

Sermon 14: Ephesians 4:17-24: A New Creation in Christ

OUTLINE

Old man
New man

INTRODUCTION

Thomas Watson once said, 'Dead fish swim downstream; living fish swim upstream.' As Christians we are no longer dead, we can no longer go along with the world. We are no longer what we were so we can no longer live the way we used to. We have life and cannot live like we do not; we have God and cannot live like we do not. This is the heart of what Paul is getting at in Ephesians 4:17-24. We are in the second half of the letter to the Ephesians. Chapters 1-3 are mostly doctrine indicating what God has done for us, and the gospel realities we have been brought into. Chapters 4-6 map out the life that must now flow in light of these wonderful realities. Paul began chapter 4 urging the Ephesians to walk worthy of the call they have been called to, 4:1. There are two things we are called to that Paul maps out in chapters 4-6. We are called to be one, in other words to unity. 4:1-16 dealt with the issue of unity. But we are also called to holiness, and 4:17, pretty much to the end of the book deals with what that holiness looks like. 4:17-24 then play an important role in Paul outlining the gospel realities which ground the new life of holiness we are to live. Paul here tells us of the newness that God has brought about by the gospel which calls for the new life we are to live. In other words, Paul tells us what we are, before calling us to be what we are. You can see that he tells us to put the old away and cultivate the new, and then immediately in v25 he launches into putting of the old actions of lying, anger, stealing, etc. All of those imperatives flow from this indicative.

V17-24 fall into two parts. V17-19 describes the old way of living that we are to put off. In that section Paul shows how the old way of living flowed from the old realities that once controlled us, namely being dead in sin. V20-24, contrast with this as Paul talks about the Ephesians did not experience the gospel in such a way that left them in their sins. And so he calls them to be renewed and to cultivate the new life of holiness they have been saved for. So v17-19 looks at Paul's description of the old man and v20-24 talks about how we are made new and should now continue to cultivate that newness.

Old man

V17, '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.' Paul begins this new section in v17 the same way that he begun the previous sections in 3:1 and 4:1, with an appeal to his role as an apostle. When he says, 'I say' he is drawing attention to His authority and right to call these Ephesians to complete life change. Then he uses the 'testify' to draw attention to the veracity/truthfulness of his statement. Then he affirms that he is testifying 'in the Lord.' This is a threefold emphasis on what he is about to say. What he is about to say is of the utmost importance: 'you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do.' Now Paul is using the word Gentile here to refer to pagans. A common distinction between Jew and Gentile distinguishes between those who live according to God's law and those who do not, Paul is following this distinction. Paul is obviously calling them and us to a life of holiness, a holiness marked by putting away the old.

Now Paul can't help himself he characterizes their lives with this phrase, 'in the futility of their minds.' His analytic way of thinking immediately spots a key area that explains the pagan way of life—the mind. The word 'futility' means emptiness/worthlessness/vanity, which is ironic because the Greeks prided themselves on their profundity.

Paul then goes on to explain why, v18, '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.' The pagans live the way they do because of the way they think, why do they think the way they do? Here is Paul's explanation. The problem of human behavior is a constant problem to the unbelieving mind. Why do people who love each other hurt each other; why do people commit crime in terrible ways; why do we pursue pleasures that are bad for us ruining our health, our jobs, our families, our reputations, etc.? The world's answer usually runs along the lines of nature or nurture or some combination of the two. The Bible adds to other ingredients that the world does not feature into its explanations, the devil and indwelling sin. But because the devil can't make us do things, we do things because we want to Paul focuses on how sin influences our minds which makes us who we are.

Paul describes a state of dark understandings. The unbeliever may have many facts, they may have PhDs, but this does not mean they have the answers to the big questions: Who am I? Where did I come from? What am I for? Who is God? Etc. Without the light of the word, and the worldview it teaches we cannot answer these basic questions. As a result of this darkness we are then Paul tells us 'alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them.' This darkness does not merely leave us to roam around in the dark bumping our heads causing harm to ourselves and others, and this it does. This is God's universe and we cannot live without reference to Him. You are choosing for or against Him all the time. We act in such a way that we estrange ourselves from a holy God, we bring ourselves through our lawbreaking of His law under His condemnation. We provoke His wrath against us. This is fatal. We cannot leave those who do not God in this darkness it results in eternal damnation. Now you might think that the word ignorance paints the picture of an innocent ignorance. Paul leaves us in no doubt showing how it is in fact a culpable ignorance, as the last part of v18 reads, 'due to their hardness of heart.' There is darkness, this darkness flows from ignorance, this ignorance we now learn is due to a hardening of heart. The correct translation here is hardness not blindness the word is the same word used to describe marble and bone formations. The importance of this is in the fact that the hardening is a steeling of the will, a willful choice, not an ignorant blindness.

Here we come to the heart of the human condition, pun intended. Paul is saying the same thing here that He says in Rom. 1:18-32. We see there that sinful humanity suppresses the truth of God; this leads to futility in think that leads to all sorts of idolatry. God acts in judgement handing them over to their sinful minds, and this results in all manner of wickedness. We have the same pattern here except where there Paul talks about God hardening their hearts, here he talks about the pagans hardening their own hearts. So which is it, did God harden their hearts or did they harden their own hearts? And the answer is, yes. It is a case of concurrence, of both-and. Just as God hardened Pharaoh's heart and Pharaoh hardened his own heart, so here as well. This is a passive judicial hardening. Our sin provokes the judgement of God, and He acts to punish. But as Augustine said, 'the punishment of sin is sin.' God putting on display His wisdom, strength and holiness makes sin its own punishment. In His wisdom sin does not free itself but compounds itself in the problem, and without God getting His hands dirty allows sin to bring a penalty upon itself. In His strength He brings His holy purpose to pass without violating the will of the creature. And His holiness is revealed as sin is not ignored but dealt with by a holy judge.

Paul then spells out the consequences of this: v19, 'They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity.' Here is where he brings it back to the lifestyle of the pagans showing the root cause for their behavior. Anyone who plays a musical instrument knows what a callous is. Through repetitive action an area that was once sensitive grows insensitive through a thickness of skin so that activities can be indulged more vigorously for longer periods of time. Paul is using this picture language to describe the effect of sin on our hearts. Through ignoring conscience we develop a thick callous and no longer feel as sensitive about the wrong we are doing. Through constant violation of God's law we become indifferent even to the law written upon our hearts. Sins that once caused immense shame are now 'normal' and we can go in them unfeeling.

Paul spells out the development, they are so callous 'they have given themselves up.' Once again we have this idea repeated in Romans 1. God as a judgement gives people up to their own sins, here we see the other side of the coin; through our hardness of hearts we gladly surrender ourselves to our sins. What we have here is the picture of voluntary slavery. We draw back at the idea of handing ourselves over to addiction which through pleasure destroys us, but this is exactly what we do with sin. This is a road of pain and self-destruction. For some the destruction is obvious and external for others whose sins are more respectable the damage is all hidden and interior.

What we have here is one of the sad realities of sin. Sin always leads to more sin. It is like drugs. We begin with a mild drug like marijuana or alcohol, it gives us a buzz and we love it. But the more we do it the less we get out of it, so we start drinking more and smoking more. But then these no longer do it, so we have to start mixing it up with other things, and on and on it goes. Every sin if not nipped in the bud is a gateway sin in that leads to more sin. And this lifestyle of sin leading to sin is the life of those who do not have God and should not be the life of a believer. Sin is the road they walk not the road they avoid. In God we have turned from this road to the path of holiness, if we step back on it we repent with the intent we will never do that sin again. We develop a hatred for it, constantly softening our hearts to it and never allowing excuses to make a safe place for it lest it multiply, we harden and become entangled in them. God's truth gives us clear insight to what sin is, how our hearts work, and the beauty of holiness. It is this truth that sets us free. It is possible for a Christian to fall into addictions, but in Christ we have all the light and resources we need to live free of them. It seems that this effect of diminishing returns is a small mercy because it reminds us that sin is not what we are made for, sin cannot satisfy, sin is a liar that does not deliver, turn to God.

Paul gets specific about their sins and its development: 'and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity.' The word sensuality, which is also translated as licentiousness means, public indecency of a shameless kind. Sins which were once shameful and embarrassing and done in the dark behind closed doors are now out in the open, out of the closet, and a matter of pride. 'Greedy' speaks of a desire that is never satisfied, and even when filled overindulges. 'Practice' speaks of more than single occurrences. A thought indulged becomes a deed a deed indulged get repeated, a deed repeated becomes a habit/addiction, and habit repeated becomes a character. 'Every kind' shows the way sin branches out into things we thought we would never be involved in. 'Every kind of impurity'/uncleanness, an umbrella term for all kinds of sin.

This is how those dead in sin live, but we are alive; this is how those without truth live, but we have the truth; this is how those who have a hole in their hearts live, but we have Christ.

New man

V20-21, '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.' Paul moves from what we were to what we are. He begins by talking about how we became Christians pointing to what and how we learned of Christ as a key reason why we cannot live in sin like unbelievers. Now remember Paul was the one who planted the church in Ephesus, he stayed in the city for 18 months and there was a revival there. He knows what he taught them and alludes to it now. Firstly, he talks about the content of what they learned, 'But that it not the way you learned Christ!' Paul doesn't say learned the truth, or learned holiness. No He says you learned Christ. He is the truth, He is the pattern of holiness, He is the ultimate gift of love who ravishes our hearts to obedience. He is the holy one who had to die because of the seriousness of sin. He is the one who had to undergo judgement day for us. He died to save us from sin. Secondly, when Paul says, 'assuming that you have heard about Him.' The word 'about' is not in the Greek, it should literally be, 'assuming that you have heard Him.' In other words, Paul is saying here as He says in other places that the Sheep have heard the Shepherds voice, that God is beseeching them through the preached word. In reference to the present discussion they have heard the call from sin into grace and holiness from Christ Himself. They are not rejecting man but Christ if they reject His word. Thirdly, Paul indicates that Christ is also the atmosphere in which we heard the truth about Christ, 'and were taught in Him.' Why all this emphasis on Christ? Because we are no longer in Adam, we are no longer what we were in Adam, we are no longer controlled by what controlled us in Adam, we are in Christ.

V22, 'to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires.' Paul here is alluding back to the message they heard and believed when they were saved. Although it sounds here like a present imperative, a command that you should obey today, it is clear from other places in Paul that he sees this putting off the old man as a past tense reality. For example, Col. 3:9-10, 'Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices ¹⁰ and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.' Here is the sequence: when you first became a Christian you died to sin in Christ, that was when you put off the old man. What we were in Adam was put to death. It was at that time that we also came alive in Christ. We were rescued from the kingdom of satan in Adam, to Christ in Christ. God did something to us in the past which we now cooperate with in the present. We died with Christ in salvation, but because there is still indwelling sin in us there is an ongoing responsibility to put to death the sin that still abides in us. This is what Paul is calling the Ephesians to here. There is an ever living temptation to revert to old ways and live as if we were still in Adam. But because something has happened to us, we died with Christ, that is looking at it from God's died; or we put off the old man, that is looking at it from our side. There is now an ongoing duty to live in light of that truth which is an ongoing mortifying of sin in our lives, a perpetual denial of the everliving fountain of sin that continues to assault us from within. Look at verse 25, 'Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another.' Paul sees the putting away of falsehood as past tense, in other words at conversion, but there is still an ongoing responsibility to cultivate holiness and kill sin. The truth is we are only able to cultivate holiness and kill sin because this past reality is true. And it is because of this past reality that the Christian should not live in sin. This is the

point that Paul is making in Rom. 6:1-4, 'What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? ²By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? ³Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.'

V23-24, 'and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, ²⁴and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.' So how do we keep putting off the old and putting on the new. Once again Paul brings our minds into focus. We must be renewed in the spirit of our minds, in the attitude of our minds. If we have an attitude that says, I am a sinner and not I have died with Christ, that will affect your living. If you have a mind that thinks sin is good and not holiness that will affect your conduct. Understand the truth about you and live it out, be what you are, apply the truth of the gospel. This is why in Paul's prayers for the Ephesians he prays for knowledge and wisdom. The mind is key to how we live our lives.

But holiness does not end with thinking correctly, there is the need to then put on the new self. Not just any new self like turning over a new leaf, but pursuing the God given design for humanity in holiness and righteousness. There is a lot of talk today about being human, Christianity is the only true restoration of humanity project that is true, a return to what God made us to be, holy as He is holy. Paul is going to map out in the rest of this section what this looks like: putting off lying and putting on truth; putting off anger; putting off stealing and putting on industry, etc.

So in which direction are you swimming, are you swimming with the dead fish downstream or with the living fish, upstream?