

Imitating Christ: Putting on the New Self – Ephesians 4:17-32

Intro

What would you say to someone who has come from a completely different religion and has now said that they are a new Christian, and they want to be part of your church? Would you make sure they understand the gospel? That sounds like a good idea, they need to get the basic understanding of salvation right. But now that you know they have the basics right, what would be your next concern? Well, if they have come from a different religion and a different culture, then they might do things a bit differently to what you are used to. It might be that most things are not a big issue. They might eat differently, smell a bit different, wear different kinds of clothes. They might even do things like take off their shoes when they enter church, or bow down low when they pray. But what if the issues are bigger than that, what if people are doing things that God says they should not be doing?

In the early part of the letter, Paul outlined parts of the gospel so that people had a good understanding of what the gospel was. We have seen him talk about God's work in saving his people and establishing the church with Jesus as the head of the church. The church in Ephesus obviously had both Jewish and Gentile Christians in it, which meant that people who came from different cultures and religious backgrounds were now worshipping the one true God together. Last week, we heard how there were differences in people's backgrounds and cultures, but they were united in the church because they were all saved by Christ, and the Holy Spirit was at work in them. We also saw that they needed to demonstrate love to one another; bearing with each other's differences, being patient, gentle, and humble with each other over things which could cause division but were not really big issues in God's eyes. But now, Paul takes the next step in his letter to the Ephesian church. He is no longer talking about things that don't really matter but could still cause a few problems among the people. No, he is talking about things that are either sinful, or could lead to sin. He is talking about serious matters which need to be addressed.

Living like Gentiles

Ephesians 4:17-19 *So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. ¹⁸ They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. ¹⁹ Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, and they are full of greed.*

Today's passage starts with Paul insisting that the Ephesian church should no longer live like the Gentiles do. This means that at least some of the people in the church were living like Gentiles. Now, it is important that we understand that Paul was not talking about people living like Gentile Christians. He was talking about people not living in a Christian way at all. They were living like regular Gentiles, like people of the world, and apart from the label of Christian, Christ had no part in their everyday lives.

I remember reading a story about some young adults who had gone through youth group and were becoming junior leaders. They had committed their lives to Christ and wanted to serve God and the youth of their church by taking up these junior leader roles. They had gone to camps and conferences to get trained and were excited about the prospect of doing something good for God. Each week after youth group had finished,
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the leaders would go over to someone's place to hang out. The junior leaders wanted to be part of this as they thought they would get mentored by the more experienced leaders. But what they found was that the leaders did more than just hang out. They drank too much, they paired off and sometimes went into bedrooms, there was even the odd occasion when someone would smoke some weed. The leaders of this youth group led Bible studies and prayer time during youth group but once youth group was over, their lives were no different to the ways of the world. I think that is the kind of thing Paul was thinking about when he wrote these words. Some of the "Christians" in Ephesus were living like the world, which does not make sense.

Futile

Notice, in verse 18, that by living this way they are separated from the life of God. This is significant because of what Paul said back in...

***Ephesians 2:4-5** But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, ⁵ made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions-- it is by grace you have been saved.*

God made them alive with Christ, but now their actions show that they were separated from the life of God. It was as if they were still dead in their transgressions and sins. It was as if they had not been saved at all. Why would they do this? Why would they risk their eternal life and salvation?

Paul tells us that their hearts were hard. They would not let God penetrate their inner being. There might have been times when they could look like Christians, possibly even fake it, but that was on the outside. Inside, God was nowhere to be found. But this was not just a heart thing, it was a head thing too. Notice that they were darkened in their understanding and were futile in their thinking. This looks to the motivations behind what they would do. You see, sometimes Christians and non-Christians can do exactly the same things but for completely different reasons. Worldly thinking is at best only good for this world, which means that it is limited to this world, which will pass away. Usually, that means that people chase after momentary pleasures. They feel good for a short while, but once that pleasure is gone, they need to find another moment of pleasure. It becomes a downward spiral of chasing pleasure after pleasure, which is never really satisfied, and in the end is futile.

Remember, Paul is talking to people in the church. People who said they were Christians but were not living like Christians. This is still a problem for every church today. We need to recognise how easy it is for us to say that we live with Jesus as our Lord, but to not live the way he tells us to live. That is the definition of hypocrisy. Paul goes on...

Don't Put Off Putting Off

***Ephesians 4:20-24** That, however, is not the way of life you learned ²¹ when you heard about Christ and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus. ²² 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; ²³ to be made new in the attitude of your minds; ²⁴ and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.*

One of the frustrating things about being a parent is when your child does something which goes against everything you have taught them. You do your best to teach your children to be honest, caring, patient, gentle, respectful, and loving to others. You may have even spent a lot of time introducing you children to Jesus. But

then you get this message from the school, or you get a knock on the door from a neighbour, or you find out that your child has been kicked out of a club or group, and you think, “What happened here? That was not how I raised that child! That was not how I taught them to live! Why have they done this?” Paul seems to be saying a similar thing. “That is not the way of life you learned. We did not teach you to live like that. It goes against the truth of Jesus.” In fact, the Ephesian church had already been taught that there were things that used to be part of a Gentile’s life which should no longer be part of their life. So, the things he is talking about here were not just cultural things, not things that did not really matter. He is talking about things that God considered sinful. If God is holy, pure, and righteous, then the life of his people should reflect something of that holiness, purity, and righteousness. It should be seen in the way you live, it should be part of who you are, it should be part of your make up. Paul speaks about it almost as if the Christian needs to be changing their clothes. Their old way of life could be represented by dirty, filthy, rotten clothing which barely covers the essentials, doesn’t keep you warm, and could even make you sick. The best thing you could do is to take those clothes off and put on some fresh new clothing. Now, the problem with that analogy is that it can seem like all you need to do is do some more good things and you might look all nice and clean and pure on the outside. But Paul is talking about a deep change. It is a change in your desires, it is a change in your attitudes, it is a change of your mind, your thinking. It is no longer futile, empty, and pointless, it has been renewed in truth, holiness, and righteousness. In other words, Jesus changes you. And this change is not a one off, single moment of change. No, the truth of Jesus will continue to change you throughout your life. You might struggle with one type of sin at certain times of your life, and you might struggle in a completely different type of sin at other times in your life. Christianity is therefore a constant putting off of the old, and a constant putting on of the new.

I think it is another way of talking about repentance. The Christian is supposed to constantly repent of those things which are against God, and turn to those things which are of God. If we do not continually humble ourselves and repent, then our hearts will become hard and we can risk walking away from God. I think this idea of putting off the old and putting on the new is also a way of talking about sanctification. The more we put off the old, the more we rid ourselves of sin, and the more we put on the new, the more we become like Jesus – pure, holy, and righteous. So, as a church, we always need to be ready to put off the old and to put on the new so that we can grow in Christ.

Examples

You can imagine people reading this idea, understanding the concept, but then wonder what it might look like in real life. Well, I think that is what the next two and half chapters are about. Paul gave all kinds of instructions about how they should live as a Christian church, as Christian households, and in the community. But the last seven verses of chapter 4 outline some simple, concrete, examples of what Paul is talking about.

In verse 25, they are told to put off falsehood and to speak the truth. They obviously had a problem with lying to one another. In verse 28, they were told to stop stealing, and to find themselves some honest work. In verse 29, they were told to stop speaking to each other in an unwholesome way. They seem to have been harsh and destructive in the way they spoke to one another, and Paul encouraged them to turn this around. But I

want you to notice something significant in these three examples. Paul did not simply say “stop doing this” and “start doing that” as if Christianity is all about doing the right stuff. No, Christianity has always been about relationships. God forgives us so that we can be in a relationship with him. Understanding forgiveness from God means that we can have better relationships with each other. And a church is all about the relationships between God and his people as the people relate to God and to each other. What we see in these three examples is how Paul encouraged his readers to do the right thing for the good of the church and the relationships in the church. So, they were told to speak the truth to each other because they were all members of the one body, because they were the church of God. Speaking God’s truths will strengthen the church. They were told to do some honest work so that they might have something to share with those in need. The money you make is not for you to hang onto, not for you to lavish yourself in riches, but to share with others. And the words we use are meant to build others up, to benefit those who listen. Now, that does not mean that we don’t ever rebuke people, or tell them uncomfortable truths, but it does mean that when we do need to tell them things that are hard to listen to, it is done with the long-term goal of building them up and benefitting them. Now, you may have noticed that I missed out...

Ephesians 4:26-27 *"In your anger do not sin": Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, ²⁷ and do not give the devil a foothold.*

I only missed this one out because it broke the pattern of the other ones. It did not use the “putting off - putting on” idea and there isn’t any relational reason for this verse. It simply gives the warning of allowing your anger to be unrestrained. Unrestrained anger allows us to be tempted and the devil can gain his foothold in the life of the church. At the end of our reading, Paul gave a short list of things that people need to put off and put on as Christians.

Ephesians 4:31-32 *Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. ³² Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.*

Notice how Paul wanted the people to move away from rivalry, hurting, and harming each other. If the list from verse 31 described your church, then you would have to think that the church was divided and fractured as people treated each other like enemies. But also notice the kind of virtues that Paul wanted them to clothe themselves with in verse 32. Kindness, compassion, and forgiveness. Those virtues help to restore relationships. Just as Christ restores our relationship with God by forgiving us, so too can we restore relationships in the church by the offering each other forgiveness. If forgiveness is not in the church, then it cannot be a church which reflects Christ. That is what would grieve the Holy Spirit, that is what would grieve God. When God’s work of forgiveness is not being seen in our lives, when we are not changed by God’s presence, when we look no different to the world, then the Holy Spirit is grieved. This is not how we are meant to live. Put off the old, put on the new, and be more like Jesus.