

Ephesians 4:17-24

Learning Christ

Turning to **chapter 4** in Paul's epistle to the Ephesians, we have moved from Paul's declaration of the gospel of what God has done for us in Christ and therefore who we are now in Christ. Everything that Paul said in **chapters 1-3** can be summed up by saying that everything that is true of Christ is now true of us through the Spirit-union with Christ. As we stand before God's judicial throne, we are assured that we stand justified (declared righteous and forgiven of all our sin), now and forevermore, on account of the merited righteousness that is freely given to us through faith alone. In fact, our justification before God is so assured that Paul can speak of our salvation as being complete and fully accomplished so that he tells us that we are already seated with Christ in heaven. Our salvation is so complete that we have already died, we have been raised from the dead, and we have ascended into heaven to sit on exalted thrones before the presence of Almighty God in Christ. We are no longer strangers and aliens living in this world without hope in God. But now we are fellow citizens with all the saints in the mystical body of Christ so that we have become the household of God, a building built upon the foundation of Christ, who is becoming the holy temple in the Lord. As Paul told the Galatians:

“For through the Law I died to the Law, that I might live to God. 20 “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the *life* which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and delivered Himself up for me (**Galatians 2:19-20**).

This means that your old life has been put to death and you have been given a new life. Paul has already contrasted this old life and new life in **chap. 2** when he was explaining the glorious work of God's grace in redeeming you from that old life that leads to death and condemnation and raising you up into that new life in which he lavishes his grace upon you according to his kindness in Christ Jesus. Since this is now true, then the life that you live day-to-day should be consistent to your new identity in Christ. In other words, if Christ is your life then you will live as he lived. This is why Paul says in **4:1** that you are to walk in a manner worthy of God's calling you into Christ. In the first part of **chap. 4**, Paul has told you what means God has given you so that your life will be lived consistently to your union with Christ: namely, the Spirit working through the means of grace which are received by faith alone. The WSC asks and answers:

Q88: What are the outward means whereby Christ communicateth to us the benefits of redemption?

A88: The outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicateth to us the benefits of redemption, are his ordinances, especially the Word, sacraments, and prayer; all which are made effectual to the elect for salvation.

Now, Paul picks up in **v. 17** by once again repeating what he said in **4:1** but this time he paints your previous life in the dark colors of the depravity of man alienated from God. Then in **v. 20** he reminds us that "our walk" in Christ will be very different from our former walk in sin because we have been taught Christ. Notice that the content of what we have been taught is the full person and work of Jesus Christ. Finally, in **vv. 21-24** Paul explains what we have been taught in Christ.

Now that we have been gloriously united to Christ, Paul urges you not to fall back into the patterns of thinking and living of your former "Gentile" way of life (**v. 17**). Another word for Gentiles is "strangers." Paul describes the life of those who are outside or strangers to Christ

(vv. 17-19; cf. 2:1-3, 11-12). Paul here describes what has become known as the Reformed doctrine of total depravity. Total depravity begins in a fallen mind which affects the will and emotions of man so that performs sinful deeds which lead to death. Though you as a human being are not fully your mind it is only through your mind that you know yourself. The man outside of Christ, or the Gentile, walks in the emptiness and vanity of his own mind (4:17), which is darkened by sin (4:18). Now this darkening of their mind is much more extensive than you first might think.

Romans 1:18 describes this as a suppression of the knowledge of God in unrighteousness. Though the unbeliever knows God, he continually suppresses, muffles, squashes, extinguishes that knowledge of God so that he can continue to rebel against God. This "futility" is often understood as idolatry (cf. **Rom. 1:21-22, 24**). It is the result of having one's life disconnected/excluded(NASB)/alienated (ESV) from God (4:18; cf. 2:12).

Gospel of John 1:1-10

1:4 "the life was the Light of men" - the Logos of creation is the ground of ALL knowledge. He is like the sun by which we see all things. He is the Light that illumines the created world we live in. We are able to know the world because He is the ground of our cognition and reasoning. This is general revelation made known to us by the agency of the Holy Spirit who takes what belongs to the Logos and makes it known to man through common grace.

1:5 "did not comprehend it" - it is better translated, "did not overpower/overtake it" (κατέλαβεν) as it is used in **John 12:35** (καταλάβη), the only other place in John's gospel where the word is used. John is making an analogy here. Just as God's Light (Logos) cannot be overtaken or overpowered by the darkness which covered the earth (**Gen. 1:2**) at the time of the creation, so the "darkness" referring to the mind of man, who suppresses the the truth of God in unrighteousness (cf. **Rom. 1:18, 21; Eph. 4:17-18**), cannot overpower the Light of reason, the Logos of creation.

1:9 "the true Light which, coming into the world, enlightens every man" - The true Light "became flesh and dwelt among us" (**John 1:14**). He penetrates the darkness of our sinful soul but we suppress that knowledge "in unrighteousness" (cf. **Rom. 1:18**) and as a result "the world did not know Him" (**John 1:10**). This is the further extent of general revelation of the incarnation coming closer to man, revealing Himself more fully to man so that we can know God. Again, this is made known to us through the divine Agent, the Holy Spirit, through common grace. It can be suppressed by sinful intention just as the preaching of the gospel can be suppressed by sin.

1:12-13 "as many as received Him" and "who were born . . . of God" - this explains finally how the incarnated true Light of God finally penetrates the darkness of man's soul. God causes us to be born from above (cf. **John 3:3, 5**) by the Spirit of God so that we can receive the true Light that penetrates into our minds and be born again. As a result, we no longer suppress the truth in unrighteousness but receive it with joy so that we can have eternal life (**John 17:3**).

Without being in a true relationship to God (Eph. 4:18 “alienated”) the mind of the pagan has lost all touch with reality and is left to its own, fumbling in the dark, without any purpose or direction in life. Now seeing the emptiness of life, the pagan wants to make sense of it all and the only thing he can do is live according to his own carnal desires (**4:19; cf. Rom. 1:24-32**). All he has left is to live for himself. He becomes his own god to whom he offers up all devotion and passion (cf. **Rom. 1:24** – “worship the creature rather than the Creator”).

Paul presents the downward spiral of sin that he so eloquently described in **Rom. 1:18-32**. When man is alienated from God, the source of all life, then there is no meaning in the world but what man finds in fulfilling his own self-centered desires. He is so hardened by a lack of purpose in life that his sole purpose becomes himself. He has simply become a dead man walking alienated from all life which is found only in Christ (cf. **Eph. 2:1-3**). But he has become so calloused and hardened by the darkness of his sin that he is like a paraplegic man who has lost all sensitivity in his lower in his lower extremities that he no longer feels pain. God has handed the pagan over into the emptiness of this life without God so that in the hardness of his heart he has lost the capacity to feel shame and to discern between good and evil. He is a man without any moral restraints (other than God’s common grace) so that he not only lives for his own carnal desires but that he does so with continual greediness or with a continual lust and hunger for more debauchery. Ultimately, this self-centered, hedonistic life is deceitful (cf. **v. 22**) and vain because it promises happiness, pleasure, and fulfillment when in the end it only brings death and destruction. Paul says “the wages of sin is death.”

When a man is so darkened by sin and blinded by the continual, but never satisfying desire to fulfill the lusts of his flesh, how can he possibly turn from that vicious, fatal cycle of death and destruction? He has to be made alive or what we call in theology “regenerated” (cf. **2:4-6**). This is not something he can do for himself but something that must be done to/for him. The man outside of Christ is so helpless that even the very instrument that God uses (“faith”) to give salvation to him must also be given as a free gift (**2:8**).

Light has now shined in the darkness and our minds are being renewed and transformed by God’s grace so that we now have the mind of Christ (**5:8; 1 Cor. 2:14-16**; we are no longer “outsiders,” **2:19-22**). This is why Paul can now speak of our new walk in Christ as being consistent to the life of Christ. Through union with Christ and empowered by his Spirit we no longer live according to our own self-centered desires (for ourselves) but we are enabled to live sacrificially for others, just as Christ lived for us (cf. **4:1-3**). How else can you explain the difference between these two ways of life? Notice the same stark contrast made in **v. 20** that was made in **2:4**.

Now Paul sends us **back to school** to remind us how and what we have learned through our union with Christ. The content of our instruction is a person: **Jesus Christ**. In him we have everything that we need to learn to walk in a manner worthy of our calling. “Learning Christ” means that we have entered into a living person so that we are being shaped into his image. In **v. 21**, it is better to translate “if” to “since” because the phrase implies confidence and certainty. Having learned Christ, you no longer live in pagan darkness and ignorance, but because you are his sheep you have heard the voice of the Good Shepherd (ie. calling, **4:1; John 10:11, 14-16, 26-29**) and you have been taught “in” him. By hearing him and being taught in him you have been instructed in the truth because Jesus is the perfect embodiment of truth. Jesus is the truth of God and he is the one who we are to speak to one another in love (cf. **4:15**). When we speak “Jesus” to one another in love we are proclaiming the apostolic gospel, the one faith which cements us together in unity and the building up of one another in love.

But what is the content of learning Christ, of learning the gospel? Paul now presents the content of the gospel tradition that has been passed down to us by giving us three infinitives which explain how we now live in Christ: to put off (**v. 22**); to be renewed (**v. 23**); and to put on (**v. 24**). The first and last infinitives are aorist which means they speak of actions that are complete. To put off and put on is something that has already been completed. Paul uses the language of taking off old clothing and putting on new clothing but what is taken off and put on is not clothing but a "person." Paul is referring to the old man in Adam that he has described in **2:1-3** and **4:17-19** and the new man in Christ (**cf. Col. 3:9-10**). In **Romans 13:14** Paul speaks of being clothed with the Lord Jesus Christ. In **Gal. 3:27** and **Rom. 6:1-6** Paul equates the putting on of Christ with our baptism into Christ which has already taken place (**Rom. 8:1-11; Gal. 2:20**).

But what is already true of us definitively in Christ is also being worked out daily in our lives which is why Paul uses a present infinitive in **v. 23**. The renewal or transformation of our minds (**Rom. 12:1-2**) is a process in which we are becoming what we are in Christ. But Paul's use of the infinitive here is also passive to remind us that God and God alone is the one who accomplishes our salvation from beginning to end (**2:10**; **cf. WCF 13:1; WLC 75**).

They, who are once effectually called, and regenerated, having a new heart, and a new spirit created in them, are further sanctified, really and personally, through the virtue of Christ's death and resurrection, by his Word and Spirit dwelling in them: the dominion of the whole body of sin is destroyed, and the several lusts thereof are more and more weakened and mortified; and they more and more quickened and strengthened in all saving graces, to the practice of true holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord (**WCF 13:1**).

WLC: Q75: What is sanctification?

A75: Sanctification is a work of God's grace, whereby they whom God hath, before the foundation of the world, chosen to be holy, are in time, through the powerful operation of his Spirit applying the death and resurrection of Christ unto them, renewed in their whole man after the image of God; having the seeds of repentance unto life, and all other saving graces, put into their hearts, and those graces so stirred up, increased, and strengthened, as that they more and more die unto sin, and rise unto newness of life.

In **v. 23** "the Spirit" refers to the Holy Spirit who is renewing and transforming our mind by taking what belongs to Christ and making in live in and through us (**1 Cor. 2:16; Rom. 12:2**; -- walk in the Spirit, **Gal. 5:16-18**). Notice that Paul continues to the sole work of God alone in our salvation so that he is the one who effects the new creation and he alone is the goal of the new creation (ie. likeness **v. 24**) so that we will be like him. God has made us alive in Christ and is working to produce that new life of Christ in and through us so that we will be conformed into the image of Christ so that what is true of Christ (righteousness and holiness; **cf. 4:21**) will now be true of us (**cf. Rom. 8:29**).

What that will look like is what Paul will now take up in the rest of the letter. As we unfold each of the following commandments, we will first ask God's Spirit to take what belongs to Christ and conform us into Him and in faith of that work we will begin to live out and practice those commandments in and through our whole being that has now been given life in Christ to the glory of our Triune God, for from Him and through Him and to Him is all glory, now and forevermore (**Rom. 11:36**).

SDG