

The New Life

The Christian Life

Ephesians 4:20-24

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The Christian Life

Scripture

Today I am continuing my sermon series in Ephesians 4:17-32 that I am calling, “The New Life.”

Ephesians 4:17-32 may be divided into three sections. In verses 17-19, the Apostle Paul describes the non-Christian life. In verses 20-24, our text for today, the Apostle Paul describes the Christian life. And in verses 25-32, the Apostle Paul teaches Christians what is involved in living the Christian life.

Let’s read about the Christian life in Ephesians 4:20-24, but to give the contrast with the non-Christian life, I am going to begin reading in Ephesians 4:17:

¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ 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. ¹⁹ They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity. ²⁰ **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.** (Ephesians 4:20-24)

Introduction

With the recent royal wedding in Great Britain, I read an

article about etiquette rules that Meghan Markle will need to master, now that she has married into the royal family. She has married into a dress code that has been in place for hundreds of years. That means hats during the day, tiaras in the evening, gloves on her hands, and skirts that sit at or below her knees. Black clothing should be avoided unless she is in mourning or attending a remembrance event.¹

When the Apostle Paul wrote to the Ephesian Christians, he wanted them to understand their new life in Jesus Christ. In contrast to their former, non-Christian life, he wanted them to understand what it meant to “put on,” as it were, the new garment of Christianity. Over against their non-Christian life that was characterized by emptiness, hardness, darkness, deadness, and recklessness (4:17-19), Paul used three expressions, which described the Christian life.

Lesson

Ephesians 4:20-24 teaches us that Jesus Christ transforms people into new creations.

Let’s use the following outline:

1. Christians Have Learned Christ (4:20)
2. Christians Have Heard Christ (4:21a)
3. Christians Were Taught in Christ (4:21b-24)

I. Christians Have Learned Christ (4:20)

First, Christians have learned Christ.

Paul said in verse 20: **“But that is not the way you learned Christ!”** The first thing to note is the first word,

¹ See <https://www.ctvnews.ca/world/the-royals/etiquette-rules-to-master-if-you-re-joining-the-royal-family-1.3915789>.

“But.” Paul is introducing a contrast. In verses 17-19, he described the old way of life of these new Ephesian Christians. He described their non-Christian life. In contrast to that life, he now says, **“But,”** and it is very important to pay attention to what comes next as he described their new life in Christ. Paul was about to introduce the gospel message in his letter.

The second thing to note is that Paul used a figure of speech called “litotes.” Litotes is an “understatement in which an affirmative is expressed by the negative.”² An example of this is in Romans 1:16 where Paul said, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel...” In other words, Paul was saying that he was tremendously proud of the gospel, he had absolute confidence in the gospel, and he made his boast in the gospel. Similarly, in our present text, where Paul wrote, **“But that is not the way you learned Christ!”** he meant that Christians have learned Christ in a way that was completely contrary to their former way of life. As commentator Martyn Lloyd-Jones writes, “The life of the Christian is not to be something vague and indefinite, not something which is difficult to define, and difficult to recognize. According to Paul’s teaching, and the teaching of the entire Bible, it is clear-cut and obvious—it stands out, it is perfectly definite, and anybody should be able to recognize it at a glance.”³

And the third thing to note is that the Greek word for **learned** (*emathete*) is in the aorist tense. That means that it is a past, completed action with continuing results. Lloyd-Jones writes, “In other words, Christianity is not a vague, indefinite, nebulous kind of feeling or experience; patently it is something

² Catherine Soanes and Angus Stevenson, eds., *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

³ David Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Darkness and Light: An Exposition of Ephesians 4:17–5:17* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1982), 84–85.

which can be defined and described; it is primarily a matter of knowledge.... Christianity is primarily and essentially a matter of knowledge; it is the knowledge to which these people had come.”⁴

But what is so interesting is that these Christians in Ephesus had not merely learned facts or doctrines. They had **learned *Christ!*** This expression is found nowhere else in the New Testament, nor even in any other pre-biblical document. So what does it mean to have **learned Christ?** Dr. James Montgomery Boice says, “It means that Christians are Christians because they have entered into a personal relationship with the living Lord Jesus Christ. It is a learning of him that changes them at the deepest possible level.”⁵ And Dr. John Stott says that the Christ whom they learned was “not just the Word made flesh, the unique Godman, who died, rose and reigns. More than that. The implication of the context is that we must also preach his lordship, the kingdom or rule of righteousness he ushered in, and all the moral demands of the new life. The Christ whom the Ephesians had learned was calling them to standards and values totally at variance with their former pagan life.”⁶

So, first, Christians have learned Christ.

II. Christians Have Heard Christ (4:21a)

Second, Christians have heard Christ.

Paul wrote in verse 21a, “... **assuming that you have heard about him.**” The word “**about**” is not in the original

⁴ David Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Darkness and Light*, 92.

⁵ James Montgomery Boice, *Ephesians: An Expositional Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Ministry Resources Library, 1988), 160.

⁶ John R. W. Stott, *God's New Society: The Message of Ephesians*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 179.

Greek text. The verse literally reads, “... **assuming that you have heard him.**” The Ephesian Christians most likely had never heard Christ speak in person. So, what did Paul mean when he wrote, “... **assuming that you have heard him.**” Dr. Stott comments, “Paul assumes that through the voice of their Christian teachers, they had actually heard Christ’s voice. Thus, when sound biblical moral instruction is being given, it may be said that Christ is teaching about Christ.”⁷ Commentator Kent Hughes puts it this way, “When true preaching takes place, Jesus is invisibly in the pulpit and walking the aisles personally teaching his own.”⁸

If you are a Christian, you have experienced this, haven’t you? You sit in the worship service, and you listen to the preaching of the Word of God. And suddenly, it seems as if Christ himself is speaking to you! This is not mere subjectivity; it is supernatural. Jesus really is speaking to you and you are hearing him. Jesus speaks to change the thinking and the lives of his people.

So, first, Christians have learned Christ. And second, Christians have heard Christ.

III. Christians Were Taught in Christ (4:21b-24)

And third, Christians were taught in Christ.

Paul wrote in verse 21b, “... **and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus.**” What is interesting about this expression is that Paul did not say that they were taught “about him” or “by him.” Instead, they were taught “**in him.**”

Dr. Boice writes that “it probably means that Jesus is the

⁷ John R. W. Stott, *God’s New Society: The Message of Ephesians*, 179.

⁸ R. Kent Hughes, *Ephesians: The Mystery of the Body of Christ*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1990), 142.

atmosphere within which the teaching takes place. We might say that Jesus is the school, as well as the teacher and the subject of instruction.”⁹ And John Stott writes, “When Jesus Christ is at once the subject, the object and the environment of the moral instruction being given, we may have confidence that it is truly Christian. For *truth is in Jesus*. The change from his title ‘Christ’ to his human name ‘Jesus’ seems to be deliberate. The historical Jesus is himself the embodiment of truth, as he claimed.”¹⁰

Paul is asserting that only Jesus Christ transforms people into new creations. And he does so by being the subject, the object, and the environment of the teaching that brings about that transformation. In other words, to be a Christian is to be all about Christ, as St. Patrick so beautifully put it in the fifth century:

Christ be with me, Christ within me,
Christ behind me, Christ before me,
Christ beside me, Christ to win me,
Christ to comfort and restore me,
Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
Christ in quiet, Christ in danger,
Christ in hearts of all that love me,
Christ in mouth of friend and stranger.¹¹

The Ephesian pagans became new creations in Christ by having learned Christ, heard Christ, and being taught in Christ. So, what did this mean for the new Christian life of the Ephesians? The answer is in verses 22-24.

⁹ James Montgomery Boice, *Ephesians: An Expository Commentary*, 161.

¹⁰ John R. W. Stott, *God's New Society: The Message of Ephesians*, 179.

¹¹ R. Kent Hughes, *Ephesians: The Mystery of the Body of Christ*, 143.

A. *Christians Have Put Off the Old Self (4:22)*

First, Christians have put off the old self.

Paul wrote in verse 22, “... **to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires.**” It is important to understand that the words “**to put off,**” as well as the words “to put on” in verse 24, are in the aorist tense. That is, these are actions that have taken place in the past. The parallel passage in Colossians 3:9–10 makes this clear, “Do not lie to one another, seeing that you *have put off* the old self with its practices and *have put on* the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.” In other words, Paul was not giving a fresh command. Instead, he was reminding the Ephesian Christians of what had happened to them at their conversion. They had **put off their old self**. They were now new creatures in Christ. They no longer had an old self, or an old nature. That belonged **to their former manner of life and was corrupt through deceitful desires.**

Dr. Lloyd-Jones illustrates how to put off the old self:

It concerns a certain man in his early fifties, who had lived a very evil and dissolute life. He was a drunkard, a fighter, gambler, wife-beater, adulterer; there was nothing, I imagine, short of murder, that the man had not been guilty of; and indeed, he would have been guilty of murder in many a drunken brawl if he had not been restrained by his own friends. He had a fiendish, foul temper, and he became mad under drink. Eventually he came under the sound of the gospel and was converted. Now this is where the thing sounds almost ludicrous, but this is the fact. He was a tall man, athletic, well built, a fighter. And there was one thing he was particularly proud of, namely his moustache and its length from

tip to tip. (Is it not extraordinary what people are proud of?) This was his particular matter of pride. In fact, the cause of most of his fightings happened to be his moustache, because some other man would challenge him that his moustache measured more from tip to tip than his own. And so a quarrel would begin, and they would end in fighting. But he was not only proud of his moustache; he also boasted that no man could stand up to him in his prowess as a fighter. Then the unexpected happened. He came to the church, and was converted, and we looked on the event with wonder.

But this is the story. Some six weeks after the man's conversion he came to a week-night meeting, and I noticed immediately as he came in that the moustache had gone. He had not merely cut off the extended ends, but he had shaved off the entire moustache. My immediate reaction was one of annoyance; I said to myself, Some busybody in this church has told this man to do that. At the end of the meeting, as he was going out, I stopped him and said I wanted a word with him. Who told you to get rid of that moustache? I said. Nobody! he replied. Now come along, I said; don't shield anybody; this kind of busybody does great harm in a church. I am out to get rid of these self-appointed spiritual detectives, I continued. Tell me the truth. Who told you to get rid of that moustache? He said, Nobody has told me. I still pressed him hard, but he persisted. Well, I said, why have you got rid of it then? I will tell you, he said. I was getting up, actually, this morning and after I had washed, I went to the looking-glass, and I was there, he said, brushing my hair. Suddenly I saw my moustaches—on account of its size he reckoned it as two moustaches—and I said to myself, Them things don't belong to a Christian! So I cut off the ends, he said, and I shaved off the rest.

The man, let me add, could neither read nor write. He had lived such a dissolute, evil life, and had been brought up in such a loose way, that, literally, he could not write, he could not read; that was his expression, "Them things don't belong

to a Christian"! Illiterate and ignorant, yes, but he had been born again, and the Spirit of God had come into him; and the Spirit of God with His unction and anointing had taught him the lesson, "Them things don't belong to a Christian!" "Put off the old man!" And he had put him off in that respect. They belonged to the old life, they had nothing to do with the new life. Very simple, is it not? Ignorant, illiterate man! I would to God that this church were full of such people! I see Christians today, even deliberately, it seems to me, putting on the old man! putting on things that belong to the life of the flesh and the devil and the world. And they have not yet realized that "Them things don't belong to a Christian"! That is the argument of the Apostle. Work it out for yourselves in detail. The Christian should not even look like the typical man or woman of the world. There are certain things that are incompatible with this new life. Put them off! Get rid of them!¹²

B. *Christians Have Put On the New Self (4:24)*

Second, Christians have put on the new self.

Paul wrote in verse 24, "**... and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.**" When the Ephesian Christians were regenerated, they received a new nature. They **put on the new self**. Kent Hughes writes, "We received the old man at birth, and we were given the new man in our heavenly birth. The new man is not our work—it is God's creation and gift."¹³

C. *Christians Are To Be Renewed in the Spirit of Their Minds (4:23)*

And third, Christians are to be renewed in the spirit of

¹² David Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Darkness and Light*, 147–148.

¹³ R. Kent Hughes, *Ephesians: The Mystery of the Body of Christ*, 144.

their minds.

Verse 23 is actually sandwiched between putting off and putting on, “... **and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds.**” The Greek word for “**to be renewed**” is a present infinitive, meaning that this is something that must be done continually. John Stott explains that “it indicates that, in addition to the decisive rejection of the old and assumption of the new, implicit in conversion, a daily—indeed a continuous—inward renewal of our outlook is involved in being a Christian. If heathen degradation is due to the futility of their minds, then Christian righteousness depends on the constant renewing of our minds.”¹⁴

And how do we renew our minds? By reading God’s word. And not just reading it in order to check off our list that we have read it, but reading it in such a way as to understand and apply what God wants of us as his new creatures in Christ.

Conclusion

Therefore, having analyzed the Christian life in Ephesians 4:20-24, let us live as those who have been transformed by Jesus Christ.

If you are not a Christian, ask God to transform you by giving you a new nature, a new self.

And if you are a Christian, ask God to enable you to live as one who has a new nature, and who has been transformed by Jesus Christ. Amen.

¹⁴ John R. W. Stott, *God’s New Society: The Message of Ephesians*, 182.

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is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and membership in his church family,
develop them to Christlike maturity,
equip them for their ministry in the church
and life mission in the world,
in order to magnify God's name.*

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