experience that. Well Paul did. We can't talk about that. Well Paul does, he puts it in the letter. And yet even in the midst of that hard season, which he has no problem being transparent and describing, he also describes how God was at work. And then you read these really powerful words in Second Corinthians Four. I just think these are so powerful, Paul says, We are hard-pressed, but not crushed, we are perplexed, and that we're word can mean confused, anxious, uncertain, doubtful. We are perplexed, but not in despair. And what is Paul saying? You know what he's saying this, we've been hard pressed. We live in this age, it's broken. It can be challenging, but we're not crushed because the age to come is here. We are perplexed. The things I've been going through at times are difficult or uncertain, it's not the way it's supposed to be. It can be confusing. That's this age. But we're not in despair. In a real sense, this is what Paul is doing throughout his letters. And he says, live in life worthy of your calling, what Paul was acknowledging is look, I know, I know life can be complicated. And in different ways, we're gonna see him deal with topics that make life complicated as we go through these letters. Look, this is this age we live, I know that, I know that. But that's not the whole story because you're now part of something God is doing, his kingdom. This is who you are now. So in the midst of this, live a life worthy of your calling. Live a life that reflects your new relationship made possible through Jesus Christ.

Well if that's kind of what Paul was talking about. Let's just ask one more question. If that's what this means, What does this look like? Live a life worthy of your calling. I think we need to

wrestle with what it looks like, because there are different ways you can take on board Paul's language, and I think there are different ways you can take on board Paul's letters.

First of all, when Paul says, look, live a life worthy of your calling, you can hear that and say, I've gotta live up to this. I've gotta live up to certain standards and expectations. I've gotta live up to these directives, commands, morals, ethics, right? I've got to measure up. That's what it means to be worthy. Right, you can hear it this way, I need to measure up to these standards. My first year as a doctoral student at Cambridge, and my first meeting with my supervisor after I had written a short paper for him, I presented it that to him, he had read it, we went through it, and then the painful, the deeply painful part of the conversation came because he hands that paper back to me and looks at me and says, Mr. Davis, this is not doctoral level work. And I hear those words, and I'm mindful of fact that, Well, this first year is really a probationary year, I'm gonna be evaluated at the end of this year to see if I get to continue in the program. I'm newly married, I brought my bride halfway across the world, and now we may get kicked out. And so I had to start working. And I went through some really, I'm gonna be honest with you, this is maybe the most stressful you're in my life, 'cause I've gotta measure up. That evaluation is coming, I've gotta meet the standards, I've gotta measure up, and I just gotta keep working, and so that was that season in my life.

Maybe you've had that experience in an academic setting or in a vocational setting, somebody you know, an employer looks like you and said You know what, you gotta step it up, you're not, you've gotta live up to our expectations, you've got to live up to our standards. And if you've been in that spot just as I was, this is bad, that is stressful, that is the way... You have got to work, I've gotta work hard. And I realized even in communicating this series, I want to be careful because if I'm not careful, this is what I'm laying on you, man, you gotta live up to this. You can hear that this way, and as we go through the letters, I'm mindful of that. You can hear what we are talking about this way. But can I suggest that really what Paul was not talking about... What really what Paul was talking about, it's not about living up, living up to a standard, it's about living out. It's about living out your new identity. This is how Paul thinks. So that even when Paul can come down hard on people, you need to stop doing some of this stuff, you gotta get this junk out of your life, you need to think differently, you're stuck in this age and how you deal with one another and how you deal with others. Paul can be very direct, but it's never driven by, you need to live up to this. It's, this isn't who you are anymore. You need to live out your new identity. One of the most classic was Paul phrases. This is found in Philippians Chapter 2, right? Paul says, Work out your salvation. And again, you can hear that as, man, you've gotta measure up, you gotta live up, but notice what he says, Work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose. And this is the way Paul argued, this is the way Paul thinks. Even when he challenges and goes after people, his point is, Look, I know you're living in this age, but this doesn't ultimately define who you are, this does. So when he says, Live a life worthy. What he's saying is, I want you to live in a manner that reflects who you truly are. I want you to live in a manner consistent with your new identity.

Let me just give you one example of that. Let's go back to the reading we did earlier. Remember we read from Philippians Chapter Two, and if you remember in that passage, Paul talks about humility. And when we think about humility, understand in the ancient world, humility, humility is not a virtue. In the ancient world, what is valued is honor, and how do you achieve honor, you achieve honor, by outperforming other people. That's how you achieve honor.

Furthermore, in the ancient world, people who are not worthy of honor or people who don't possess honor, you don't need to worry about them, you don't need to be concerned, you don't need to care for them. So if they're not on the same social standing, it just doesn't matter. And so this is the world in which Paul is writing Philippians. And ultimately, what Paul assumes is that competitive attitude, where who you are is always dependent on how you compare to other people. What Paul is assuming in this letter is that's this age. And notice, he doesn't simply say, Okay, you need to be humble. Notice it is rooted in a story of Jesus, right? Look, and what Paul is saying, Look, you have come into a relationship with Christ, and as you read the letters, as we'll go through the letter, you'll notice a recurring phrase in Paul's writings, as you're in Christ, you're in Christ, it uses different ways to communicate that, but you are in Christ, you have been brought into relationship with him, you're now rooted in the story of what Jesus is doing, and therefore this is where your identity and how you think about yourself is rooted and secure. And so he's writing to these people in this age where it's so easy just to always be looking around how I'm doing in comparison to everybody else, And the truth is that's not just an ancient value, we see that, how am I doing? We compare ourselves. Sometimes even in conversations, I can be so consumed with what you're thinking about me or how I'm doing, I'm not even paying attention to the conversation. And Paul says, Look, that is of this age, and I know that's the world in which you live, and I know it's easy to do, but your identity is now rooted in this relationship with Jesus, you are part of the age to come. To Paul says, Look, this is what I want you to do. I want you to work out your identity, and one of the ways that will work out is just a deepening freedom to act in humility.

Now understand, and then again, we've gotta be careful here in terms of how we use language, when Paul talks about humility, when the Bible talks about humility, it's not about self-loathing, it's about self-forgetfulness. Humility is an approach to life where I'm just not always consumed with me. Because if we're not careful in so much of the things going on in our lives, we can just let all of that become all-consuming and I just, How am I doing? How are people thinking about? In different ways. It's all about me. When I'm consumed with me, I can't see you.

And Paul says, Look, I get, I get this is the way things operate, and these were values deeply rooted in Roman culture, but he says this is of this age. You've been called to something else. You've been brought into a relationship. So I want you to live out your identity, I want you to be liberated beyond yourself, because you're rooted in Christ.

This week, I was reading an article in the Atlantic, and the article was reflecting on our experience over the last few years, covid, and some of the things that we've gone through, and the article is entitled How We Learn To Be Lonely. And the point of the article is, yes, we kinda come through covid and it feels like all that's in a rear-view mirror, yet for some of us, we

developed deeper patterns of isolation. And we've kind of gotten comfortable in that, and of course, the author is making an argument, that's really not good for us. And I was kind of getting ready for this message, even as I was thinking about what I was reading in this article, and I thought, What if? What if? What if as a church family we were the people who, when the relationships around us were liberated in humility to really be for other people. Right, of course, there's no question. It's gotten more comfortable to just be isolated, to stick to ourselves and be comfortable in our routines, and maybe covid has only intensified that, but I think Paul would say, Yeah, yeah, I get it. But that's this age. Even right now, are there ways you can just lean into your identity that will liberate you to be for other people? People in your family, people in your workplace, your classroom, your neighborhood, maybe. Even at times been some ideas, I need to check up on this person, or I need to maybe I'll send a card, or wouldn't it be great if I did this for that person, you kinda have these ideas and you kind of just let them sit there and maybe that was a work of God's Spirit encouraging you to live out to your identity. And you know what, Paul says? Take those steps. Paul says, Look, there's a new creation. Yeah, I know this is a divided culture, things are polarized and we can lament all the things that are negative in our culture, but Paul says Yes, but there... There's the age to come.

And so this is what we're gonna see in Paul's letters as we go through them. What Paul is going to do, time after time, in different ways, is say, This is what your new life is rooted in, this is your identity, and here's what it looks like to embrace it. Here's what it's like to live this out.

Having said that, in introducing Paul to you, I really wanna invite you to be a part of the series, not only to join us Sunday by Sunday, but also to walk through this series with us using our devotional guide, and if you haven't picked this up, can I encourage you to do this. To pick up one of these, you can start this week, each week there are just three short devotionals that can prepare you for what we'll be talking about on Sunday, and in each of these devotionals, we're gonna encourage you to read a part of Scripture, to respond to it, to reflect, and to pray. In using the series to challenge us to grow in our understanding of our identity and to learn what it means to live this out. This is one of the ways you can participate by engaging this devotional guide, and I would say, and also as you go through this series, as we go through this together, really to engage what we're learning in prayer. And we're gonna be very intentional with how we build prayer into our services. When you get this guide, there's some very clear prayer prompts week by week, and we also at the beginning of the guide, talk about different ways we can pray.

And what I wanna do as we start this series is just introduce you to one of those, there's a description in the book, but I wanna introduce you to one of the ways that we can pray, it's called the prayer of examen, and that simply means it's a prayer of reflection that we can use toward the end of the day, just to reflect on the day. It's an invitation to pray at the end of the day, and the way that we look back and try to see our day through God's lens through what God has been doing. And for you, maybe this becomes just another way to grow in your relationship with God, because remember part of what Paul is saying is You need to be rooted in your identity, you need to be rooted in this relationship. To learn to live that out, your roots need to grow deep. And prayer is one of the ways we do that. So if you've never done this



before, this is one of the ways where this series can encourage you to take next steps. As I said, there's a description in the book, but here are just kind of some themes to think about as you close your day to replay just brief. Okay, so what happened today? What was this day like? And then, where did I feel God's grace? With their moments where God was particularly present? Likewise, were there disappointing moments or painful moments or things that I didn't handle well, where did I feel emotional pain today? Where did I sin? And then as you close that prayer to live differently tomorrow, just with a recognition and gratitude that God is walking with me, that my identity is rooted in him. Can I suggest that as we go through the series, just being intentional in closing your day this way, it kinda just becomes a way to grow, grow in the ways God is seeking to root you in your new identity and empower you to live that out.

And very briefly, what I'd like to do, is just lead you through a couple of the questions, I realized this is the morning, it's not the end of the day, but let me just, let me just give you a few seconds to reflect on two of these questions. And we'll just think about the last couple of days. During the last couple of days where have you experienced God's grace? Where has God been present? Let me just give you a few seconds to think about that. Likewise, over the last couple of days, maybe it would have been the pressure points, maybe even a moment of emotional pain, or things you didn't handle well, that you just need to acknowledge. Let me give you a few seconds to reflect on that.

Father, over the next few weeks, as we work our way through the letters of Paul the Apostle in different ways, week after week, we're gonna see how Paul is encouraging people to understand what you're doing and to understand that their identity is now found in this new work of God. And even as he does that, he also says, and this is what it looks like to live that out. Father, I pray particularly for us as a church family, as a church community, that we're just gonna be open to your Spirit, and what ways in which you want to continue to stretch us and grow us in the course of working our way through this part of Scripture. Father, I pray we really would be open to when you really wanna deepen our sense of identity and deepen our understanding of what it means to live that out. And what I didn't mind, I pray that we're gonna be willing to engage this series, to use these materials, to really be intentional and praying with you and engaging with you in the course of this series. Because we've been invited to live as people of the new age, and I pray that in Jesus' name. Amen.

As you think about what this looks like in your own life, we'd love to pray with you about what that can entail. If there are particular issues going on in your life that we can pray with you right now, we're gonna be available here at the front and members of our prayer team, and so we would love to come alongside and encourage and pray with you this morning.

Now as you go and now as we enter into this series can we begin this week, and really the early part of this year, with a recognition that through the work of Jesus, we've been called, we've been invited, we've been challenged and equipped to live a life that is worthy of our new calling. Amen.