

Off with the Old, On with the New

Ephesians 4:17-24

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Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity. But that is not the way you learned Christ! — assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. — Ephesians 4:17-24, ESV

Introduction: Who Are You?

Do you remember when Susan Boyle stepped onto the stage on *Britain's Got Talent* in 2009? No one thought this very plain-looking middle-aged British woman would be able to sing well; most people probably thought she was a joke. But when she opened her mouth and let out the wonderful gift of a voice that God had given her, the judges were blown away and she launched a musical career in which she earned almost \$10 million in the first year of her career. Boyle has gone on to win critical acclaim and commercial success, selling over 25 million albums worldwide since 2009. Susan Boyle took a risk and stepped onto the stage and sang her heart out because she knew who she was inside, even if people couldn't tell it from the outside.

Do you know who you are? I meet so many Christians who seem to have no real idea who they are. So far, in Ephesians, we have seen that people who believe in Jesus Christ are members of the body of Christ, saints, spiritually resurrected and redeemed, reconciled children of God who have access to God and who are in Christ forever. This is not who we are in and of ourselves, of course. This is not who we are by nature, but it is who we are by God's grace through faith in Jesus and because of the redemption in Christ that the Holy Spirit applies to us.

In our passage today, Paul is urging the Ephesians to know better who they are and to live out who they are in their lives. In doing so, he contrasts the life and identity of believers with the life and identity of unbelievers.

After having spent three and a half chapters explaining the Gospel and how God saves and transforms sinners through Jesus Christ, Paul now urges the Ephesian Christians in very strong language: *“Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds.”*

When Paul says, “I say and testify in the Lord,” he is speaking with authority and calling for a response as one who is “in the Lord,” that is, in Christ. He’s reminding the Ephesians not only of his position but also of their own. He tells them not to live (walk) any longer as the Gentiles do and then he takes verses 17-19 to explain what characterizes the life of a Gentile unbeliever.

I. A Life without God (vv. 17-19)

If we could summarize the life of an unbeliever in a single phrase, it would be *“a life without God.”* Paul’s fuller description is this: *“. . . in the futility of their minds. They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity.”*

Our world tries to sell the lie that a life without God is a life of freedom, of freedom from rules and of “enlightenment” in the freedom of thought. But Paul exposes the lie of this way of thinking and shows life without God for what it really is: full of futility, darkness, ignorance, hardness of heart, a calloused conscience, sensuality and impurity.

A. Mental Darkness, Alienated from God (vv. 17-18)

Paul begins by describing the mental futility and darkness of thinking. The first thing Paul says about unbelievers is that their minds are empty or futile, meaningless or vain. The word “futility” speaks of something that is devoid of strength and substance. He then says they are darkened in their understanding, literally that their thought process is shrouded in thick clouds and dim.

Their thinking is futile and their thought process is shrouded in darkness because they are alienated from the life of God. Without God, we lack the true perspective on reality that allows us to see things clearly. This is because, as Paul says at the end of Romans 11, *“for from him and through him and to him are all things.”* God is the origin, purpose, destiny and sustenance of all things. And as Paul said on Mars Hill in Athens, *“in Him we live and move and have our being.”* We are made in God’s image and our life is created and sustained by God, so someone who tries to think about the world and about his own life

while alienated from the life of God is cut off from the source of life, meaning, purpose and destiny of all creation and every human being within it.

But why are they cut off from the life of God and why are they so darkened in their understanding? Paul says they are “*alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart.*” This is similar to what Paul says in Romans 1 about the relationship between God’s inescapable, undeniable revelation of Himself in creation and people’s ignorance of Him and His truth:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. – Rom. 1:18-21, ESV

God has revealed the essence of His nature and power in the creation, and His self-revelation is plain for all to see. But God’s wrath is aroused and revealed because people suppress the plain and available truth about God by their unrighteousness. In other words, it’s not true – despite what people may claim – that people just can’t see or know anything about God, and so they are ignorant of God and act sinfully out of mere ignorance. The cause-and-effect chain actually runs in the reverse order. People are ignorant of God because of the hardness of their hearts. People suppress the truth by their unrighteousness. They know the truth about God but, out of a stubborn refusal to honor God and thank God, they become futile in their thinking, they become darkened.

The story of humanity is similar to the story of *Pinnocchio*: We have a Creator and we have been given life, but we resent the voice of conscience and the expectations of our Creator and we’re lured away by the voices of the world and temptation. Because of our lack of gratitude and reluctance to honor our Creator, we run off in search of greater freedom and end up enslaved and are becoming more animal than human.

But it is the moral orientation, the desire to dishonor and to seek “freedom” – just like Adam and Eve in the Garden – which is the root cause of the mental futility and darkness.

B. Moral Decadence, Surrendered to Sensuality (v. 19)

In verse 19, Paul describes the hardness of heart of unbelievers in these terms: “*They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity.*” The callousness – the hardness of heart – is seen in their having “given themselves up” to sensuality (an unbridled lust and domination by carnal appetites), impurity (uncleanness, vileness) of every kind, which they pursue with greediness (covetousness, a relentless desire for more).

Once your heart is hardened toward God and your conscience is callous, you become not free but enslaved, not liberated but dominated, given over to your carnal appetites – for pleasure of whatever kind. But the carnal appetites can never be satisfied; they are restless and relentless, cancerous and ravenous.

But let’s not miss Paul’s point here: He’s describing the lives of unbelievers who do not have salvation, who have not received life from God, who are alienated from the life of God, who are still dead in their trespasses and sins in which they walk, who are still the walking dead spiritual zombies. But his point is not to show us how bad these people are so that we can wallow in some kind of self-righteous smug sense of superiority. On the contrary, he’s saying to Christians, “You must no longer live this way.”

In other words, Christians in the church at Ephesus were living this way. If we’re honest, we can all sense within our hearts and all see in our own lives the temptation and the tendency to think and act this way. We may confess Christ as our Savior, come to church and call ourselves Christians, but we live our lives as practical atheists, cut off from the life of God in our daily thinking, our understanding of the world, and given over to selfish desires with a greedy drive to get what we want and have it our way when we want.

What Paul is saying to us so urgently is that this is not who you are and this is not how you have to live.

II. Life in Christ (vv. 20-24)

And so Paul says in a blunt statement in verse 20: “*But that is not the way you learned Christ!*” All of this description of futile thinking, of hard-heartedness, of sensuality and impurity, this is not Christ! No true teacher of Christ, no faithful preacher of the Gospel, would teach that the Gospel is all about how you can live like you please, indulge your flesh and harden your heart and give yourself over to every kind of impurity and be just fine, no problem.

We are most certainly not saved by our good works. We most certainly cannot and do not earn any favor from God by self-denial, self-righteousness, human efforts at obedience. But neither is it true that our new life in Christ is just like our old life in the flesh, only with the peace of mind that comes from being forgiven. There's an old bumper sticker that used to be popular that says, "Christians aren't perfect, just forgiven." The problem with this bumper sticker is in the word "just."

Christians aren't perfect; none of us are, not even close. We are all guilty of breaking God's law in thought, word and deed every single day of our lives. As Christians, we live 365 days per year, 3.652 days every ten years, and over ten thousand of days in our walk with Christ on this earth, and not one of them in lived perfectly, in full obedience to God's righteous commands. And we are forgiven. Praise God that we are forgiven because Christ paid the penalty on the cross for every one of our sins! If Jesus had not paid the price and we had not been forgiven and cleansed of all sin by God's free and undeserved grace, we would have no hope – no hope at all.

But we are so much more than *just* forgiven. We are in Christ. Paul has been repeating over and over again how we are in Christ, and now he wants us to see very practically, very powerfully, what difference this makes in our lives. It makes all the difference in the world.

And so he says:

But that is not the way you learned Christ!— ²¹ assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, ²² to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, ²³ and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, ²⁴ and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

A. Taught in Him, as the Truth is in Jesus (vv. 20-21)

Paul wants to make sure we know where the truth and the power of our new life, our new self is found, and so he begins with "*assuming . . . you were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus.*" The truth is found in Jesus. Jesus said in John 8:31-32: "*If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.*" If you remain, abide, rest, dwell in Christ's word, then you will know the truth and the truth will set you free. Later, in John 14:6, Jesus would say, "*I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.*"

Christians so often fall into one of two traps when it comes to living the Christian life, and these traps are legalism and lawlessness. Legalism is a human-defined and human-driven attempt at obeying and pleasing God. It adds extra rules to God's rules, thinking that by keeping even more rules than God gives us, we can live a life that pleases Him. Lawlessness, on the other hand, makes the fatal error of mistaking sin for freedom and flaunts freedom by engaging in sensuality and impurity. Legalism and licentiousness are two heads of the same monster, self. Self-determination, self-regulation, self-indulgence, self-righteousness – what do they all have in common? Self!

But if we have learned Christ properly, we know that the truth is found in Him, that freedom is found in Him, that life is found in Him, that righteousness is found in Him!

B. Putting Off the Old Life (v. 22)

But if we're going to live the new life we have in Christ, we need to lay down our old life. We must learn by grace *“to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires.”*

Godlessness is our old self, our former manner of life. A self-determined, self-regulated, self-pleasing life is the past, corrupt by deceitful desires. Our selfish desires are deceitful and these desires corrupt our whole manner of life when we live for them. Instead, we are to put them off.

C. Putting On the New Life (vv. 23-24)

But Paul's command is not entirely, or even mostly, negative. We are not just to put off the old self, but we are also *“to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.”* Obedience and a God-pleasing life are never just a matter of stopping doing the wrong things. We need to do more than just stop listening to our deceitful desires. We need to do more than “Just say No!”

God has given us the gift of a new self, a self that is created by God after His own likeness in true righteousness and holiness. This is a restoration of the image of God which was corrupted so radically by the Fall. Our sinful nature is a corrupt distortion of the image of God, capable of great achievements, but all done for selfish reasons, and equally capable of great evil and great immorality, in pursuit of the same selfishness.

In stark contrast to this stands our new nature, our new self. In Christ, we are re-created, we are re-generated. This is why Jesus said we need to be born again. This is what 2 Cor. 5:17 means when it says, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.”

The two defining characteristics of this new self, created after the image of God, are righteousness and holiness. Righteousness is concerned with our conduct and character, our morality, if you will. We are created to live rightly and properly. Holiness is our Godward orientation, as we live right before the Lord, by faith in the Lord and for the glory of the Lord.

Conclusion: Be renewed in the Spirit of Your Minds

So, how do we do this? How do we put off the old self and put on the new self? How do we turn our backs on selfishness and our deceitful desires and embrace God’s greater will, His higher calling, and live out the new self that He has created us to be? It cannot be a matter of mere will-power, for that would be self-determination.

Paul gives us the key in the phrase he inserts in between putting off the old self and putting on the new: “*and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds.*”

Paul here uses a verb tense that indicates that this renewal is a continuing, ongoing activity. It is also a passive verb, “be renewed,” and this indicates that the work of renewal is God’s work in us, not our work in ourselves.

This phrase in verse 23 has a close parallel idea in Romans 12:1-2 that can help us further understand what Paul means. Romans 12 begins the transition in Romans from the doctrinal section to the practical application, and verses 1 and 2 say:

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. (ESV)

We are transformed by the renewing of our minds, and only then can we discern the will of God and live as living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to God.

In other words, we need the Holy Spirit to re-arrange the mental furniture and the inner life of our minds, the way we think, the default settings of what we value and why we value it. It also needs to be

renewed, changed, revised, made new. God does this through His word, through prayer, through worship. But He is the One who does it. When the inside of us is changed, then the outside can truly and properly follow suit. That's what we must pray for and what we must seek in the word, in prayer, in worship and in life.