

The New Self, Created To Be Like God

Ephesians 4:17-32

Key Verse: 4:23-24

“...to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.”

The main theme of Ephesians is “...to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ” (1:10). Based on this theme, Paul gives practical applications in chapters 4-6. In 4:1-16 Paul emphasized keeping the unity of the Spirit, while recognizing the diversity of gifts in the body, and growing to maturity in Christ. True unity develops when members of the body mature in godliness. So, in 4:17-5:20, Paul admonishes us to grow in godliness in our inner persons and in our way of life.

In today’s passage, Paul explains why we have to grow to maturity. When we heard about Christ and accepted him, God created a new self in us. At that moment, the seed of God’s life was planted in us, and it began to grow. God’s purpose is that we may grow to maturity until we become like Jesus (Ro 8:29). But this growth is not automatic or painless. It involves change of one's attitudes, thoughts and way of life. People may hate to be changed more than anything else. Many refuse to change their diet, exercise regimen, or substance abuse even when seriously warned by their doctors. It seems people would rather die than give up bad habits. This also applies to Christians. In this passage Paul teaches us that we must put off the old self, and put on the new self (17-24), and, how to live a new life in Christ (25-32).

I. Put off the old self, put on the new self (17-24)

Paul explains why we must no longer live as the Gentiles do in verses 17-19. Then, in verses 20-24, he teaches the basis for our new lives.

First, “you must no longer live as the Gentiles do” (17-19). Paul begins in verse 17, “So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do.” At first glance, this may seem to be legalistic: “...you must no longer...” But we should understand why Paul gave this strong warning. Paul had been a very strict Pharisee. But after encountering the Risen Christ, he was completely changed. He grasped the essence of the gospel of grace. So he could accept any kind of person in Christ. He even became like the Gentiles so as to win them over to Christ (1 Cor 9:21). He had a genuine shepherd’s heart for them (Gal 4:19). For their own good, he urged them not to live as the Gentiles do.

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What, then, was the Gentile way of life? Paul mentions specifically, “**...in the futility of their thinking.**” This means that without God their minds were empty, fruitless and vain. Even though people work hard to attain something, it perishes and vanishes with death. So people feel emptiness in their deep hearts. The philosopher and theologian Paul Tillich (1886-1965) said, in his book, “The New Being,”¹ that ungodly man's way of thinking is characterized by three gray figures: emptiness, guilt, and death. When people try to live without God, they think they will be free. Yet they are always accompanied by these three gray figures, especially emptiness. They are darkened in their understanding (18); they have no discernment or wisdom, despite the flood of information in our time. According to research at U.C. Berkeley, the total production of new information in the year 2000 was 1.5 exabytes. That is 37,000 times the total holdings of the Library of Congress. Just two years later, the annual rate hit 3.5 exabytes.² Yet, despite all this information, we rarely find books with real wisdom. Modern people have lots of knowledge without much wisdom or discernment. The Bible is the book of wisdom. It makes us wise for salvation through faith in Christ, and equips us to do good works (2 Ti 3:15-17). When people abandon God and the Bible, they lose wisdom. They do not know why they live, or how to live, because they are darkened in their understanding. They are separated from the life of God (18). This means to be cut off from the source of life, like a cut flower in a vase; it seems to be alive, but has no root. Moreover, they live in spiritual ignorance. It is not due to lack of education, but to the hardening of their hearts toward God. They deny God intentionally, like an ostrich that sticks its head in the ground to avoid danger. Romans 1:21 says, “**For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.**” Eventually they lose all sensitivity to God's presence and cannot recognize spiritual things. They become numb in their conscience and spirit. On the other hand, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, and they are full of greed (19). They are greedy for money, pleasure, power, and food. This leads to destruction. This is why Paul told them to no longer live as Gentiles do. We, too, must no longer live as the Gentiles do.

Second, the way of life you learned in Christ (20-24). Look at verses 20-21. “**That, however, is not the way of life you learned when you heard about Christ and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus.**” When the Ephesians heard about Christ and accepted him, they were liberated from bondage to sin and could begin a new life. They were taught in Christ in

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accordance with the truth that is in Jesus. We can find the truth that saves only in Jesus. Jesus said, **“I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me”** (Jn 14:6). Jesus promised that when we know the truth, the truth sets us free (Jn 8:32).

The words “learned,” “heard,” and “taught,” suggest that we are in school: the school of Jesus. The main subject is Jesus Christ, to know him. It is not to know information about him, but to know him personally. Our semester is not 12 weeks or 16 weeks, but our entire lifetime. The life of faith is to learn Christ - especially his character: humility, kindness, love, gentleness, patience, compassion, righteousness, and so on. It is also to learn the meaning of his suffering, death, and resurrection. As an old missionary, Paul said, **“I want to know Christ - yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection of the dead”** (Php 3:10-11). Dawson Trotman, founder of the Navigators, defined his life goal as follows: “To know Christ, to let Christ be known.” At the age of eight, Count Zinzendorf exclaimed about Christ, “I have but one passion – ‘tis He only He.”

The content of the teaching to the Ephesians is specified in verses 22-24. Verse 22 says, **“You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires....”** Here, **“...put off your old self...”** means to repent. When we lived in the old self, the inclination of our thoughts was only evil all the time (Gen 6:5). The old self is being corrupted by deceitful desires day by day, and is on its way to ruin and destruction. That is why we were taught to put off the old self. This is what we must do by God’s grace. As the old ways of life are put off, renewal is called for, and it is inward renewal. Verses 23-24 tell us what God does to renew us. They say, **“...to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.”** When we accepted Christ, God created in us a new self - a new person - a new creation, according to the image of God in true righteousness and holiness. The Apostle John says that when we are born of God, God’s seed remains in us (1 Jn 3:9). A seed has life in it, and it grows. God’s life that was planted in us grows to the fullness of Christ. Our job is to let the seed grow. In order to do so, we must uproot bad habits and sinful desires which hinder our spiritual growth.

Exodus gives us a model of how God helped his people to grow in holiness. The people of Israel were helplessly bound in Egypt as slaves. They could do nothing to escape. But God liberated them by the blood of the lamb. They had done

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nothing; God had done everything to redeem them. They were free to live a new life as children of God. Even though they were free, they still had a slave mentality. They retained many bad habits and unholy attitudes in their minds. They were unthankful, quick to complain, greedy, lazy, unfaithful and impatient. They needed discipline. God led them to the desert, gave them his Law and trained them to be faithful in following him, eating daily bread, keeping the Sabbath, and so on. God disciplines us, as well, to put off our old way of life and put on the new self (Heb 12:10). We should be most thankful for and cooperative with God's discipline.

In verse 23, the words, “**...to be made new in the attitude of your minds...**” describe renewal in the inner life of believers. This is the work of the Holy Spirit, working in the deepest parts of our being to progressively transform us into the image of Christ. The Holy Spirit works to make us new from the inside out. Since the Holy Spirit is working in us, Paul urges us to put off the old self and put on the new self so that we may grow to maturity.

II. How to put off the old and put on the new (25-32)

In this part Paul instructs us specifically how to put off the old way of life, and put on the new way of life. It is like taking off old, sweaty clothes and replacing them with a fresh new suit of the finest fabric.

Look at verse 25. “**Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbor, for we are all members of one body.**” This is the first of Paul's practical instructions. Obviously, putting off falsehood and speaking the truth is important. Falsehood has three meanings: an untrue statement, the absence of truth or accuracy, or the habit of lying. People practice falsehood to put forth a false image and to gain influence and benefit. We have come to expect this from politicians, but it must not be done in the Christian community. It leads to factions and hypocrisy, and it breeds distrust. So we must put it off. Instead, we must speak the truth. This is the truth about sin, righteousness and judgment, as well as the truth about grace, forgiveness and love. Instead of speaking about others behind their backs, we must speak the truth to our brothers and sisters, even when it hurts. What is said in private rooms should not be opposite of what is said in public meetings. We can speak truthfully when we honor God's word more than human ideas. We can speak truthfully when we love others enough to bear misunderstanding for their good. The Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth, loves to work where there is genuine confession of sin and real repentance. This is why we must speak gospel truth to one another. We must speak truth in our fellowships, homes,

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and community. This creates an atmosphere that fosters putting off the old and putting on the new.

Look at verses 26-27. **“In your anger do not sin; Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold.”** It is interesting that the issue of anger follows speaking the truth. Perhaps there is a connection here. Paul does not say that we should not get angry. But he warns us not to sin when we are angry. This includes trying to inflict pain on others with words or deeds in order to vent our own feelings. Really great people learn to harness their anger for a positive purpose. But at least we should not fall into sin due to anger. After having a nasty encounter with someone that provokes anger, we should take some time to calm down and pray before reacting. Then the Lord will give us wisdom. We should solve each day’s anger before sunset. This anger gives the devil a foothold. If we let anger boil within us for a time, this hidden poison will damage many others, and ourselves most of all. So we must be serious about solving our anger. It is interesting to realize that if we add the letter “d” at the beginning of “anger,” it becomes “danger.” Anger is the warning sign of danger. John Hunter (1728-1793) was a world famous scientist. He claimed that heart attacks may be caused by anger, jealousy, and self-righteousness, which puts pressure on blood vessels. After he shared this in a seminar, a scholar attacked his theory sharply. Hunter became angry and got up to counterattack. But he fell down and later died. The cause of death was a heart attack induced by anger. Knowing about anger is not enough; we must master it. James 1:19-20 say, **“Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry, because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires.”**

The teaching not to steal in verse 28 is not just a legalistic rule. It challenges our inner attitude of wanting to get something. It teaches us to be sacrificial instead of selfish - to share instead of getting. In order to have something to share with others we must work hard, doing something useful with our own hands. In verse 29 Paul tells us not to let any unwholesome talk come out of our mouths. So we must control our speech and say only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs. There is the story of a woman who invented rumors about others to enjoy gossiping. One day she noticed that no one would speak to her any longer. She found that her careless words about others had caused everyone to lose trust in her. So she visited her rabbi and asked help. The rabbi told her to cut a pillow in half and scatter the feathers to the wind. She did so. When she reported this to the rabbi, he told her to gather the feathers and bring them back to him. She tried all evening but could collect only a fraction of what was lost. Then he told her that in

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the same way, bad words about others could never be taken back.³ Jesus said in Matthew 12:36: **“But I tell you that everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken.”** Proverbs 12:18 says, **“The words of the reckless pierce like swords, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.”**

Paul urges, **“And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption”** (30). The Holy Spirit of God is a person. He is characterized by absolute purity. He commits himself to God's children and is with us always. He works to make us holy and pure. If we resist his work in us or hurt others, he is grieved. The Holy Spirit's work is most essential. Without the help of the Holy Spirit we can never put off the old and put on the new. We must always remember that the Holy Spirit dwells in us and among us, and honor him in word and deed.

In verse 31 Paul admonishes us to get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. These things damage our personalities and choke our spiritual growth. What is worse, they damage others and bring division to the body of Christ. For the health of our own personalities, as well as for the well-being of Christ's church, we must get rid of all these things right away, just as we throw out the trash before it becomes a health hazard.

Verse 32 says, **“Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.”** God is kind to both the evil and the good, and causes his sun to shine on both (Mt 5:45). God is also compassionate to the weak and helpless. As children of God we too should be kind and compassionate to one another. God is the one who is most mistreated, insulted and offended by mankind every day. But God forgives our sins through Jesus Christ. When we remember how Christ forgave us by shedding his blood for our sins, we can forgive others unconditionally. Josh McDowell said, "Forgiveness is the oil of relationships." As we forgive one another, the grace of God overflows among us.

Let's remember that God created a new life in us according to his own image and that he made us to grow into the fullness of Christ. Let's put off all the elements of our old lives and live a new life so that we ourselves may be healthy and useful to God in building a healthy Christian community.

¹ Tillich, Paul. "The New Being," 1955. Charles Scribner's Sons: New York, p. 42

² http://www.kk.org/thetechnium/archives/2006/02/the_speed_of_in.php

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³ Rothenberg, Joan. "Yettele's Feathers," 1995. Hyperion: New York.